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THE AWKWARD AGE



HENRY JAMES

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1843 - 1916

AI-created interpretation after John Singer Sargent, 1913.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Henry James

Henry James was an American-born novelist, short-story writer and critic who spent much of his adult life in Europe. He eventually settled in England and became a British citizen in 1915. His family included the philosopher and psychologist William James and the diarist Alice James.

The meetings and misunderstandings between Americans and Europeans recur throughout his fiction. *The Portrait of a Lady* explores freedom, money and the consequences of choice. Later novels, including *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl*, develop increasingly intricate ways of representing perception and motive.

James was equally attentive to the possibilities of shorter fiction. In *The Turn of the Screw*, uncertainty becomes part of the reader's experience: testimony, interpretation and the limits of knowledge cannot easily be separated. His other ghost stories and tales often make an ordinary social encounter feel unexpectedly charged.

He also wrote criticism, travel books, biography, autobiography and plays. Across these forms, James asks how much one person can understand about another. His sentences invite patient attention to small changes of emphasis, where an apparently settled impression can acquire a second meaning.

Biographical reference: Wikipedia, Henry James. Historical portrait: John Singer Sargent, 1913. Full source details are retained in the edition archive.

ABOUT THIS EDITION

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Henry James

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PREFACE

I recall with perfect ease the idea in which "The Awkward Age" had its origin, but re-perusal gives me pause in respect to naming it. This composition, as it stands, makes, to my vision—and will have made perhaps still more to that of its readers—so considerable a mass beside the germ sunk in it and still possibly distinguishable, that I am half-moved to leave my small secret undivulged. I shall encounter, I think, in the course of this copious commentary, no better example, and none on behalf of which I shall venture to invite more interest, of the quite incalculable tendency of a mere grain of subject-matter to expand and develop and cover the ground when conditions happen to favour it. I say all, surely, when I speak of the thing as planned, in perfect good faith, for brevity, for levity, for simplicity, for jocosity, in fine, and for an accommodating irony. I invoked, for my protection, the spirit of the lightest comedy, but "The Awkward Age" was to belong, in the event, to a group of productions, here re-introduced, which have in common, to their author's eyes, the endearing sign that they asserted in each case an unforeseen principle of growth. They were projected as small things, yet had finally to be provided for as comparative monsters. That is my own title for them, though I should perhaps resent it if applied by another critic—above all in the case of the piece before us, the careful measure of which I have just freshly taken. The result of this consideration has been in the first place to render sharp for me again the interest of the whole process thus illustrated, and in the second quite to place me on unexpectedly good terms with the work itself. As I scan my list I encounter none the "history" of which embodies a greater number of curious truths—or of truths at least by which I find contemplation more enlivened. The thing done and dismissed has ever, at the best, for the ambitious workman, a trick of looking dead, if not buried, so that he almost throbs with ecstasy when, on an anxious review, the flush of life reappears. It is verily on recognising that flush on a whole side

of “The Awkward Age” that I brand it all, but ever so tenderly, as monstrous—which is but my way of noting the QUANTITY of finish it stows away. Since I speak so undauntedly, when need is, of the value of composition, I shall not beat about the bush to claim for these pages the maximum of that advantage. If such a feat be possible in this field as really taking a lesson from one’s own adventure I feel I have now not failed of it—to so much more demonstration of my profit than I can hope to carry through do I find myself urged. Thus it is that, still with a remnant of self-respect, or at least of sanity, one may turn to complacency, one may linger with pride. Let my pride provoke a frown till I justify it; which—though with more matters to be noted here than I have room for I shall accordingly proceed to do.

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

the little idea seemed happy—happy, that is, above all in having come very straight; but its proposed scale was the limit of a small square canvas. One had been present again and again at the exhibition I refer to—which is what I mean by the "coming straight" of this particular London impression; yet one was (and through fallibilities that after all had their sweetness, so that one would on the whole rather have kept them than parted with them) still capable of so false a measurement. When I think indeed of those of my many false measurements that have resulted, after much anguish, in decent symmetries, I find the whole case, I profess, a theme for the philosopher. The little ideas one wouldn't have treated save for the design of keeping them small, the developed situations that one would never with malice prepense have undertaken, the long stories that had thoroughly meant to be short, the short subjects that had underhandedly plotted to be long, the hypocrisy of modest beginnings, the audacity of misplaced middles, the triumph of intentions never entertained—with these patches, as I look about, I see my experience paved: an experience to which nothing is wanting save, I confess, some grasp of its final lesson.

This lesson would, if operative, surely provide some law for the recognition, the determination in advance, of the just limits and the just extent of the situation, ANY situation, that appeals, and that yet, by the presumable, the helpful law of situations, must have its reserves as well as its promises. The storyteller considers it because it promises, and undertakes it, often, just because also making out, as he believes, where the promise conveniently drops. The promise, for instance, of the case I have just named, the case of the account to be taken, in a circle of free talk, of a new and innocent, a wholly unacclimatised presence, as to which such accommodations have never had to come up, might well have appeared as limited as it was lively; and if these pages were not before us to register my illusion I should never have made a braver claim for it. They themselves admonish me, however, in fifty interesting ways, and they especially emphasise that truth of the vanity of the a priori test

of what an idee-mere may have to give. The truth is that what a happy thought has to give depends immensely on the general turn of the mind capable of it, and on the fact that its loyal entertainer, cultivating fondly its possible relations and extensions, the bright efflorescence latent in it, but having to take other things in their order too, is terribly at the mercy of his mind. That organ has only to exhale, in its degree, a fostering tropic air in order to produce complications almost beyond reckoning. The trap laid for his superficial convenience resides in the fact that, though the relations of a human figure or a social occurrence are what make such objects interesting, they also make them, to the same tune, difficult to isolate, to surround with the sharp black line, to frame in the square, the circle, the charming oval, that helps any arrangement of objects to become a picture. The storyteller has but to have been condemned by nature to a liberally amused and beguiled, a richly sophisticated, view of relations and a fine inquisitive speculative sense for them, to find himself at moments flounder in a deep warm jungle. These are the moments at which he recalls ruefully that the great merit of such and such a small case, the merit for his particular advised use, had been precisely in the smallness.

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

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

I note once again that I had not escaped seeing it actually and traceably dealt with—(I admit) a good deal of friendly suspense; also with the nature and degree of the “sacrifice” left very much to one’s appreciation. In circles highly civilised the great things, the real things, the hard, the cruel and even the tender things, the true elements of any tension and true facts of any crisis, have ever, for the outsider’s, for the critic’s use, to be translated

into terms—terms in the distinguished name of which, terms for the right employment of which, more than one situation of the type I glance at had struck me as all irresistibly appealing. There appeared in fact at moments no end to the things they said, the suggestions into which they flowered; one of these latter in especial arriving at the highest intensity. Putting vividly before one the perfect system on which the awkward age is handled in most other European societies, it threw again into relief the inveterate English trick of the so morally well-meant and so intellectually helpless compromise. We live notoriously, as I suppose every age lives, in an "epoch of transition"; but it may still be said of the French for instance, I assume, that their social scheme absolutely provides against awkwardness. That is it would be, by this scheme, so infinitely awkward, so awkward beyond any patching-up, for the hovering female young to be conceived as present at "good" talk, that their presence is, theoretically at least, not permitted till their youth has been promptly corrected by marriage—in which case they have ceased to be merely young. The better the talk prevailing in any circle, accordingly, the more organised, the more complete, the element of precaution and exclusion. Talk—giving the term a wide application—is one thing, and a proper inexperience another; and it has never occurred to a logical people that the interest of the greater, the general, need be sacrificed to that of the less, the particular. Such sacrifices strike them as gratuitous and barbarous, as cruel above all to the social intelligence; also as perfectly preventable by wise arrangement. Nothing comes home more, on the other hand, to the observer of English manners than the very moderate degree in which wise arrangement, in the French sense of a scientific economy, has ever been invoked; a fact indeed largely explaining the great interest of their incoherence, their heterogeneity, their wild abundance. The French, all analytically, have conceived of fifty different proprieties, meeting fifty different cases, whereas the English mind, less intensely at work, has never conceived but of one—the grand propriety, for every case, it should in fairness be said, of just being English. As practice, however, has always to

be a looser thing than theory, so no application of that rigour has been possible in the London world without a thousand departures from the grim ideal.

The American theory, if I may "drag it in," would be, I think, that talk should never become "better" than the female young, either actually or constructively present, are minded to allow it. THAT system involves as little compromise as the French; it has been absolutely simple, and the beauty of its success shines out in every record of our conditions of intercourse—premising always our "basic" assumption that the female young read the newspapers. The English theory may be in itself almost as simple, but different and much more complex forces have ruled the application of it; so much does the goodness of talk depend on what there may be to talk about. There are more things in London, I think, than anywhere in the world; hence the charm of the dramatic struggle reflected in my book, the struggle somehow to fit propriety into a smooth general case which is really all the while bristling and crumbling into fierce particular ones. The circle surrounding Mrs. Brookenham, in my pages, is of course nothing if not a particular, even a "peculiar" one—and its rather vain effort (the vanity, the real inexpertness, being precisely part of my tale) is toward the courage of that condition. It has cropped up in a social order where individual appreciations of propriety have not been formally allowed for, in spite of their having very often quite rudely and violently and insolently, rather of course than insidiously, flourished; so that as the matter stands, rightly or wrongly, Nanda's retarded, but eventually none the less real, incorporation means virtually Nanda's exposure. It means this, that is, and many things beside—means them for Nanda herself and, with a various intensity, for the other participants in the action; but what it particularly means, surely, is the failure of successful arrangement and the very moral, sharply pointed, of the fruits of compromise. It is compromise that has suffered her to be in question at all, and that has condemned the freedom of the circle to be self-conscious, compunctious, on the whole much more timid than brave—the consequent muddle, if the term be

not too gross, representing meanwhile a great inconvenience for life, but, as I found myself feeling, an immense promise, a much greater one than on the "foreign" showing, for the painted picture of life. Beyond which let me add that here immediately is a prime specimen of the way in which the obscurer, the lurking relations of a motive apparently simple, always in wait for their spring, may by seizing their chance for it send simplicity flying. Poor Nanda's little case, and her mother's, and Mr. Longdon's and Vanderbank's and Mitchy's, to say nothing of that of the others, has only to catch a reflected light from over the Channel in order to double at once its appeal to the imagination. (I am considering all these matters, I need scarce say, only as they are concerned with that faculty. With a relation NOT imaginative to his material the storyteller has nothing whatever to do.)

It exactly happened moreover that my own material here was to profit in a particular way by that extension of view. My idea was to be treated with light irony—it would be light and ironical or it would be nothing; so that I asked myself, naturally, what might be the least solemn form to give it, among recognised and familiar forms. The question thus at once arose: What form so familiar, so recognised among alert readers, as that in which the ingenious and inexhaustible, the charming philosophic "Gyp" casts most of her social studies? Gyp had long struck me as mistress, in her levity, of one of the happiest of forms—the only objection to my use of which was a certain extraordinary benightedness on the part of the Anglo-Saxon reader. One had noted this reader as perverse and inconsequent in respect to the absorption of "dialogue"—observed the "public for fiction" consume it, in certain connexions, on the scale and with the smack of lips that mark the consumption of bread-and-jam by a children's school-feast, consume it even at the theatre, so far as our theatre ever vouchsafes it, and yet as flagrantly reject it when served, so to speak, au naturel. One had seen good solid slices of fiction, well endued, one might surely have thought, with this easiest of lubrications, deplored by editor and publisher as positively not, for the general gullet as known to

THEM, made adequately “slick.” “‘Dialogue,’ always ‘dialogue’!” I had seemed from far back to hear them mostly cry: “We can’t have too much of it, we can’t have enough of it, and no excess of it, in the form of no matter what savourless dilution, or what boneless dispersion, ever began to injure a book so much as even the very scantest claim put in for form and substance.” This wisdom had always been in one’s ears; but it had at the same time been equally in one’s eyes that really constructive dialogue, dialogue organic and dramatic, speaking for itself, representing and embodying substance and form, is among us an uncanny and abhorrent thing, not to be dealt with on any terms. A comedy or a tragedy may run for a thousand nights without prompting twenty persons in London or in New York to desire that view of its text which is so desired in Paris, as soon as a play begins to loom at all large, that the number of copies of the printed piece in circulation far exceeds at last the number of performances. But as with the printed piece our own public, infatuated as it may be with the theatre, refuses all commerce—though indeed this can’t but be, without cynicism, very much through the infirmity the piece, IF printed, would reveal—so the same horror seems to attach to any typographic hint of the proscribed playbook or any insidious plea for it. The immense oddity resides in the almost exclusively typographic order of the offence. An English, an American Gyp would typographically offend, and that would be the end of her. THERE gloomed at me my warning, as well as shone at me my provocation, in respect to the example of this delightful writer. I might emulate her, since I presumptuously would, but dishonour would await me if, proposing to treat the different faces of my subject in the most completely instituted colloquial form, I should evoke the figure and affirm the presence of participants by the repeated and prefixed name rather than by the recurrent and affixed “said he” and “said she.” All I have space to go into here—much as the funny fact I refer to might seem to invite us to dance hand in hand round it—is that I was at any rate duly admonished, that I took my measures accordingly, and that the manner in which I took them has lived

again for me ever so arrestingly, so amusingly, on re-examination of the book.

But that I did, positively and seriously—ah so seriously!—emulate the levity of Gyp and, by the same token, of that hardiest of flowers fostered in her school, M. Henri Lavedan, is a contribution to the history of "The Awkward Age" that I shall obviously have had to brace myself in order to make. Vivid enough to me the expression of face of any kindest of critics, even, moved to declare that he would never in the least have suspected it. Let me say at once, in extenuation of the too respectful distance at which I may thus have appeared to follow my model, that my first care HAD to be the covering of my tracks—lest I truly should be caught in the act of arranging, of organising dialogue to "speak for itself." What I now see to have happened is that I organised and arranged but too well—too well, I mean, for any betrayal of the Gyp taint, however faded and feeble. The trouble appears to have been that while I on the one hand exorcised the baleful association, I succeeded in rousing on nobody's part a sense of any other association whatever, or of my having cast myself into any conceivable or calculable form. My private inspiration had been in the Gyp plan (artfully dissimulated, for dear life, and applied with the very subtlest consistency, but none the less kept in secret view); yet I was to fail to make out in the event that the book succeeded in producing the impression of ANY plan on any person. No hint of that sort of success, or of any critical perception at all in relation to the business, has ever come my way; in spite of which when I speak, as just above, of what was to "happen" under the law of my ingenious labour, I fairly lose myself in the vision of a hundred bright phenomena. Some of these incidents I must treat myself to naming, for they are among the best I shall have on any occasion to retail. But I must first give the measure of the degree in which they were mere matters of the study. This composition had originally appeared in "Harper's Weekly" during the autumn of 1898 and the first weeks of the winter, and the volume containing it was published that spring. I had meanwhile been absent from England, and it

was not till my return, some time later, that I had from my publisher any news of our venture. But the news then met at a stroke all my curiosity: “I’m sorry to say the book has done nothing to speak of; I’ve never in all my experience seen one treated with more general and complete disrespect.” There was thus to be nothing left me for fond subsequent reference—of which I doubtless give even now so adequate an illustration—save the rich reward of the singular interest attaching to the very intimacies of the effort.

It comes back to me, the whole “job,” as wonderfully amusing and delightfully difficult from the first; since amusement deeply abides, I think, in any artistic attempt the basis and groundwork of which are conscious of a particular firmness. On that hard fine floor the element of execution feels it may more or less confidently DANCE; in which case puzzling questions, sharp obstacles, dangers of detail, may come up for it by the dozen without breaking its heart or shaking its nerve. It is the difficulty produced by the loose foundation or the vague scheme that breaks the heart—when a luckless fatuity has over-persuaded an author of the “saving” virtue of treatment. Being “treated” is never, in a workable idea, a mere passive condition, and I hold no subject ever susceptible of help that isn’t, like the embarrassed man of our proverbial wisdom, first of all able to help itself. I was thus to have here an envious glimpse, in carrying my design through, of that artistic rage and that artistic felicity which I have ever supposed to be intensest and highest, the confidence of the dramatist strong in the sense of his postulate. The dramatist has verily to BUILD, is committed to architecture, to construction at any cost; to driving in deep his vertical supports and laying across and firmly fixing his horizontal, his resting pieces—at the risk of no matter what vibration from the tap of his master-hammer. This makes the active value of his basis immense, enabling him, with his flanks protected, to advance undistractedly, even if not at all carelessly, into the comparative fairy-land of the mere minor anxiety. In other words his scheme HOLDS, and as he feels this in spite of noted strains and under repeated tests, so he keeps

his face to the day. I rejoiced, by that same token, to feel MY scheme hold, and even a little ruefully watched it give me much more than I had ventured to hope. For I promptly found my conceived arrangement of my material open the door wide to ingenuity. I remember that in sketching my project for the conductors of the periodical I have named I drew on a sheet of paper—and possibly with an effect of the cabalistic, it now comes over me, that even anxious amplification may have but vainly attenuated—the neat figure of a circle consisting of a number of small rounds disposed at equal distance about a central object. The central object was my situation, my subject in itself, to which the thing would owe its title, and the small rounds represented so many distinct lamps, as I liked to call them, the function of each of which would be to light with all due intensity one of its aspects. I had divided it, didn't they see? into aspects—uncanny as the little term might sound (though not for a moment did I suggest we should use it for the public), and by that sign we would conquer.

They "saw," all genially and generously—for I must add that I had made, to the best of my recollection, no morbid scruple of not blabbing about Gyp and her strange incitement. I the more boldly held my tongue over this that the more I, by my intelligence, lived in my arrangement and moved about in it, the more I sank into satisfaction. It was clearly to work to a charm and, during this process—by calling at every step for an exquisite management—"to haunt, to startle and waylay." Each of my "lamps" would be the light of a single "social occasion" in the history and intercourse of the characters concerned, and would bring out to the full the latent colour of the scene in question and cause it to illustrate, to the last drop, its bearing on my theme. I revelled in this notion of the Occasion as a thing by itself, really and completely a scenic thing, and could scarce name it, while crouching amid the thick arcana of my plan, with a large enough O. The beauty of the conception was in this approximation of the respective divisions of my form to the successive Acts of a Play—as to which it was more than ever a case for charmed capitals. The divine distinction of the act of a

play—and a greater than any other it easily succeeds in arriving at—was, I reasoned, in its special, its guarded objectivity. This objectivity, in turn, when achieving its ideal, came from the imposed absence of that "going behind," to compass explanations and amplifications, to drag out odds and ends from the "mere" storyteller's great property-shop of aids to illusion: a resource under denial of which it was equally perplexing and delightful, for a change, to proceed. Everything, for that matter, becomes interesting from the moment it has closely to consider, for full effect positively to bestride, the law of its kind. "Kinds" are the very life of literature, and truth and strength come from the complete recognition of them, from abounding to the utmost in their respective senses and sinking deep into their consistency. I myself have scarcely to plead the cause of "going behind," which is right and beautiful and fruitful in its place and order; but as the confusion of kinds is the inelegance of letters and the stultification of values, so to renounce that line utterly and do something quite different instead may become in another connexion the true course and the vehicle of effect. Something in the very nature, in the fine rigour, of this special sacrifice (which is capable of affecting the form-lover, I think, as really more of a projected form than any other) lends it moreover a coercive charm; a charm that grows in proportion as the appeal to it tests and stretches and strains it, puts it powerfully to the touch. To make the presented occasion tell all its story itself, remain shut up in its own presence and yet on that patch of staked-out ground become thoroughly interesting and remain thoroughly clear, is a process not remarkable, no doubt, so long as a very light weight is laid on it, but difficult enough to challenge and inspire great adroitness so soon as the elements to be dealt with begin at all to "size up."

The disdainers of the contemporary drama deny, obviously, with all promptness, that the matter to be expressed by its means—richly and successfully expressed that is—CAN loom with any largeness; since from the moment it does one of the conditions breaks down. The process simply collapses under

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

as simple and superficial as that of 'A Doll's House'—while from the moment he's by apparent intention comprehensive and searching it's on the footing of an effect as confused and obscure as 'The Wild Duck.' From which you easily see ALL the conditions can't be met. The dramatist has to choose but those he's most capable of, and by that choice he's known."

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

the perfect paradise of the loose end. The play consents to the logic of but one way, mathematically right, and with the loose end as gross an impertinence on its surface, and as grave a dishonour, as the dangle of a snippet of silk or wool on the right side of a tapestry. We are shut up wholly to cross-relations, relations all within the action itself; no part of which is related to anything but some other part—save of course by the relation of the total to life. And, after invoking the protection of Gyp, I saw the point of my game all in the problem of keeping these conditioned relations crystalline at the same time that I should, in emulation of life, consent to their being numerous and fine and characteristic of the London world (as the London world was in this quarter and that to be deciphered). All of which was to make in the event for complications.

I see now of course how far, with my complications, I got away from Gyp; but I see to-day so much else too that this particular deflexion from simplicity makes scarce a figure among the others after having once served its purpose, I mean, of lighting my original imitative innocence. For I recognise in especial, with a waking vibration of that interest in which, as I say, the plan of the book is embalmed for me, that my subject was probably condemned in advance to appreciable, or more exactly perhaps to almost preposterously appreciative, over-treatment. It places itself for me thus in a group of small productions exhibiting this perversity, representations of conceived cases in which my process has been to pump the case gaspingly dry, dry not only of superfluous moisture, but absolutely (for I have encountered the charge) of breathable air. I may note, in fine, that coming back to the pages before us with a strong impression of their recording, to my shame, that disaster, even to the extent of its disqualifying them for decent reappearance, I have found the adventure taking, to my relief, quite another turn, and have lost myself in the wonder of what "over-treatment" may, in the detail of its desperate ingenuity, consist of. The revived interest I speak of has been therefore that of following critically, from page to page, even as the red Indian tracks in the forest the pale-face, the footsteps of the

systematic loyalty I was able to achieve. The amusement of this constatation is, as I have hinted, in the detail of the matter, and the detail is so dense, the texture of the figured and smoothed tapestry so loose, that the genius of Gyp herself, muse of general looseness, would certainly, once warned, have uttered the first disavowal of my homage. But what has occurred meanwhile is that this high consistency has itself, so to speak, constituted an exhibition, and that an important artistic truth has seemed to me thereby lighted. We brushed against that truth just now in our glance at the denial of expansibility to any idea the mould of the "stage-play" may hope to express without cracking and bursting—and we bear in mind at the same time that the picture of Nanda Brookenham's situation, though perhaps seeming to a careless eye so to wander and sprawl, yet presents itself on absolutely scenic lines, and that each of these scenes in itself, and each as related to each and to all of its companions, abides without a moment's deflexion by the principle of the stage-play. In doing this then it does more—it helps us ever so happily to see the grave distinction between substance and form in a really wrought work of art signally break down. I hold it impossible to say, before "The Awkward Age," where one of these elements ends and the other begins: I have been unable at least myself, on re-examination, to mark any such joint or seam, to see the two DISCHARGED offices as separate. They are separate before the fact, but the sacrament of execution indissolubly marries them, and the marriage, like any other marriage, has only to be a "true" one for the scandal of a breach not to show. The thing "done," artistically, is a fusion, or it has not BEEN done—in which case of course the artist may be, and all deservedly, pelted with any fragment of his botch the critic shall choose to pick up. But his ground once conquered, in this particular field, he knows nothing of fragments and may say in all security: "Detach one if you can. You can analyse in YOUR way, oh yes—to relate, to report, to explain; but you can't disintegrate my synthesis; you can't resolve the elements of my whole into different responsible agents or find your way at all (for your own fell purpose). My mixture has only to be perfect

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

I should have liked just here to re-examine with the reader some of the positively most artful passages I have in mind—such as the hour of Mr. Longdon's beautiful and, as it were, mystic attempt at a compact with Vanderbank, late at night, in the billiard-room of the country-house at which they are staying; such as the other nocturnal passage, under Mr. Longdon's roof, between Vanderbank and Mitchy, where the conduct of so much fine meaning, so many flares of the exhibitory torch through the labyrinth of mere immediate appearances, mere familiar allusions, is successfully and safely effected; such as the whole array of the terms of presentation that are made to serve, all systematically, yet without a gap anywhere, for the presentation, throughout, of a Mitchy "subtle" no less than concrete and concrete no less than deprived of that officious explanation which we know as "going behind"; such as, briefly, the general service of co-ordination and vivification rendered, on lines of ferocious, of really quite heroic compression, by the picture of the assembled group at Mrs. Grendon's, where the "cross-references" of the action are as thick as the green leaves of a garden, but none the less, as they have scenically to be, counted and disposed, weighted with

responsibility. Were I minded to use in this connexion a “loud” word—and the critic in general hates loud words as a man of taste may hate loud colours—I should speak of the composition of the chapters entitled “Tishy Grendon,” with all the pieces of the game on the table together and each unconfusedly and contributively placed, as triumphantly scientific. I must properly remind myself, rather, that the better lesson of my retrospect would seem to be really a supreme revision of the question of what it may be for a subject to suffer, to call it suffering, by over-treatment. Bowed down so long by the inference that its product had in this case proved such a betrayal, my artistic conscience meets the relief of having to recognise truly here no traces of suffering. The thing carries itself to my maturer and gratified sense as with every symptom of soundness, an insolence of health and joy. And from this precisely I deduce my moral; which is to the effect that, since our only way, in general, of knowing that we have had too much of anything is by FEELING that too much: so, by the same token, when we don’t feel the excess (and I am contending, mind, that in “The Awkward Age” the multiplicity yields to the order) how do we know that the measure not recorded, the notch not reached, does represent adequacy or satiety? The mere feeling helps us for certain degrees of congestion, but for exact science, that is for the criticism of “fine” art, we want the notation. The notation, however, is what we lack, and the verdict of the mere feeling is liable to fluctuate. In other words an imputed defect is never, at the worst, disengageable, or other than matter for appreciation—to come back to my claim for that felicity of the dramatist’s case that his synthetic “whole” IS his form, the only one we have to do with. I like to profit in his company by the fact that if our art has certainly, for the impression it produces, to defer to the rise and fall, in the critical temperature, of the telltale mercury, it still hasn’t to reckon with the engraved thermometer-face.

HENRY JAMES.

THE AWKWARD AGE

BOOK FIRST. LADY JULIA

I

Save when it happened to rain Vanderbank always walked home, but he usually took a hansom when the rain was moderate and adopted the preference of the philosopher when it was heavy. On this occasion he therefore recognised as the servant opened the door a congruity between the weather and the “four-wheeler” that, in the empty street, under the glazed radiance, waited and trickled and blackly glittered. The butler mentioned it as on such a wild night the only thing they could get, and Vanderbank, having replied that it was exactly what would do best, prepared in the doorway to put up his umbrella and dash down to it. At this moment he heard his name pronounced from behind and on turning found himself joined by the elderly fellow guest with whom he had talked after dinner and about whom later on upstairs he had sounded his hostess. It was at present a clear question of how this amiable, this apparently unassertive person should get home—of the possibility of the other cab for which even now one of the footmen, with a whistle to his lips, craned out his head and listened through the storm. Mr. Longdon wondered to Vanderbank if their course might by any chance be the same; which led our young friend immediately to express a readiness to see him safely in any direction that should accommodate him. As the footman’s whistle spent itself in vain they got together into the four-wheeler, where at the end of a few moments more Vanderbank became conscious of having proposed his own rooms as a wind-up to their drive. Wouldn’t that be a better finish of the evening than just separating in the wet? He liked his new acquaintance, who struck him as in a manner clinging to him, who was staying at an hotel

presumably at that hour dismal, and who, confessing with easy humility to a connexion positively timid with a club at which one couldn't have a visitor, accepted his invitation under pressure. Vanderbank, when they arrived, was amused at the air of added extravagance with which he said he would keep the cab: he so clearly enjoyed to that extent the sense of making a night of it. "You young men, I believe, keep them for hours, eh? At least they did in my time," he laughed—"the wild ones! But I think of them as all wild then. I dare say that when one settles in town one learns how to manage; only I'm afraid, you know, that I've got completely out of it. I do feel really quite mouldy. It's a matter of thirty years—!"

"Since you've been in London?"

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

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

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

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

"How old are you then, pray?"

"Why I'm thirty-four."

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

"The General Audit. I'm Deputy Chairman."

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

“Oh yes—our head’s Sir Digby Dence.”

“And what do we do for you?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The cab?” Vanderbank liked him so, found in him such a promise of pleasant things, that he was almost tempted to say: “Dear and delightful sir, don’t weigh that question; I’ll pay,

myself, for the man's whole night!" His approval at all events was complete.

"Most certainly. That's the only way not to think of it."

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

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

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

"I see that's not what you mean."

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

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

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

Vanderbank laughed. "Well, SHE got it."

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

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

“And what IS the work?”

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

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

“Ah not about that. Try him.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Dead? Dear, dear!”

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

Mr. Longdon turned from his contemplation with a visible effort. “I feel obliged to you for taking it so; it mightn’t—one never knows—have amused you. As I told you there, the first thing I did was to ask Fernanda about the company; and when

she mentioned your name I immediately said: 'Would he like me to speak to him?'"

"And what did Fernanda say?"

Mr. Longdon stared. "Do YOU call her Fernanda?"

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

His friend hesitated; then with a smile a trifle strange: "Pardon me; *I* didn't mention—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What do you call awfully well?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh yes, several other ladies."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He spoke with pointed levity, but his companion showed him after an instant a face just covered—and a little painfully—with

the vision of the possibility brushed away by the joke. “Oh I’m not so bad as that!” Mr. Longdon modestly ejaculated.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ah to some great man of course!"

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

Mr. Longdon looked conspicuously subtle. "Then perhaps YOU'RE the man!"

"Do I look like a 'great' one?" Vanderbank broke in.

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

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

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

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

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

"She's over there beside the lamp—also a present from the original."

II

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

"Little girls—innocent lambs? Surely—to old friends. Didn't they in your time?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m only too sorry to wait.” Laying down the object he had been examining Mr. Longdon took another turn about the room, and his manner was such an appeal to his host to accept his restlessness that as he circulated the latter watched him with encouragement. “I said to you just now that I knew the mothers, but it would have been more to the point to say the grandmothers.” He stopped before his young friend, then nodded at the image of Nanda. “I knew HERS. She put it at something less.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

"To make herself out the same?" Vanderbank took him straight up. "It was nasty my doing that? I see, I see. Yes, yes: I rather gave her away, and you're struck by it—as is most delightful you SHOULD be—because you're in every way of a better tradition and, knowing Mrs. Brookenham's my friend, can't conceive of one's playing on a friend a trick so vulgar and odious. It strikes you also probably as the kind of thing we must be constantly doing; it strikes you that right and left, probably, we keep giving each other away. Well, I dare say we do. Yes, 'come to think of it,' as they say in America, we do. But what

shall I tell you? Practically we all know it and allow for it and it's as broad as it's long. What's London life after all? It's tit for tat!"

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

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

"Friendship." Mr. Longdon maintained the full value of the word.

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

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

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

"That shows you really don't care," the old man returned with acuteness.

"Oh we're past saving, if that's what you mean!" Vanderbank laughed.

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

"A pity I don't care?"

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

"I assure you *I* shall! You're awfully interesting."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well, she's in the midst of her future now. She's married."

"And whom did she marry?"

"A fellow called Toovey. A man in the City."

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

"Exactly—Blanche Bertha Vanderbank."

Mr. Longdon looked half-mystified and half-distressed. "And now she's Nancy Toovey?"

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

“But why?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

portrait of Nanda. “Lady Julia was exquisite and this child’s exactly like her.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Her own girl's? 'Admit' them?"

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

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

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

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

"Why naturally her marrying. Above all her marrying early."

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

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

"What do you mean by the strain?"

"Well, the complication of her being there."

"Being where?"

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

Mr. Longdon stared. "But where else should she be?"

"At her husband's, don't you see?"

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

"What do you call good time?"

"Why time to make herself loved."

Vanderbank wondered. "By the men who come to the house?"

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

III

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

interesting questions and we must sooner or later have them all out."

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

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

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

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

Mr. Longdon's smile was beautiful—it supplied so many meanings that when presently he spoke he seemed already to have told half his story. "Well, my life took a form. It had to, or I don't know what would have become of me, and several things

that all happened at once helped me out. My father died—I came into the little place in Suffolk. My sister, my only one, who had married and was older than I, lost within a year or two both her husband and her little boy. I offered her, in the country, a home, for her trouble was greater than any trouble of mine. She came, she stayed; it went on and on and we lived there together. We were sorry for each other and it somehow suited us. But she died two years ago."

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

"What do you mean by that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

This explanation was very delicately made. "She COULD marry again."

"And I suppose you know she did," Vanderbank returned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mr. Longdon sadly smiled at him. “I haven’t got over her yet!” Then, however, as if not to look morbid, he took pains to be clear. “The first wound was bad—but from that one always comes round. Your mother, dear woman, had known how to help me. Lady Julia was at that time her intimate friend—it was she who introduced me there. She couldn’t help what happened—she did her best. What I meant just now was that in

the aftertime, when opportunity occurred, she was the one person with whom I could always talk and who always understood." He lost himself an instant in the deep memories to attest which he had survived alone; then he sighed out as if the taste of it all came back to him with a faint sweetness: "I think they must both have been good to me. At the Malvern time, the particular time I just mentioned to you, Lady Julia was already married, and during those first years she had been whirled out of my ken. Then her own life took a quieter turn; we met again; I went for a good while often to her house. I think she rather liked the state to which she had reduced me, though she didn't, you know, in the least presume on it. The better a woman is—it has often struck me—the more she enjoys in a quiet way some fellow's having been rather bad, rather dark and desperate, about her—for her. I dare say, I mean, that though Lady Julia insisted I ought to marry she wouldn't really have liked it much if I had. At any rate it was in those years I saw her daughter just cease to be a child—the little girl who was to be transformed by time into the so different person with whom we dined to-night. That comes back to me when I hear you speak of the growing up, in turn, of that person's own daughter."

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

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

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

“Then after all”—and his friend made the point with innocent sharpness—“you’re NOT past saving!”

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

“You’re too clever—you’re too clever: that’s what’s the matter with you all!” Mr. Longdon sighed.

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

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

“Do you mean its being so low?”

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

“Just how you were affected? I assure you there’s at this moment nothing I desire nearly so much.”

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

Vanderbank considered him with a benevolence, a geniality of approval, that he literally had to hold in check for fear of seeming to patronise. “There’s not one of us who can touch you. You’re delightful, you’re wonderful, and I’m intensely curious to hear you,” the young man pursued. “Were we absolutely odious?” Before his guest’s puzzled, finally almost pained face, such an air of appreciating so much candour, yet of looking askance at so much freedom, he could only try to smooth the way and light the subject. “You see we don’t in the least know where we are. We’re lost—and you find us.” Mr. Longdon, as he spoke, had prepared at last really to go, reaching the door with a manner that denoted, however, by no means so much satiety as an attention that felt itself positively too agitated. Vanderbank had helped him on with the Inverness cape and for an instant detained him by it. “Just tell me as a kindness. DO we talk—”

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

“Too outrageously. I want the truth.”

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

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

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

BOOK SECOND. LITTLE AGGIE

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

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

“Do you mean to say you’re not going?”

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

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

“Do you mean to YOU, mummy?”

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

He had fallen back in the chair, from the depths of which he met her eyes. “Why it’s just THE time, mummy. I did it on

purpose. I can always go to sleep when I like. I assure you it sees one through things!"

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

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

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

"A terror, mamma?"

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

"What do you call my fate?"

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

"Oh dear, dear!" he wonderingly whistled while he wandered back to the hearth-rug, on which, with his hands behind him, he

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

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

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

she pushed the drawer back, closing the whole thing. “You terrify me—you terrify me,” she again said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You know,” he answered with his manner as of letting her see her own attitude, “you know you try to make me do things you wouldn’t at all do yourself. At least I hope you wouldn’t.

And don't you see that if I so far oblige you I must at least be paid for it?"

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

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

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

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

"But if YOU wrote—"

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

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

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

She rose at this, turning her eyes about the room as if from the extremity of martyrdom or the wistfulness of some deep thought. Yet when she spoke it was with a different expression,

an expression that would have served for an observer as a marked illustration of that disconnectedness of her parts which frequently was laughable even to the degree of contributing to her social success. “You’ve spent then more than four pounds in five days. It was on Friday I gave them to you. What in the world do you suppose is going to become of me?”

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

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

“Anything to assist you. Only, if I SHOULD find I’m not wanted—?”

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

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

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

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

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

“But if I AM kicked out?”

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

“Happy thought! And shall I write?”

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

“Delicious mummy!” And Harold blew her a kiss.

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

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

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

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

II

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

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

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

“How he does run about!” And the Duchess, still with a glance hither and yon, sank upon the sofa to which she had made her way unaided. Mrs. Brookenham knew perfectly the meaning of this glance: she had but three or four comparatively good pieces, whereas the Duchess, rich with the spoils of Italy, had but three or four comparatively bad. This was the relation, as between intimate friends, that the Duchess visibly preferred, and it was quite groundless, in Buckingham Crescent, ever to enter the drawing-room with an expression suspicious of disloyalty. The Duchess was a woman who so cultivated her passions that she would have regarded it as disloyal to introduce there a new piece of furniture in an underhand way—that is without a full appeal to herself, the highest authority, and the consequent bestowal of opportunity to nip the mistake in the bud. Mrs. Brookenham had repeatedly asked

herself where in the world she might have found the money to be disloyal. The Duchess's standard was of a height—! It matched for that matter her other elements, which were wontedly conspicuous as usual as she sat there suggestive of early tea. She always suggested tea before the hour, and her friend always, but with so different a wistfulness, rang for it. "Who's to be at Brander?" she asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, but Harold's a mere baby."

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

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

"Every one's at any rate awfully kind to Harold." She waited a moment to give her visitor the chance to pronounce that eminently natural, but no pronouncement came—nothing but the footman who had answered her ring and of whom she ordered tea. "And where did you say YOU'RE going?" she enquired after this.

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

“And then where do you take her?”

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

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

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

“And you have Aggie till then?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“In the country?”

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

The Duchess handsomely stared. “Been where?”

“Why here, to see Nanda.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mrs. Brookenham, who had many talents, had none perhaps that she oftener found useful than that of listening with the appearance of being fairly hypnotised. It was the way she listened to her housekeeper at their regular morning conference, and if the rejoinder ensuing upon it frequently appeared to have nothing to do with her manner this was a puzzle for her interlocutor alone. "Oh of course I know your theory, dear Jane, and I dare say it's very charming and old-fashioned and, if you like, aristocratic, in a frowsy foolish old way—though even upon that, at the same time, there would be something too to be said. But I can only congratulate you on finding it more workable than there can be any question of MY finding it. If you're all armed for the sacrifices you speak of I simply am not. I don't think I'm quite a monster, but I don't pretend to be a saint. I'm an English wife and an English mother—I live in the mixed English world. My daughter, at any rate, is just my daughter, I thank my stars, and one of a good

English bunch: she's not the unique niece of my dead Italian husband, nor doubtless either, in spite of her excellent birth, of a lineage, like Aggie's, so very tremendous. I've my life to lead and she's a part of it. Sugar?" she wound up on a still softer note as she handed the cup of tea.

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

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

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

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

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

Mrs. Brookenham waited so long to say what she considered that before she next spoke the question appeared to have dropped. Then she only replied as if suddenly remembering her manners: "Won't you eat something?" She indicated a

particular plate. “One of the nice little round ones?” The Duchess appropriated a nice little round one and her hostess presently went on: “There’s one thing I mustn’t forget—don’t let us eat them ALL. I believe they’re what Lord Petherton really comes for.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Prevent what?”

“Why what I suppose you call the pourparlers.”

“For Aggie’s hand? My dear,” said the Duchess, “I’m glad you do me the justice of feeling that I’m a person to take time by the

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

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

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

"Well, Jane, you do say things to me!" Mrs. Brookenham blandly broke in. She had sunk back into her chair; her hands, in her lap pressed themselves together and her wan smile

brought a tear into each of her eyes by the very effort to be brighter. It might have been guessed of her that she hated to seem to care, but that she had other dislikes too. “If one were to take up, you know, some of the things you say—!” And she positively sighed for the wealth of amusement at them of which her tears were the sign. Her friend could quite match her indifference. “Well, my child, TAKE them up; if you were to do that with them candidly, one by one, you would do really very much what I should like to bring you to. Do you see?” Mrs. Brookenham’s failure to repudiate the vision appeared to suffice, and her visitor cheerfully took a further jump. “As much of Tishy as she wants—AFTER. But not before.”

“After what?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The same as yours?”

“Well, more like them than like yours.”

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

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

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

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

“Do you mean offer him my child?”

She laughed at the intonation. “There you are once more—vous autres! If you’re shocked at the idea you place drolement your delicacy. I’d offer mine to the son of a chimney-sweep if the principal guarantees were there. Nanda’s charming—you don’t do her justice. I don’t say Mr. Mitchett’s either beautiful or noble, and he certainly hasn’t as much distinction as would cover the point of a pin. He doesn’t mind moreover what he says—the lengths he sometimes goes to!—but

that," added the Duchess with decision, "is no doubt much a matter of how he finds you'll take it. And after marriage what does it signify? He has forty thousand a year, an excellent idea of how to take care of it and a good disposition."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh we don't call THAT a social scandal!" Mrs. Brookenham inimitably returned.

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

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

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

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

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

Mrs. Brookenham wondered. "Do you mean today?"

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

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

"Shall I find him here too then?"

"Oh take the chance."

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

"Free as air, dear Jane."

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

III

When Mr. Brookenham appeared his wife was prompt. "She's coming back for Lord Petherton."

"Oh!" he simply said.

"There's something between them."

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

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

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

“What’s between any woman and the man she’s making up to?”

“Why there may often be nothing. I didn’t know she even particularly knew him,” Brookenham added.

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

“Do you suppose it’s her idea that he’ll marry her?” Brookenham asked in his colourless way.

“My dear Edward!” his wife murmured for all answer.

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

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

“No cream, please,” her husband said. “Hasn’t she a house too?”

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

“Oh!” Brookenham commented.

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

“But where’s the attraction?”

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

“But I mean in old Jane.”

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

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

“I mean for instance she has such a grand idea of duty. She thinks we’re nowhere!”

“Nowhere?”

“With our children—with our home life. She’s awfully down on Tishy.”

“Tishy?”—Edward appeared for a moment at a loss.

“Tishy Grendon—and her craze for Nanda.”

“Has she a craze for Nanda?”

“Surely I told you Nanda’s to be with her for Easter.”

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

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

“And how does he get there?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“They WILL send—after her note.”

"Did it say so?"

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

Again he meditated. "That often doesn't prevent one's being let in for ten shillings."

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

"Ah but he needn't be—that's my point. *I* wasn't at his age."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What would you do?" She put it as if she couldn't possibly imagine.

"I'd speak to him."

"To Harold?"

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

"Nowhere, thank heaven. We grace our own board."

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

"That's not for dinner. The Baggers and Mary Pinthorpe and—upon my word I forget."

"You'll see when she comes," suggested Brookenham, who was again at the window.

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

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

"Do you mean who's to dine?"

"No, that doesn't matter. But whether Mitchy HAS come down."

"I can only find out by asking him."

"Oh *I* could ask him." He seemed disappointed at his wife's want of resource.

"And you don't want to?"

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

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

"The money?"

"To pay Mitchy back."

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was less apparent than ever what Edward supposed. "Oh Van hasn't money to chuck about."

"Ah I only mean a sovereign here and there."

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

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

"We must stop that in time."

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

"Well then wait and see."

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

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

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

“Oh!” her husband replied.

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

“Oh!” her companion repeated.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And what does Van know?”

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

“The old boy—to Van?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her companion appeared to look at the idea and then meet it. "He'll have to see her first."

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

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

"Yes, I know what you thought. But it wasn't."

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

"SHE was all ready—yes. But I wasn't. I am now," Mrs. Brookenham, with a fine emphasis on her adverb, proclaimed as she turned to meet the opening of the door and the appearance of the butler, whose announcement—"Lord Petherton and Mr. Mitchett"—might for an observer have seemed immediately to offer support to her changed state.

IV

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

qualified the resemblance was the equal familiarity excited in his subjects.

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

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

"Why do you say 'this time' as if it were different from any other time?" she replied as she gave him his tea.

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

"My dear Mitchy," said Mrs. Brookenham, "what do YOU know about 'trouble'—either poor Nanda's or mine or anybody's else? You've never had to take any in your life, you're the spoiled child of fortune and you skim over the surface of things in a way that seems often to represent you as supposing

everybody else has wings. Most other people are sticking fast in their native mud."

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

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

"Why, were they particularly dreadful?"—Mitchy was honestly surprised. "I rather liked the one in the pink cover—what's the confounded thing called?—I thought it had a sort of a something-or-other." He had cast his eye about as if for a glimpse of the forgotten title, and she caught the question as he vaguely and good-humouredly dropped it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

that you can see her for yourself'—when have you ever said anything like that?"

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

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

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

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

"Don't talk nonsense. Between Petherton and Jane."

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

"It's too beautiful," Mrs. Brookenham appreciatively sighed, "your relation with him! You won't compromise him."

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

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

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

This enquiry appeared only to confirm his friend in the view of what was touching in him. "You're the most delicate thing I know, and it crops up with effect the oddest in the intervals of

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

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

Mrs. Brookenham's face covered him for an instant as no painted Madonna's had ever covered the little charge at the breast beneath it. "And the finest thing of all in you is your beautiful, beautiful pride! You're prouder than all of us put together." She checked a motion that he had apparently meant as a protest—she went on with her muffled wisdom. "There isn't a man but YOU whom Petherton wouldn't have made vulgar. He isn't vulgar himself—at least not exceptionally; but he's just one of those people, a class one knows well, who are so fearfully, in this country, the cause of it in others. For all I know he's the cause of it in me—the cause of it even in poor Edward.

For I'm vulgar, Mitchy dear—very often; and the marvel of you is that you never are."

"Thank you for everything. Thank you above all for 'marvel'!" Mitchy grinned.

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

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

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

"I like her as much as I dare to—as much as a man can like a girl when from the very first of his seeing her and judging her he has also seen, and seen with all the reasons, that there's no chance for him whatever. Of course, with all that, he has done his best not to let himself go. But there are moments," Mr. Mitchett ruefully added, "when it would relieve him awfully to feel free for a good spin."

"I think you exaggerate," his hostess replied, "the difficulties in your way. What do you mean by all the 'reasons'?"

"Why one of them I've already mentioned. I make her flesh creep."

"My own Mitchy!" Mrs. Brookenham protestingly moaned.

"The other is that—very naturally—she's in love."

"With whom under the sun?"

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

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

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

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

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

"The loveliest shade you ever saw. It's too absurd that you haven't noticed."

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

"But what good will that do me?" Mitchy appealed.

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

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

"Do you mean he has told you so?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Good. Then I know what she said."

"She absolutely denied it."

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

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

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

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

“What does she mean, what does she mean?” Mitchy repeated.

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

V

That young lady, in this relation, was certainly a figure to have offered a foundation for the highest hopes. As slight and white, as delicately lovely, as a gathered garden lily, her admirable training appeared to hold her out to them all as with precautionary finger-tips. She presumed, however, so little on any introduction that, shyly and submissively, waiting for the word of direction, she stopped short in the centre of the general friendliness till Mrs. Brookenham fairly became, to meet her, also a shy little girl—put out a timid hand with wonder-struck innocent eyes that hesitated whether a kiss of greeting might be dared. “Why you dear good strange ‘ickle’ thing, you haven’t been here for ages, but it IS a joy to see you and I do hope you’ve brought your doll!”—such might have been the sense of our friend’s fond murmur while, looking at her up and down with pure pleasure, she drew the rare creature to a sofa. Little Aggie presented, up and down, an arrangement of dress exactly in the key of her age, her complexion, her emphasised virginity. She might have been prepared for her visit by a cluster of doting nuns, cloistered daughters of ancient houses and educators of similar products, whose taste, hereditarily good, had grown, out of the world and most delightfully, so queer as to leave on everything they touched a particular shade of distinction. The Duchess had brought in with the child an air of added confidence for which an observer would in a moment have seen the grounds, the association of the pair being so markedly favourable to each. Its younger member carried out the style of her aunt’s presence quite as one of the accessory figures effectively thrown into old portraits. The Duchess on the other

hand seemed, with becoming blandness, to draw from her niece the dignity of a kind of office of state—hereditary governess of the children of the blood. Little Aggie had a smile as softly bright as a Southern dawn, and the friends of her relative looked at each other, according to a fashion frequent in Mrs. Brookenham's drawing-room, in free exchange of their happy impression. Mr. Mitchett was none the less scantly diverted from his estimate of the occasion Mrs. Brookenham had just named to him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mr. Mitchett cast about; he had apparently found time to reflect on his precipitation. "I see what Petherton's up to, and I won't, by drawing you aside just now, expose your niece to anything that might immediately oblige Mrs. Brook to catch her up and flee with her. But the first time I find you more isolated—well," he laughed, though not with the clearest ring, "all I can say is Mind your eyes dear Duchess!"

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

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

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

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

The question had been launched with an argumentative sharpness that made it for a moment keep possession of the air,

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

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

The Duchess watched her as from a box at the play, comfortably shut in, as in the old operatic days at Naples, with a pair of entertainers. "You're the most interesting nation in the

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The person alluded to meanwhile, fidgeting frankly in his chair, alternately stretching his legs and resting his elbows on his knees, had reckoned as small the profit he might derive from this colloquy. His bored state indeed—if he was bored—prompted in him the honest impulse to clear, as he

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

consultations. She listens to the case, she strokes her chin and prescribes—"

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

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

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

VI

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

Mitchy was much amused. "Do you really think Petherton has?"

The Duchess withstood it. "They've got, both outside and in, the same great general things, only turned, in each, rather different ways, a way safer for him as a man, and more triumphant for her as—whatever you choose to call her! What CAN a woman do," she richly mused, "with such beauty as that—?"

"Except come desperately to advise with Mrs. Brook"—Mitchy undertook to complete her question—"as to the highest use to make of it? But see," he immediately added, "how perfectly competent to instruct her our friend now looks." Their hostess had advanced to Lady Fanny with an outstretched hand but with an eagerness of greeting merged a little in the sweet predominance of wonder as well as in the habit, at such moments most perceptible, of the languid lily-bend. Nothing in general could have been less conventionally poor than the kind of reception given in Mrs. Brookenham's drawing-room to the particular element—the element of physical splendour void of those disparities that make the question of others tiresome—comprised in Lady Fanny's presence. It was a place in which, at all times, before interesting objects, the unanimous occupants, almost more concerned for each other's vibrations than for anything else, were apt rather more to exchange sharp and silent searchings than to fix their eyes on the object itself. In the case of Lady Fanny, however, the object itself—and quite by the same law that had worked, though less profoundly, on the entrance of little Aggie—superseded the usual rapt communion very much in the manner of some beautiful tame tigress who might really coerce attention. There was in Mrs. Brookenham's way of looking up at her a dim despairing abandonment of the idea of any common personal ground. Lady Fanny, magnificent, simple, stupid, had almost the stature of her brother, a forehead unsurpassably low and an air of sombre concentration just sufficiently corrected by something in her movements that failed to give it a point. Her blue eyes were heavy in spite of being perhaps a couple of shades too clear, and the wealth of her black hair, the disposition of the massive coils of which was all her own, had possibly a satin sheen depreciated by the current fashion. But the great thing in her was that she was, with unconscious heroism, thoroughly herself; and what were Mrs. Brook and Mrs. Brook's intimates after all, in their free surrender to the play of perception, but a happy association for keeping her so? The Duchess was moved to the liveliest admiration by the grand simple sweetness of her

encounter with Mrs. Donner, a combination indeed in which it was a question if she or Mrs. Brook appeared to the higher advantage. It was poor Mrs. Donner—not, like Mrs. Brook, subtle in sufficiency, nor, like Lady Fanny, almost too simple—who made the poorest show. The Duchess immediately marked it to Mitchy as infinitely characteristic that their hostess, instead of letting one of her visitors go, kept them together by some sweet ingenuity and while Lord Petherton, dropping his sister, joined Edward and Aggie in the other angle, sat there between them as if, in pursuance of some awfully clever line of her own, she were holding a hand of each. Mr. Mitchett of course did justice all round, or at least, as would have seemed from an enquiry he presently made, wished not to fail of it. "Is it your real impression then that Lady Fanny has serious grounds—"

"For jealousy of that preposterous little person? My dear Mitchett," the Duchess resumed after a moment's reflexion, "if you're so rash as to ask me in any of these connexions for my 'real' impression you deserve whatever you may get." The penalty Mitchy had incurred was apparently grave enough to make his companion just falter in the infliction of it; which gave him the opportunity of replying that the little person was perhaps not more preposterous than any one else, that there was something in her he rather liked, and that there were many different ways in which a woman could be interesting. This further levity it was therefore that laid him fully open. "Do you mean to say you've been living with Petherton so long without becoming aware that he's shockingly worried?"

"My dear Duchess," Mitchy smiled, "Petherton carries his worries with a bravery! They're so many that I've long since ceased to count them; and in general I've been disposed to let those pass that I can't help him to meet. YOU'VE made, I judge," he went on, "a better use of opportunities perhaps not so good—such as at any rate enables you to see further than I into the meaning of the impatience he just now expressed."

The Duchess was admirable, in conversation, for neglecting everything not essential to her present plausibility. "A woman

like Lady Fanny can have no 'grounds' for anything—for any indignation, I mean, or for any revenge worth twopence. In this particular case at all events they've been sacrificed with such extravagance that, as an injured wife, she hasn't had the gumption to keep back an inch or two to stand on. She can do absolutely nothing."

"Then you take the view—?" Mitchy, who had, after all, his delicacies, pulled up as at sight of a name.

"I take the view," said the Duchess, "and I know exactly why. Elle se les passe—her little fancies! She's a phenomenon, poor dear. And all with—what shall I call it?—the absence of haunting remorse of a good house-mother who makes the family accounts balance. She looks—and it's what they love her for here when they say 'Watch her now!'—like an angry saint; but she's neither a saint nor, to be perfectly fair to her, really angry at all. She has only just enough reflexion to make out that it may some day be a little better for her that her husband shall, on his side too, have committed himself; and she's only, in secret, too pleased to be sure whom it has been with. All the same I must tell you," the Duchess still more crisply added, "that our little friend Nanda is of the opinion—which I gather her to be quite ready to defend—that Lady Fanny's wrong."

Poor Mitchy found himself staring. "But what has our little friend Nanda to do with it?"

"What indeed, bless her heart? If you WILL ask questions, however, you must take, as I say, your risks. There are days when between you all you stupefy me. One of them was when I happened about a month ago to make some allusion to the charming example of Mr. Cashmore's fine taste that we have there before us: what was my surprise at the tone taken by Mrs. Brook to deny on this little lady's behalf the soft impeachment? It was quite a mistake that anything had happened—Mrs. Donner had pulled through unscathed. She had been but a day or two at the most in danger, for her family and friends—the best influences—had rallied to her support: the flurry was all

over. She was now perfectly safe. Do you think she looks so?" the Duchess asked.

This was not a point that Mitchy was conscious of freedom of mind to examine. "Do I understand you that Nanda was her mother's authority—?"

"For the exact shade of the intimacy of the two friends and the state of Mrs. Brook's information? Precisely—it was 'the latest before going to press.' 'Our own correspondent'! Her mother quoted her."

Mr. Mitchett visibly wondered. "But how should Nanda know—?"

"Anything about the matter? How should she NOT know everything? You've not, I suppose, lost sight of the fact that this lady and Mrs. Grendon are sisters. Carrie's situation and Carrie's perils are naturally very present to the extremely unoccupied Tishy, who is unhappily married into the bargain, who has no children, and whose house, as you may imagine, has a good thick atmosphere of partisanship. So, as with Nanda, on HER side, there's no more absorbing interest than her dear friend Tishy, with whom she's at present staying and under whose roof she perpetually meets this victim of unjust aspersions—!"

"I see the whole thing from here, you imply?" Mr. Mitchett, under the influence of this rapid evocation, had already taken his line. "Well," he said bravely, "Nanda's not a fool."

A momentary silence on the part of the Duchess might have been her tribute to his courage. "No. I don't agree with her, as it happens, here; but that there are matters as to which she's not in general at all befogged is exactly the worst I ever said of her. And I hold that in putting it so—on the basis of my little anecdote—you clearly give out that you're answered."

Mitchy turned it over. "Answered?"

"In the quarrel that a while back you sought to pick with me. What I touched on to her mother was the peculiar range of aspects and interests she's compelled to cultivate by the special

intimacies that Mrs. Brook permits her. There they are—and that's all I said. Judge them for yourself."

The Duchess had risen as she spoke, which was also what Mrs. Donner and Mrs. Brookenham had done; and Mr. Mitchett was on his feet as well, to act on this last admonition. Mrs. Donner was taking leave, and there occurred among the three ladies in connexion with the circumstance a somewhat striking exchange of endearments. Mr. Mitchett, observing this, expressed himself suddenly as diverted. "By Jove, they're kissing—she's in Lady Fanny's arms!" But his hilarity was still to deepen. "And Lady Fanny, by Jove, is in Mrs. Brook's!"

"Oh it's all beyond ME!" the Duchess cried; and the little wail of her baffled imagination had almost the austerity of a complaint.

"Not a bit—they're all right. Mrs. Brook has acted!" Mitchy went on.

"Ah it isn't that she doesn't 'act'!" his interlocutress ejaculated.

Mrs. Donner's face presented, as she now crossed the room, something that resembled the ravage of a death-struggle between its artificial and its natural elegance. "Well," Mitchy said with decision as he caught it—"I back Nanda." And while a whiff of derision reached him from the Duchess, "Nothing HAS happened!" he murmured.

As to reward him for an indulgence that she must much more have divined than overheard the visitor approached him with her sweet bravery of alarm. "I go on Thursday to my sister's, where I shall find Nanda Brookenham. Can I take her any message from you?"

Mr. Mitchett showed a rosiness that might positively have been reflected. "Why should you dream of her expecting one?"

"Oh," said the Duchess with a cheer that but half carried off her asperity, "Mrs. Brook must have told Mrs. Donner to ask you!"

The latter lady, at this, rested strange eyes on the speaker, and they had perhaps something to do with a quick flare of

Mitchy's wit. "Tell her, please—if, as I suppose, you came here to ask the same of her mother—that I adore her still more for keeping in such happy relations with you as enable me thus to meet you."

Mrs. Donner, overwhelmed, took flight with a nervous laugh, leaving Mr. Mitchett and the Duchess still confronted. Nothing had passed between the two ladies, yet it was as if there were a trace of something in the eyes of the elder, which, during a moment's silence, moved from the retreating visitor, now formally taken over at the door by Edward Brookenham, to Lady Fanny and her hostess, who, in spite of the embraces just performed, had again subsided together while Mrs. Brook gazed up in exalted intelligence. "It's a funny house," said the Duchess at last. "She makes me such a scene over my not bringing Aggie, and still more over my very faint hint of my reasons for it, that I fly off, in compunction, to do what I can, on the spot, to repair my excess of prudence. I reappear, panting, with my niece—and it's to THIS company I introduce her!"

Her companion looked at the charming child, to whom Lord Petherton was talking with evident kindness and gaiety—a conjunction that evidently excited Mitchy's interest. "May WE then know her?" he asked with an effect of drollery. "May I—if HE may?"

The Duchess's eyes, turned to him, had taken another light. He even gaped a little at their expression, which was in a manner carried out by her tone. "Go and talk to her, you perverse creature, and send him over to me." Lord Petherton, a minute later, had joined her; old Edward had left the room with Mrs. Donner; his wife and Lady Fanny were still more closely engaged; and the young Agnesina, though visibly a little scared at Mitchy's queer countenance, had begun, after the fashion he had touched on to Mrs. Brook, politely to invoke the aid of the idea of habit. "Look here—you must help me," the Duchess said to Petherton. "You can, perfectly—and it's the first thing I've yet asked of you."

"Oh, oh, oh!" her interlocutor laughed.

“I must have Mitchy,” she went on without noticing his particular shade of humour.

“Mitchy too?”—he appeared to wish to leave her in no doubt of it.

“How low you are!” she simply said. “There are times when I despair of you. He’s in every way your superior, and I like him so that—well, he must like HER. Make him feel that he does.”

Lord Petherton turned it over as something put to him practically. “I could wish for him that he would. I see in her possibilities—!” he continued to laugh.

“I dare say you do. I see them in Mitchett, and I trust you’ll understand me when I say I appeal to you.”

“Appeal to HIM straight. That’s much better,” Petherton lucidly observed.

The Duchess wore for a moment her proudest air, which made her, in the connexion, exceptionally gentle. “He doesn’t like me.”

Her interlocutor looked at her with all his bright brutality. “Oh my dear, I can speak for you—if THAT’S what you want!”

The Duchess met his eyes, and so for an instant they sounded each other. “You’re so abysmally coarse that I often wonder—!” But as the door reopened she caught herself. It was the effect of a face apparently directed at her. “Be quiet. Here’s old Edward.”

BOOK THIRD. MR. LONGDON

If Mitchy arrived exactly at the hour it was quite by design and on a calculation—over and above the prized little pleasure it might give him—of ten minutes clear with his host, whom it rarely befell him to see alone. He had a theory of something special to go into, of a plummet to sink or a feeler to put forth; his state of mind in short was diplomatic and anxious. But his hopes had a drop as he crossed the threshold. His precaution had only assured him the company of a stranger, for the person in the room to whom the servant announced him was not old Van. On the other hand this gentleman would clearly be old—what was it? the fellow Vanderbank had made it a matter of such importance he should "really know." But were they then simply to have tea there together? No; the candidate for Mr. Mitchett's acquaintance, as if quickly guessing his apprehension, mentioned on the spot that their entertainer would be with them: he had just come home in a hurry, fearing he was late, and then had rushed off to make a change. "Fortunately," said the speaker, who offered his explanation as if he had had it on his mind—"fortunately the ladies haven't yet come."

"Oh there ARE to be ladies?"—Mr. Mitchett was all response. His fellow guest, who was shy and apparently nervous, sidled about a little, swinging an eye-glass, yet glancing in a manner a trifle birdlike from object to object. "Mrs. Edward Brookenham I think."

"Oh!" Mitchy himself felt, as soon as this comment had quitted his lips, that it might sound even to a stranger like a sign, such as the votaries of Mrs. Edward Brookenham had fallen into the way of constantly throwing off, that he recognised her hand in the matter. There was, however, something in his entertainer's face that somehow encouraged frankness; it had the sociability of surprise—it hadn't the chill. Mitchy saw at the same time that this friend of old Van's would never really understand him; though that was a thing he at

times liked people as much for as he liked them little for it at others. It was in fact when he most liked that he was on the whole most tempted to mystify. “Only Mrs. Brook?—no others?”

“‘Mrs. Brook’?” his elder echoed; staring an instant as if literally missing the connexion; but quickly after, to show he was not stupid—and indeed it seemed to show he was delightful—smiling with extravagant intelligence. “Is that the right thing to say?”

Mitchy gave the kindest of laughs. “Well, I dare say I oughtn’t to.”

“Oh I didn’t mean to correct you,” his interlocutor hastened to profess; “I meant on the contrary, will it be right for me too?”

Mitchy’s great goggle attentively fixed him. “Try it.”

“To HER?”

“To every one.”

“To her husband?”

“Oh to Edward,” Mitchy laughed again, “perfectly!”

“And must I call him ‘Edward’?”

“Whatever you do will be right,” Mitchy returned—“even though it should happen to be sometimes what I do.”

His companion, as if to look at him with a due appreciation of this, stopped swinging the nippers and put them on. “You people here have a pleasant way—!”

“Oh we HAVE!”—Mitchy, taking him up, was gaily emphatic. He began, however, already to perceive the mystification which in this case was to be his happy effect.

“Mr. Vanderbank,” his victim remarked with perhaps a shade more of reserve, “has told me a good deal about you.” Then as if, in a finer manner, to keep the talk off themselves: “He knows a great many ladies.”

“Oh yes, poor chap, he can’t help it. He finds a lady wherever he turns.”

The stranger took this in, but seemed a little to challenge it. “Well, that’s reassuring, if one sometimes fancies there are fewer.”

“Fewer than there used to be?—I see what you mean,” said Mitchy. “But if it has struck you so, that’s awfully interesting.” He glared and grinned and mused. “I wonder.”

“Well, we shall see.” His friend seemed to wish not to dogmatise.

“SHALL we?” Mitchy considered it again in its high suggestive light. “You will—but how shall I?” Then he caught himself up with a blush. “What a beastly thing to say—as if it were mere years that make you see it!”

His companion this time gave way to the joke. “What else can it be—if I’ve thought so?”

“Why, it’s the facts themselves, and the fine taste, and above all something qui ne court pas les rues, an approach to some experience of what a lady IS.” The young man’s acute reflexion appeared suddenly to flower into a vision of opportunity that swept everything else away. “Excuse my insisting on your time of life—but you HAVE seen some?” The question was of such interest that he had already begun to follow it. “Oh the charm of talk with some one who can fill out one’s idea of the really distinguished women of the past! If I could get you,” he continued, “to be so awfully valuable as to fill out mine!”

His fellow visitor, on this, made, in a pause, a nearer approach to taking visibly his measure. “Are you sure you’ve got an idea?” Mr. Mitchett brightly thought. “No. That must be just why I appeal to you. And it can’t therefore be for confirmation, can it?” he went on. “It must be for the beautiful primary hint altogether.”

His interlocutor began, with a shake of the eyeglass, to shift and sidle again, as if distinctly excited by the subject. But it was as if his very excitement made the poor gentleman a trifle coy. “Are there no nice ones now?”

“Oh yes, there must be lots. In fact I know quantities.”

This had the effect of pulling the stranger up. “Ah ‘quantities’! There it is.”

“Yes,” said Mitchy, “fancy the ‘lady’ in her millions. Have you come up to London, wondering, as you must, about what’s happening—for Vanderbank mentioned, I think, that you HAVE come up—in pursuit of her?”

“Ah,” laughed the subject of Vanderbank’s information, “I’m afraid ‘pursuit,’ with me, is over.”

“Why, you’re at the age,” Mitchy returned, “of—the most exquisite form of it. Observation.”

“Yet it’s a form, I seem to see, that you’ve not waited for my age to cultivate.” This was followed by a decisive headshake. “I’m not an observer. I’m a hater.”

“That only means,” Mitchy explained, “that you keep your observation for your likes—which is more admirable than prudent. But between my fear in the one direction and my desire in the other,” he lightly added, “I scarcely know how to present myself. I must study the ground. Meanwhile HAS old Van told you much about me?”

Old Van’s possible confidant, instead of immediately answering, again assumed the pince-nez. “Is that what you call him?”

“In general, I think—for shortness.”

“And also”—the speaker hesitated—“for esteem?”

Mitchy laughed out. “For veneration! Our disrespects, I think, are all tender, and we wouldn’t for the world do to a person we don’t like anything so nice as to call him, or even to call her, don’t you know—?”

His questioner had quickly looked as if he knew. “Something pleasant and vulgar?”

Mitchy’s gaiety deepened. “That discrimination’s our only austerity. You must fall in.”

“Then what will you call ME?”

“What can we?” After which, sustainingly, “I’m ‘Mitchy,’” our friend stated.

His interlocutor looked slightly queer. “I don’t think I can quite begin. I’m Mr. Longdon,” he almost blushed to articulate.

“Absolutely and essentially—that’s exactly what I recognise. I defy any one to see you,” Mitchy declared, “as anything else, and on that footing you’ll be, among us, unique.”

Mr. Longdon appeared to accept his prospect of isolation with a certain gravity. “I gather from you—I’ve gathered indeed from Mr. Vanderbank—that you’re a little sort of a set that hang very much together.”

“Oh yes; not a formal association nor a secret society—still less a ‘dangerous gang’ or an organisation for any definite end. We’re simply a collection of natural affinities,” Mitchy explained; “meeting perhaps principally in Mrs. Brook’s drawing-room—though sometimes also in old Van’s, as you see, sometimes even in mine—and governed at any rate everywhere by Mrs. Brook, in our mysterious ebbs and flows, very much as the tides are governed by the moon. As I say,” Mitchy pursued, “you must join. But if Van has got hold of you,” he added, “or you’ve got hold of him, you HAVE joined. We’re not quite so numerous as I could wish, and we want variety; we want just what I’m sure you’ll bring us—a fresh eye, an outside mind.”

Mr. Longdon wore for a minute the air of a man knowing but too well what it was to be asked to put down his name. “My friend Vanderbank swaggers so little that it’s rather from you than from himself that I seem to catch the idea—!”

“Of his being a great figure among us? I don’t know what he may have said to you or have suppressed; but you can take it from me—as between ourselves, you know—that he’s very much the best of us. Old Van in fact—if you really want a candid opinion,” and Mitchy shone still brighter as he talked, “is formed for a distinctly higher sphere. I should go so far as to say that on our level he’s positively wasted.”

“And are you very sure you’re not?” Mr. Longdon asked with a smile.

“Dear no—I’m in my element. My element’s to grovel before Van. You’ve only to look at me, as you must already have made

out, to see I'm everything dreadful that he isn't. But you've seen him for yourself—I needn't tell you!" Mitchy sighed.

Mr. Longdon, as under the coercion of so much confidence, had stood in place longer than for any previous moment, and the spell continued for a minute after Mitchy had paused. Then nervously and abruptly he turned away, his friend watching him rather aimlessly wander. "Our host has spoken of you to me in high terms," he said as he came back. "You'd have no fault to find with them."

Mitchy took it with his highest light. "I know from your taking the trouble to remember that, how much what I've said of him pleases and touches you. We're a little sort of religion then, you and I; we're an organisation of two, at any rate, and we can't help ourselves. There—that's settled." He glanced at the clock on the chimney. "But what's the matter with him?"

"You gentlemen dress so much," said Mr. Longdon.

Mitchy met the explanation quite halfway. "*I* try to look funny—but why should Apollo in person?"

Mr. Longdon weighed it. "Do you think him like Apollo?"

"The very image. Ask any of the women!"

"But do *I* know—?"

"How Apollo must look?" Mitchy considered. "Why the way it works is that it's just from Van's appearance they get the tip, and that then, don't you see? they've their term of comparison. Isn't it what you call a vicious circle? I borrow a little their vice."

Mr. Longdon, who had once more been arrested, once more sidled away. Then he spoke from the other side of the expanse of a table covered with books for which the shelves had no space—covered with portfolios, with well-worn leather-cased boxes, with documents in neat piles. The place was a miscellany, yet not a litter, the picture of an admirable order. "If we're a fond association of two, you and I, let me, accepting your idea, do what, this way, under a gentleman's roof and while enjoying his hospitality, I should in ordinary circumstances think perhaps something of a breach."

"Oh strike out!" Mitchy laughed. It possibly chilled his interlocutor, who again hung fire so long that he himself at last adopted his image. "Why doesn't he marry, you mean?"

Mr. Longdon fairly flushed with recognition. "You're very deep, but with what we perceive—why doesn't he?"

Mitchy continued visibly to have his amusement, which might have been, this time and in spite of the amalgamation he had pictured, for what "they" perceived. But he threw off after an instant an answer clearly intended to meet the case. "He thinks he hasn't the means. He has great ideas of what a fellow must offer a woman."

Mr. Longdon's eyes travelled a while over the amenities about him. "He hasn't such a view of himself alone—?"

"As to make him think he's enough as he stands? No," said Mitchy, "I don't fancy he has a very awful view of himself alone. And since we ARE burning this incense under his nose," he added, "it's also my impression that he has no private means. Women in London cost so much."

Mr. Longdon had a pause. "They come very high, I dare say."

"Oh tremendously. They want so much—they want everything. I mean the sort of women he lives with. A modest man—who's also poor—isn't in it. I give you that at any rate as his view. There are lots of them that would—-and only too glad—'love him for himself'; but things are much mixed, and these not necessarily the right ones, and at all events he doesn't see it. The result of which is that he's waiting."

"Waiting to feel himself in love?"

Mitchy just hesitated. "Well, we're talking of marriage. Of course you'll say there are women with money. There ARE"—he seemed for a moment to meditate—"dreadful ones!"

The two men, on this, exchanged a long regard. "He mustn't do that."

Mitchy again hesitated. "He won't."

Mr. Longdon had also a silence, which he presently terminated by one of his jerks into motion. "He shan't!"

Once more Mitchy watched him revolve a little, but now, familiarly yet with a sharp emphasis, he himself resumed their colloquy. “See here, Mr. Longdon. Are you seriously taking him up?”

Yet again, at the tone of this appeal, the old man perceptibly coloured. It was as if his friend had brought to the surface an inward excitement, and he laughed for embarrassment. “You see things with a freedom—”

“Yes, and it’s so I express them. I see them, I know, with a raccourci; but time after all rather presses, and at any rate we understand each other. What I want now is just to say”—and Mitchy spoke with a simplicity and a gravity he had not yet used—“that if your interest in him should at any time reach the point of your wishing to do something or other (no matter what, don’t you see?) FOR him—!”

Mr. Longdon, as he faltered, appeared to wonder, but emitted a sound of gentleness. “Yes?”

“Why,” said the stimulated Mitchy, “do, for God’s sake, just let me have a finger in it.”

Mr. Longdon’s momentary mystification was perhaps partly but the natural effect of constitutional prudence. “A finger?”

“I mean—let me help.”

“Oh!” breathed the old man thoughtfully and without meeting his eyes.

Mitchy, as if with more to say, watched him an instant, then before speaking caught himself up. “Look out—here he comes.”

Hearing the stir of the door by which he had entered he looked round; but it opened at first only to admit Vanderbank’s servant. “Miss Brookenham!” the man announced; on which the two gentlemen in the room were—audibly, almost violently—precipitated into a union of surprise.

II

However she might have been discussed Nanda was not one to shrink, for, though she drew up an instant on failing to find in the room the person whose invitation she had obeyed, she

advanced the next moment as if either of the gentlemen before her would answer as well. “How do you do, Mr. Mitchy? How do you do, Mr. Longdon?” She made no difference for them, speaking to the elder, whom she had not yet seen, as if they were already acquainted. There was moreover in the air of that personage at this juncture little to invite such a confidence: he appeared to have been startled, in the oddest manner, into stillness and, holding out no hand to meet her, only stared rather stiffly and without a smile. An observer disposed to interpret the scene might have fancied him a trifle put off by the girl’s familiarity, or even, as by a singular effect of her self-possession, stricken into deeper diffidence. This self-possession, however, took on her own part no account of any awkwardness: it seemed the greater from the fact that she was almost unnaturally grave, and it overflowed in the immediate challenge: “Do you mean to say Van isn’t here? I’ve come without mother—she said I could, to see HIM,” she went on, addressing herself more particularly to Mitchy. “But she didn’t say I might do anything of that sort to see YOU.”

If there was something serious in Nanda and something blank in their companion, there was, superficially at least, nothing in Mr. Mitchett but his usual flush of gaiety. “Did she really send you off this way alone?” Then while the girl’s face met his own with the clear confession of it: “Isn’t she too splendid for anything?” he asked with immense enjoyment. “What do you suppose is her idea?” Nanda’s eyes had now turned to Mr. Longdon, whom she fixed with her mild straightness; which led to Mitchy’s carrying on and repeating the appeal. “Isn’t Mrs. Brook charming? What do you suppose is her idea?”

It was a bound into the mystery, a bound of which his fellow visitor stood quite unconscious, only looking at Nanda still with the same coldness of wonder. All expression had for the minute been arrested in Mr. Longdon, but he at last began to show that it had merely been retarded. Yet it was almost with solemnity that he put forth his hand. “How do you do? How do you do? I’m so glad!”

Nanda shook hands with him as if she had done so already, though it might have been just her look of curiosity that detracted from her air of amusing herself. “Mother has wanted me awfully to see you. She told me to give you her love,” she said. Then she added with odd irrelevance: “I didn’t come in the carriage, nor in a cab nor an omnibus.”

“You came on a bicycle?” Mitchy enquired.

“No, I walked.” She still spoke without a gleam. “Mother wants me to do everything.”

“Even to walk!” Mitchy laughed. “Oh yes, we must in these times keep up our walking!” The ingenious observer just now suggested might even have detected in the still higher rise of this visitor’s spirits a want of mere inward ease.

She had taken no notice of the effect upon him of her mention of her mother, and she took none, visibly, of Mr. Longdon’s manner or of his words. What she did while the two men, without offering her, either, a seat, practically lost themselves in their deepening vision, was to give her attention all to the place, looking at the books, pictures and other significant objects, and especially at the small table set out for tea, to which the servant who had admitted her now returned with a steaming kettle. “Isn’t it charming here? Will there be any one else? Where IS Mr. Van? Shall I make tea?” There was just a faint quaver, showing a command of the situation more desired perhaps than achieved, in the very rapid sequence of these ejaculations. The servant meanwhile had placed the hot water above the little silver lamp and left the room.

“Do you suppose there’s anything the matter? Oughtn’t the man—or do you know our host’s room?” Mr. Longdon, addressing Mitchy with solicitude, yet began to show in a countenance less blank a return of his sense of relations. It was as if something had happened to him and he were in haste to convert the signs of it into an appearance of care for the proprieties.

“Oh,” said Mitchy, “Van’s only making himself beautiful”—which account of their absent entertainer gained a

point from his appearance at the moment in the doorway furthest removed from the place where the three were gathered.

Vanderbank came in with friendly haste and with something of the look indeed—refreshed, almost rosy, brightly brushed and quickly buttoned—of emerging, out of breath, from pleasant ablutions and renewals. “What a brute to have kept you waiting! I came back from work quite begrimed. How d’ye do, how d’ye do, how d’ye do? What’s the matter with you, huddled there as if you were on a street-crossing? I want you to think this a refuge—but not of that kind!” he laughed. “Sit down, for heaven’s sake; lie down—be happy! Of course you’ve made acquaintance all—except that Mitchy’s so modest! Tea, tea!”—and he bustled to the table, where the next minute he appeared rather helpless. “Nanda, you blessed child, do YOU mind making it? How jolly of you!—are you all right?” He seemed, with this, for the first time, to be aware of somebody’s absence. “Your mother isn’t coming? She let you come alone? How jolly of her!” Pulling off her gloves Nanda had come immediately to his assistance; on which, quitting the table and laying hands on Mr. Longdon’s shoulder to push him toward a sofa, he continued to talk, to sound a note of which the humour was the exaggeration of his flurry. “How jolly of you to be willing to come—most awfully kind! I hope she isn’t ill? Do, Mitchy, lie down. Down, Mitchy, down!—that’s the only way to keep you.” He had waited for no account of Mrs. Brookenham’s health, and it might have been apparent—still to our sharp spectator—that he found nothing wonderful in her daughter’s unsupported arrival.

“I can make tea beautifully,” she said from behind her table. “Mother showed me how this morning.”

“This morning?”—and Mitchy, who, before the fire and still erect, had declined to be laid low, greeted the simple remark with uproarious mirth. “Dear young lady, you’re the most delicious family!”

“She showed me at breakfast about the little things to do. She thought I might have to make it here and told me to offer,” the

girl went on. “I haven’t yet done it this way at home—I usually have my tea upstairs. They bring it up in a cup, all made and very weak, with a piece of bread-and-butter in the saucer. That’s because I’m so young. Tishy never lets me touch hers either; so we had to make up for lost time. That’s what mother said”—she followed up her story, and her young distinctness had clearly something to do with a certain pale concentration in Mr. Longdon’s face. “Mother isn’t ill, but she told me already yesterday she wouldn’t come. She said it’s really all for ME. I’m sure I hope it is!”—with which there flickered in her eyes, dimly but perhaps all the more prettily, the first intimation they had given of the light of laughter. “She told me you’d understand, Mr. Van—from something you’ve said to her. It’s for my seeing Mr. Longdon without—she thinks—her spoiling it.”

“Oh my dear child, ‘spoiling it’!” Vanderbank protested as he took a cup of tea from her to carry to their friend. “When did your mother ever spoil anything? I told her Mr. Longdon wanted to see you, but I didn’t say anything of his not yearning also for the rest of the family.”

A sound of protest rather formless escaped from the gentleman named, but Nanda continued to carry out her duty. “She told me to ask why he hadn’t been again to see her. Mr. Mitchy, sugar?—isn’t that the way to say it? Three lumps? You’re like me, only that I more often take five.” Mitchy had dashed forward for his tea; she gave it to him; then she added with her eyes on Mr. Longdon’s, which she had had no difficulty in catching: “She told me to ask you all sorts of things.”

This acquaintance had got up to take his cup from Vanderbank, whose hand, however, dealt with him on the question of his sitting down again. Mr. Longdon, resisting, kept erect with a low gasp that his host only was near enough to catch. This suddenly appeared to confirm an impression gathered by Vanderbank in their contact, a strange sense that his visitor was so agitated as to be trembling in every limb. It brought to his own lips a kind of ejaculation—“I SAY!” But even as he spoke Mr. Longdon’s face, still white, but with a smile that was not all pain, seemed to supplicate him not to notice; and he

was not a man to require more than this to achieve a divination as deep as it was rapid. “Why we’ve all been scattered for Easter, haven’t we?” he asked of Nanda. “Mr. Longdon has been at home, your mother and father have been paying visits, I myself have been out of London, Mitchy has been to Paris, and you—oh yes, I know where you’ve been.”

“Ah we all know that—there has been such a row made about it!” Mitchy said.

“Yes, I’ve heard of the feeling there is,” Nanda replied.

“It’s supposed to be awful, my knowing Tishy—quite too awful.”

Mr. Longdon, with Vanderbank’s covert aid, had begun to appear to have pulled himself together, dropping back on his sofa and attending in a manner to his tea. It might have been with the notion of showing himself at ease that he turned, on this, a benevolent smile to the girl. “But what, my dear, is the objection—?”

She looked gravely from him to Vanderbank and to Mitchy, and then back again from one of these to the other. “Do you think I ought to say?”

They both laughed and they both just appeared uncertain, but Vanderbank spoke first. “I don’t imagine, Nanda, that you really know.”

“No—as a family, you’re perfection!” Mitchy broke out. Before the fire again, with his cup, he addressed his hilarity to Mr. Longdon. “I told you a tremendous lot, didn’t I? But I didn’t tell you about that.”

His elder maintained, yet with a certain vagueness, the attitude of amiable enquiry. “About the—a—family?”

“Well,” Mitchy smiled, “about its ramifications. This young lady has a tremendous friendship—and in short it’s all very complicated.”

“My dear Nanda,” said Vanderbank, “it’s all very simple. Don’t believe a word of anything of the sort.”

He had spoken as with the intention of a large vague optimism; but there was plainly something in the girl that would always make for lucidity. “Do you mean about Carrie Donner? I DON’T believe it, and at any rate I don’t think it’s any one’s business. I shouldn’t have a very high opinion of a person who would give up a friend.” She stopped short with the sense apparent that she was saying more than she meant, though, strangely, as if it had been an effect of her type and of her voice, there was neither pertness nor passion in the profession she had just made. Curiously wanting as she seemed both in timidity and in levity, she was to a certainty not self-conscious—she was extraordinarily simple. Mr. Longdon looked at her now with an evident surrender to his extreme interest, and it might well have perplexed him to see her at once so downright as from experience and yet of so fresh and sweet a tenderness of youth.

“That’s right, that’s right, my dear young lady: never, never give up a friend for anything any one says!” It was Mitchy who rang out with this lively wisdom, the action of which on Mr. Longdon—unless indeed it was the action of something else—was to make that personage, in a manner that held the others watching him in slight suspense, suddenly spring to his feet again, put down his teacup carefully on a table near and then without a word, as if no one had been present, quietly wander away and disappear through the door left open on Vanderbank’s entrance. It opened into a second, a smaller sitting-room, into which the eyes of his companions followed him.

“What’s the matter?” Nanda asked. “Has he been taken ill?”

“He IS ‘rum,’ my dear Van,” Mitchy said; “but you’re right—of a charm, a distinction! In short just the sort of thing we want.”

“The sort of thing we ‘want’—I dare say!” Vanderbank laughed. “But it’s not the sort of thing that’s to be had for the asking—it’s a sort we shall be mighty lucky if we can get!”

Mitchy turned with amusement to Nanda. “Van has invented him and, with the natural greed of the inventor, won’t let us have him cheap. Well,” he went on, “I’ll ‘stand’ my share.”

“The difficulty is that he’s so much too good for us,” Vanderbank explained.

“Ungrateful wretch,” his friend cried, “that’s just what I’ve been telling him that YOU are! Let the return you make not be to deprive me—!”

“Mr. Van’s not at all too good for ME, if you mean that,” Nanda broke in. She had finished her tea-making and leaned back in her chair with her hands folded on the edge of the tray.

Vanderbank only smiled at her in silence, but Mitchy took it up. “There’s nobody too good for you, of course; only you’re not quite, don’t you know? IN our set. You’re in Mrs. Grendon’s. I know what you’re going to say—that she hasn’t got any set, that she’s just a loose little white flower dropped on the indifferent bosom of the world. But you’re the small sprig of tender green that, added to her, makes her immediately ‘compose.’”

Nanda looked at him with her cold kindness. “What nonsense you do talk!”

“Your tone’s sweet to me,” he returned, “as showing that you don’t think ME, either, too good for you. No one, remember, will take that for your excuse when the world some day sees me annihilated by your having put an end to our so harmless relations.”

The girl appeared to lose herself a moment in the—abysmal humanity over which his fairly fascinating ugliness played like the whirl of an eddy. “Martyr!” she gently exclaimed. But there was no smile with it. She turned to Vanderbank, who, during the previous minute, had moved toward the neighbouring room, then faltering, taking counsel of discretion, had come back on a scruple. “What IS the matter?”

“What do you want to get out of him, you wretch?” Mitchy went on as their host for an instant said nothing.

Vanderbank, whose handsome face had a fine thought in it, looked a trifle absently from one of them to the other; but it was to Nanda he spoke. “Do you like him, Nanda?”

She showed surprise at the question. “How can I know so soon?”

“HE knows already.”

Mitchy, with his eyes on her, became radiant to interpret. “He knows that he’s pierced to the heart!”

“The matter with him, as you call it,” Vanderbank brought out, “is one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen.” He looked at her as with a hope she’d understand. “Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful!”

“Precisely,” Mitchy continued; “the victim done for by one glance of the goddess!”

Nanda, motionless in her chair, fixed her other friend with clear curiosity. “‘Beautiful’? Why beautiful?”

Vanderbank, about to speak, checked himself.

“I won’t spoil it. Have it from HIM!”—and, returning to their friend, he this time went out.

Mitchy and Nanda looked at each other. “But isn’t it rather awful?” Mitchy demanded.

She got up without answering; she slowly came away from the table. “I think I do know if I like him.”

“Well you may,” Mitchy exclaimed, “after his putting before you probably, on the whole, the greatest of your triumphs.”

“And I also know, I think, Mr. Mitchy, that I like YOU.” She spoke without attention to this hyperbole.

“In spite of my ineffectual attempts to be brilliant? That’s a joy,” he went on, “if it’s not drawn out by the mere clumsiness of my flattery.” She had turned away from him, kindly enough, as if time for his talk in the air were always to be allowed him: she took in vaguely Vanderbank’s books and prints. “Why didn’t your mother come?” Mitchy then enquired.

At this she again looked at him. “Do you mention her as a way of alluding to something you guess she must have told me?”

“That I’ve always supposed I make your flesh creep? Yes,” Mitchy admitted; “I see she must have said to you: ‘Be nice to him, to show him it isn’t quite so bad as that!’ So you ARE nice—so you always WILL be nice. But I adore you, all the same, without illusions.”

She had opened at one of the tables, unperceivingly, a big volume of which she turned the leaves. “Don’t ‘adore’ a girl, Mr. Mitchy—just help her. That’s more to the purpose.”

“Help you?” he cried. “You bring tears to my eyes!”

“Can’t a girl have friends?” she went on. “I never heard of anything so idiotic.” Giving him, however, no chance to take her up on this, she made a quick transition. “Mother didn’t come because she wants me now, as she says, more to share her own life.”

Mitchy looked at it. “But is this the way for her to share yours?”

“Ah that’s another matter—about which you must talk to HER. She wants me no longer to keep seeing only with her eyes. She’s throwing me into the world.”

Mitchy had listened with the liveliest interest, but he presently broke into a laugh. “What a good thing then that I’m there to catch you!”

Without—it might have been seen—having gathered the smallest impression of what they enclosed, she carefully drew together again the covers of her folio. There was deliberation in her movements. “I shall always be glad when you’re there. But where do you suppose they’ve gone?” Her eyes were on what was visible of the other room, from which there arrived no sound of voices.

“They’re off there,” said Mitchy, “but just looking unutterable things about you. The impression’s too deep. Let them look, and tell me meanwhile if Mrs. Donner gave you my message.”

“Oh yes, she told me some humbug.”

"The humbug then was in the tone my perfectly sincere speech took from herself. She gives things, I recognise, rather that sound. It's her weakness," he continued, "and perhaps even one may say her danger. All the more reason you should help her, as I believe you're supposed to be doing, aren't you? I hope you feel you are," he earnestly added.

He had spoken this time gravely enough, and with magnificent gravity Nanda replied. "I HAVE helped her. Tishy's sure I have. That's what Tishy wants me for. She says that to be with some nice girl's really the best thing for her."

Poor Mitchy's face hereupon would have been interesting, would have been distinctly touching to other eyes; but Nanda's were not heedful of it. "Oh," he returned after an instant and without profane mirth, "that seems to me the best thing for any one."

Vanderbank, however, might have caught his expression, for Vanderbank now reappeared, smiling on the pair as if struck by their intimacy. "How you ARE keeping it up!" Then to Nanda persuasively: "Do you mind going to him in there? I want him so really to see you. It's quite, you know, what he came for."

Nanda seemed to wonder. "What will he do to me? Anything dreadful?"

"He'll tell you what I meant just now."

"Oh," said Nanda, "if he's a person who can tell me sometimes what you mean—!" With which she went quickly off.

"And can't *I* hear?" Mitchy asked of his host while they looked after her.

"Yes, but only from me." Vanderbank had pushed him to a seat again and was casting about for cigarettes. "Be quiet and smoke, and I'll tell you."

Mitchy, on the sofa, received with meditation a light. "Will she understand? She has everything in the world but one," he added. "But that's half."

Vanderbank, before him, lighted for himself. "What is it?"

"A sense of humour."

"Oh yes, she's serious."

Mitchy smoked a little. "She's tragic."

His friend, at the fire, watched a moment the empty portion of the other room, then walked across to give the door a light push that all but closed it. "It's rather odd," he remarked as he came back—"that's quite what I just said to him. But he won't treat her to comedy."

III

"Is it the shock of the resemblance to her grandmother?" Vanderbank had asked of Mr. Longdon on rejoining him in his retreat. This victim of memory, with his back turned, was gazing out of the window, and when in answer he showed his face there were tears in his eyes. His answer in fact was just these tears, the significance of which Vanderbank immediately recognised. "It's still greater then than you gathered from her photograph?"

"It's the most extraordinary thing in the world. I'm too absurd to be so upset"—Mr. Longdon smiled through his tears—"but if you had known Lady Julia you'd understand. It's SHE again, as I first knew her, to the life; and not only in feature, in stature, in colour, in movement, but in every bodily mark and sign, in every look of the eyes above all—oh to a degree!—in the sound, in the charm of the voice." He spoke low and confidentially, but with an intensity that now relieved him—he was as restless as with a discovery. He moved about as with a sacred awe—he might a few steps away have been in the very presence. "She's ALL Lady Julia. There isn't a touch of her mother. It's unique—an absolute revival. I see nothing of her father, I see nothing of any one else. Isn't it thought wonderful by every one?" he went on. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"To have prepared you a little?"—Vanderbank felt almost guilty. "I see—I should have liked to make more of it; though," he added all lucidly, "I might so, by putting you on your guard, have caused myself to lose what, if you'll allow me to say it, strikes me as one of the most touching tributes I've ever seen rendered to a woman. In fact, however, how could I know? I

never saw Lady Julia, and you had in advance all the evidence I could have: the portrait—pretty bad, in the taste of the time, I admit—and the three or four photographs you must have noticed with it at Mrs. Brook's. These things must have compared themselves for you with my photograph in there of the granddaughter. The similarity of course we had all observed, but it has taken your wonderful memory and your happy vision to put into it all the detail."

Mr. Longdon thought a moment, giving a dab with his pocket-handkerchief. "Very true—you're quite right. It's far beyond any identity in the pictures. But why did you tell me," he added more sharply, "that she isn't beautiful?"

"You've deprived me," Vanderbank laughed, "of the power of expressing civilly any surprise at your finding her so. But I said to you, please remember, nothing that qualified a jot my sense of the special stamp of her face. I've always positively found in it a recall of the type of the period you must be thinking of. It isn't a bit modern. It's a face of Sir Thomas Lawrence—"

"It's a face of Gainsborough!" Mr. Longdon returned with spirit. "Lady Julia herself harked back."

Vanderbank, clearly, was equally touched and amused. "Let us say at once that it's a face of Raphael."

His old friend's hand was instantly on his arm. "That's exactly what I often said to myself of Lady Julia's."

"The forehead's a little too high," said Vanderbank.

"But it's just that excess that, with the exquisite eyes and the particular disposition round it of the fair hair, makes the individual grace, makes the beauty of the resemblance."

Released by Lady Julia's lover, the young man in turn grasped him as an encouragement to confidence. "It's a face that should have the long side-ringlets of 1830. It should have the rest of the personal arrangement, the pelisse, the shape of bonnet, the sprigged muslin dress and the cross-laced sandals. It should have arrived in a pea-green 'tilbury' and be a reader of Mrs. Radcliffe. And all this to complete the Raphael!"

Mr. Longdon, who, his discovery proclaimed, had begun, as might have been said, to live with it, looked hard a moment at his companion. “How you’ve observed her!”

Vanderbank met it without confusion. “Whom haven’t I observed? Do you like her?” he then rather oddly and abruptly asked.

The old man broke away again. “How can I tell—with such disparities?”

“The manner must be different,” Vanderbank suggested. “And the things she says.”

His visitor was before him again. “I don’t know what to make of them. They don’t go with the rest of her. Lady Julia,” said Mr. Longdon, “was rather shy.”

On this too his host could meet him. “She must have been. And Nanda—yes, certainly—doesn’t give that impression.”

“On the contrary. But Lady Julia was gay!” he added with an eagerness that made Vanderbank smile.

“I can also see that. Nanda doesn’t joke. And yet,” Vanderbank continued with his exemplary candour, “we mustn’t speak of her, must we? as if she were bold and grim.”

Mr. Longdon fixed him. “Do you think she’s sad?”

They had preserved their lowered tone and might, with their heads together, have been conferring as the party “out” in some game with the couple in the other room. “Yes. Sad.” But Vanderbank broke off. “I’ll send her to you.” Thus it was he had come back to her.

Nanda, on joining the elder man, went straight to the point. “He says it’s so beautiful—what you feel on seeing me: if that IS what he meant.” Mr. Longdon kept silent again at first, only smiling at her, but less strangely now, and then appeared to look about him for some place where she could sit near him. There was a sofa in this room too, on which, observing it, she quickly sank down, so that they were presently together, placed a little sideways and face to face. She had shown perhaps that she supposed him to have wished to take her hand, but he forbore to touch her, though letting her feel all the kindness of

his eyes and their long backward vision. These things she evidently felt soon enough; she went on before he had spoken. “I know how well you knew my grandmother. Mother has told me—and I’m so glad. She told me to say to you that she wants YOU to tell me.” Just a shade, at this, might have appeared to drop over his face, but who was there to know if the girl observed it? It didn’t prevent at any rate her completing her statement. “That’s why she wished me to-day to come alone. She said she wished you to have me all to yourself.”

No, decidedly, she wasn’t shy: that mute reflexion was in the air an instant. “That, no doubt, is the best way. I thank her very much. I called, after having had the honour of dining—I called, I think, three times,” he went on with a sudden displacement of the question; “but I had the misfortune each time to miss her.”

She kept looking at him with her crude young clearness. “I didn’t know about that. Mother thinks she’s more at home than almost any one. She does it on purpose: she knows what it is,” Nanda pursued with her perfect gravity, “for people to be disappointed of finding her.”

“Oh I shall find her yet,” said Mr. Longdon. “And then I hope I shall also find YOU.”

She appeared simply to consider the possibility and after an instant to think well of it. “I dare say you will now, for now I shall be down.”

Her companion just blinked. “In the drawing-room, you mean—always?”

It was quite what she meant. “Always. I shall see all the people who come. It will be a great thing for me. I want to hear all the talk. Mr. Mitchett says I ought to—that it helps to form the young mind. I hoped, for that reason,” she went on with the directness that made her honesty almost violent—“I hoped there would be more people here to-day.”

“I’m very glad there are not!”—the old man rang equally clear. “Mr. Vanderbank kindly arranged the matter for me just this way. I met him at dinner, at your mother’s, three weeks ago, and he brought me home here that night, when, as

knowing you so differently, we took the liberty of talking you all over. It naturally had the effect of making me want to begin with you afresh—only that seemed difficult too without further help. This he good-naturedly offered me; he said"—and Mr. Longdon recovered his spirits to repeat it—"'Hang it, I'll have 'em here for you!'"

"I see—he knew we'd come." Then she caught herself up. "But we haven't come, have we?"

"Oh it's all right—it's all right. To me the occasion's brilliant and the affluence great. I've had such talk with those young men—"

"I see"—she was again prompt, but beyond any young person he had ever met she might have struck him as literal. "You're not used to such talk. Neither am I. It's rather wonderful, isn't it? They're thought awfully clever, Mr. Van and Mr. Mitchy. Do you like them?" she pushed on.

Mr. Longdon, who, as compared with her, might have struck a spectator as infernally subtle, took an instant to think. "I've never met Mr. Mitchett before."

"Well, he always thinks one doesn't like him," Nanda explained. "But one does. One ought to," she added.

Her companion had another pause. "He likes YOU."

Oh Mr. Longdon needn't have hesitated! "I know he does. He has told mother. He has told lots of people."

"He has told even you," Mr. Longdon smiled.

"Yes—but that isn't the same. I don't think he's a bit dreadful," she pursued. Still, there was a greater interest. "Do you like Mr. Van?"

This time her interlocutor indeed hung fire. "How can I tell? He dazzles me."

"But don't you like that?" Then before he could really say: "You're afraid he may be false?"

At this he fairly laughed. "You go to the point!" She just coloured to have amused him so, but he quickly went on: "I think one has a little natural nervousness at being carried off

one's feet. I'm afraid I've always liked too much to see where I'm going."

"And you don't with him?" She spoke with her curious hard interest. "I understand. But I think I like to be dazzled."

"Oh you've got time—you can come round again; you've a margin for accidents, for disappointments and recoveries: you can take one thing with another. But I've only my last little scrap."

"And you want to make no mistakes—I see."

"Well, I'm too easily upset."

"Ah so am I," said Nanda. "I assure you that in spite of what you say I want to make no mistakes either. I've seen a great many—though you mightn't think it," she persisted; "I really know what they may be. Do you like ME?" she brought forth. But even on this she spared him too; a look appeared to have been enough for her. "How can you say, of course, already?—if you can't say for Mr. Van. I mean as you've seen him so much. When he asked me just now if I liked YOU I told him it was too soon. But it isn't now; you see it goes fast. I DO like you." She gave him no time to acknowledge this tribute, but—as if it were a matter of course—tried him quickly with something else. "Can you say if you like mother?"

He could meet it pretty well now. "There are immense reasons why I should."

"Yes—I know about them, as I mentioned: mother has told me." But what she had to put to him kept up his surprise. "Have reasons anything to do with it? I don't believe you like her!" she exclaimed. "SHE doesn't think so," she added.

The old man's face at last, partly bewildered, partly reassured, showed something finer still in the effect she produced. "Into what mysteries you plunge!"

"Oh we do; that's what every one says of us. We discuss everything and every one—we're always discussing each other. I think we must be rather celebrated for it, and it's a kind of trick—isn't it?—that's catching. But don't you think it's the most interesting sort of talk? Mother says we haven't any prejudices.

YOU have, probably, quantities—and beautiful ones: so perhaps I oughtn't to tell you. But you'll find out for yourself."

"Yes—I'm rather slow; but I generally end by finding out. And I've got, thank heaven," said Mr. Longdon, "quite prejudices enough."

"Then I hope you'll tell me some of them," Nanda replied in a tone evidently marking how much he pleased her.

"Ah you must do as *I* do—you must find out for yourself. Your resemblance to your grandmother is quite prodigious," he immediately added.

"That's what I wish you'd tell me about—your recollection of her and your wonderful feeling about her. Mother has told me things, but that I should have something straight from you is exactly what she also wants. My grandmother must have been awfully nice," the girl rambled on, "and I somehow don't see myself at all as the same sort of person."

"Oh I don't say you're in the least the same sort: all I allude to," Mr. Longdon returned, "is the miracle of the physical heredity. Nothing could be less like her than your manner and your talk."

Nanda looked at him with all her honesty. "They're not so good, you must think."

He hung fire an instant, but was as honest as she. "You're separated from her by a gulf—and not only of time. Personally, you see, you breathe a different air."

She thought—she quite took it in. "Of course. And you breathe the same—the same old one, I mean, as my grandmother."

"The same old one," Mr. Longdon smiled, "as much as possible. Some day I'll tell you more of what you're curious of. I can't go into it now."

"Because I've upset you so?" Nanda frankly asked.

"That's one of the reasons."

"I think I can see another too," she observed after a moment. "You're not sure how much I shall understand. But I shall

understand," she went on, "more, perhaps, than you think. In fact," she said earnestly, "I PROMISE to understand. I've some imagination. Had my grandmother?" she asked. Her actual sequences were not rapid, but she had already anticipated him. "I've thought of that before, because I put the same question to mother."

"And what did your mother say?"

"'Imagination—dear mamma? Not a grain!'"

The old man showed a faint flush. "Your mother then has a supply that makes up for it."

The girl fixed him on this with a deeper attention. "You don't like her having said that."

His colour came stronger, though a slightly strained smile did what it could to diffuse coolness. "I don't care a single scrap, my dear, in respect to the friend I'm speaking of, for any judgement but my own."

"Not even for her daughter's?"

"Not even for her daughter's." Mr. Longdon had not spoken loud, but he rang as clear as a bell.

Nanda, for admiration of it, broke almost for the first time into the semblance of a smile. "You feel as if my grandmother were quite YOUR property!"

"Oh quite."

"I say—that's splendid!"

"I'm glad you like it," he answered kindly.

The very kindness pulled her up. "Pardon my speaking so, but I'm sure you know what I mean. You mustn't think," she eagerly continued, "that mother won't also want to hear you."

"On the subject of Lady Julia?" He gently, but very effectively, shook his head. "Your mother shall never hear me."

Nanda appeared to wonder at it an instant, and it made her completely grave again. "It will be all for ME?"

"Whatever there may be of it, my dear."

"Oh I shall get it all out of you," she returned without hesitation. Her mixture of free familiarity and of the vividness

of evocation of something, whatever it was, sharply opposed—the little worry of this contradiction, not altogether unpleasant, continued to fill his consciousness more discernibly than anything else. It was really reflected in his quick brown eyes that she alternately drew him on and warned him off, but also that what they were beginning more and more to make out was an emotion of her own trembling there beneath her tension. His glimpse of it widened—his glimpse of it fairly triumphed when suddenly, after this last declaration, she threw off with quite the same accent but quite another effect: "I'm glad to be like any one the thought of whom makes you so good! You ARE good," she continued; "I see already how I shall feel it." She stared at him with tears, the sight of which brought his own straight back; so that thus for a moment they sat there together.

"My dear child!" he at last simply murmured. But he laid his hand on her now, and her own immediately met it.

"You'll get used to me," she said with the same gentleness that the response of her touch had tried to express; "and I shall be so careful with you that—well, you'll see!" She broke short off with a quaver and the next instant she turned—there was some one at the door. Vanderbank, still not quite at his ease, had come back to smile upon them. Detaching herself from Mr. Longdon she got straight up to meet him. "You were right, Mr. Van. It's beautiful, beautiful, beautiful!"

BOOK FOURTH. MR. CASHMORE

Harold Brookenham, whom Mr. Cashmore, ushered in and announced, had found in the act of helping himself to a cup of tea at the table apparently just prepared—Harold Brookenham arrived at the point with a dash so direct as to leave the visitor an option between but two suppositions: that of a desperate plunge, to have his shame soon over, or that of the acquired habit of such appeals, which had taught him the easiest way. There was no great sharpness in the face of Mr. Cashmore, who was somehow massive without majesty; yet he mightn't have been proof against the suspicion that his young friend's embarrassment was an easy precaution, a conscious corrective to the danger of audacity. It wouldn't have been impossible to divine that if Harold shut his eyes and jumped it was mainly for the appearance of doing so. Experience was to be taken as showing that one might get a five-pound note as one got a light for a cigarette; but one had to check the friendly impulse to ask for it in the same way. Mr. Cashmore had in fact looked surprised, yet not on the whole so surprised as the young man seemed to have expected of him. There was almost a quiet grace in the combination of promptitude and diffidence with which Harold took over the responsibility of all proprietorship of the crisp morsel of paper that he slipped with slow firmness into the pocket of his waistcoat, rubbing it gently in its passage against the delicately buff-coloured duck of which that garment was composed. "So quite too awfully kind of you that I really don't know what to say"—there was a marked recall, in the manner of this speech, of the sweetness of his mother's droop and the tenderness of her wail. It was as if he had been moved for the moment to moralise, but the eyes he raised to his benefactor had the oddest effect of marking that personage himself as a theme for the moralist.

Mr. Cashmore, who would have been very red-haired if he had not been very bald, showed a single eye-glass and a long upper lip; he was large and jaunty, with little petulant

movements and intense ejaculations that were not in the line of his type. “You may say anything you like if you don’t say you’ll repay it. That’s always nonsense—I hate it.”

Harold remained sad, but showed himself really superior. “Then I won’t say it.” Pensively, a minute, he appeared to figure the words, in their absurdity, on the lips of some young man not, like himself, tactful. “I know just what you mean.”

“But I think, you know, that you ought to tell your father,” Mr. Cashmore said.

“Tell him I’ve borrowed of you?”

Mr. Cashmore good-humouredly demurred. “It would serve me right—it’s so wretched my having listened to you. Tell him, certainly,” he went on after an instant. “But what I mean is that if you’re in such straits you should speak to him like a man.”

Harold smiled at the innocence of a friend who could suppose him not to have exhausted that resource. “I’m ALWAYS speaking to him like a man, and that’s just what puts him so awfully out. He denies to my face that I AM one. One would suppose, to hear him, not only that I’m a small objectionable child, but that I’m scarcely even human. He doesn’t conceive me as with human wants.”

“Oh,” Mr. Cashmore laughed, “you’ve all—you youngsters—as many wants, I know, as an advertisement page of the Times.”

Harold showed an admiration. “That’s awfully good. If you think you ought to speak of it,” he continued, “do it rather to mamma.” He noted the hour. “I’ll go, if you’ll excuse me, to give you the chance.”

The visitor referred to his own watch. “It’s your mother herself who gives the chances—the chances YOU take.”

Harold looked kind and simple. “She HAS come in, I know. She’ll be with you in a moment.”

He was halfway to the door, but Mr. Cashmore, though so easy, had not done with him. “I suppose you mean that if it’s only your mother who’s told, you may depend on her to shield you.”

Harold turned this over as if it were a questionable sovereign, but on second thoughts he wonderfully smiled. “Do you think that after you’ve let me have it you can tell? You could, of course, if you hadn’t.” He appeared to work it out for Mr. Cashmore’s benefit. “But I don’t mind,” he added, “your telling mamma.”

“Don’t mind, you mean really, its annoying her so awfully?”

The invitation to repent thrown off in this could only strike the young man as absurd—it was so previous to any enjoyment. Harold liked things in their proper order; but at the same time his evolutions were quick. “I dare say I AM selfish, but what I was thinking was that the terrific wigging, don’t you know?—well, I’d take it from HER. She knows about one’s life—about our having to go on, by no fault of our own, as our parents start us. She knows all about wants—no one has more than mamma.”

Mr. Cashmore soundlessly glared his amusement. “So she’ll say it’s all right?”

“Oh no; she’ll let me have it hot. But she’ll recognise that at such a pass more must be done for a fellow, and that may lead to something—indirectly, don’t you see? for she won’t TELL my father, she’ll only, in her own way, work on him—that will put me on a better footing and for which therefore at bottom I shall have to thank YOU!”

The eye assisted by Mr. Cashmore’s glass had with a discernible growth of something like alarm fixed during this address the subject of his beneficence. The thread of their relations somehow lost itself in the subtler twist, and he fell back on mere stature, position and property, things always convenient in the presence of crookedness. “I shall say nothing to your mother, but I think I shall be rather glad you’re not a son of mine.”

Harold wondered at this new element in their talk. “Do your sons never—?”

“Borrow money of their mother’s visitors?” Mr. Cashmore had taken him up, eager, evidently, quite to satisfy him; but the

question was caught on the wing by Mrs. Brookenham herself, who had opened the door as her friend spoke and who quickly advanced with an echo of it.

"Lady Fanny's visitors?"—and, though her eyes rather avoided than met his own, she seemed to cover her ladyship's husband with a vague but practised sympathy. "What on earth are you saying to Harold about them?" Thus it was that at the end of a few minutes Mr. Cashmore, on the sofa face to face with her, found his consciousness quite purged of its actual sense of his weakness and a new turn given to the idea of what, in one's very drawing-room, might go on behind one's back. Harold had quickly vanished—had been tacitly disposed of, and Mrs. Brook's caller had moved even in the short space of time so far in another direction as to have drawn from her the little cold question: "'Presents'? You don't mean money?"

He clearly felt the importance of expressing at least by his silence and his eye-glass what he meant. "Her extravagance is beyond everything, and though there are bills enough, God knows, that do come in to me, I don't see how she pulls through unless there are others that go elsewhere."

Mrs. Brookenham had given him his tea—her own she had placed on a small table near her; and she could now respond freely to the impulse felt, on this, of settling herself to something of real interest. Except to Harold she was incapable of reproach, though there were of course shades in her resignation, and her daughter's report of her to Mr. Longdon as conscious of an absence of prejudice would have been justified for a spectator by the particular feeling that Mr. Cashmore's speech caused her to disclose. What did this feeling wonderfully appear unless strangely irrelevant? "I've no patience when I hear you talk as if you weren't horribly rich."

He looked at her an instant as if guessing she might have derived that impression from Harold. "What has that to do with it? Does a rich man enjoy any more than a poor his wife's making a fool of him?"

Her eyes opened wider: it was one of her very few ways of betraying amusement. There was little indeed to be amused at here except his choice of the particular invidious name. “You know I don’t believe a word you say.”

Mr. Cashmore drank his tea, then rose to carry the cup somewhere and put it down, declining with a motion any assistance. When he was on the sofa again he resumed their intimate talk. “I like tremendously to be with you, but you mustn’t think I’ve come here to let you say to me such dreadful things as that.” He was an odd compound, Mr. Cashmore, and the air of personal good health, the untarnished bloom which sometimes lent a monstrous serenity to his mention of the barely mentionable, was on occasion balanced or matched by his playful application of extravagant terms to matters of much less moment. “You know what I come to you for, Mrs. Brook: I won’t come any more if you’re going to be horrid and impossible.”

“You come to me, I suppose, because—for my deep misfortune, I assure you—I’ve a kind of vision of things, of the wretched miseries in which you all knot yourselves up, which you yourselves are as little blessed with as if, tumbling about together in your heap, you were a litter of blind kittens.”

“Awfully good that—you do lift the burden of my trouble!” He had laughed out in the manner of the man who made notes for platform use of things that might serve; but the next moment he was grave again, as if his observation had reminded him of Harold’s praise of his wit. It was in this spirit that he abruptly brought out: “Where, by the way, is your daughter?”

“I haven’t the least idea. I do all I can to enter into her life, but you can’t get into a railway train while it’s on the rush.”

Mr. Cashmore swung back to hilarity. “You give me lots of things. Do you mean she’s so ‘fast’?” He could keep the ball going.

Mrs. Brookenham obliged him with what she meant. “No; she’s a tremendous dear, and we’re great friends. But she has her free young life, which, by that law of our time that I’m sure I

only want, like all other laws, once I know what they ARE, to accept—she has her precious freshness of feeling which I say to myself that, so far as control is concerned, I ought to respect. I try to get her to sit with me, and she does so a little, because she's kind. But before I know it she leaves me again: she feels what a difference her presence makes in one's liberty of talk."

Mr. Cashmore was struck by this picture. "That's awfully charming of her."

"Isn't it too dear?" The thought of it, for Mrs. Brook, seemed fairly to open out vistas. "The modern daughter!"

"But not the ancient mother!" Mr. Cashmore smiled.

She shook her head with a world of accepted woe. "'Give me back, give me back one hour of my youth'! Oh I haven't a single thrill left to answer a compliment. I sit here now face to face with things as they are. They come in their turn, I assure you—and they find me," Mrs. Brook sighed, "ready. Nanda has stepped on the stage and I give her up the house. Besides," she went on musingly, "it's awfully interesting. It IS the modern daughter—we're really 'doing' her, the child and I; and as the modern has always been my own note—I've gone in, I mean, frankly for my very own Time—who is one, after all, that one should pretend to decline to go where it may lead?" Mr. Cashmore was unprepared with an answer to this question, and his hostess continued in a different tone: "It's sweet her sparing one!"

This, for the visitor, was firmer ground. "Do you mean about talking before her?"

Mrs. Brook's assent was positively tender. "She won't have a difference in my freedom. It's as if the dear thing KNEW, don't you see? what we must keep back. She wants us not to have to think. It's quite maternal!" she mused again. Then as if with the pleasure of presenting it to him afresh: "That's the modern daughter!"

"Well," said Mr. Cashmore, "I can't help wishing she were a trifle less considerate. In that case I might find her with you, and I may tell you frankly that I get more from her than I do

from you. She has the great merit for me, in the first place, of not being such an admirer of my wife."

Mrs. Brookenham took this up with interest. "No—you're right; she doesn't, as I do, SEE Lady Fanny, and that's a kind of mercy."

"There you are then, you inconsistent creature," he cried with a laugh: "after all you DO believe me! You recognise how benighted it would be for your daughter not to feel that Fanny's bad."

"You're too tiresome, my dear man," Mrs. Brook returned, "with your ridiculous simplifications. Fanny's NOT 'bad'; she's magnificently good—in the sense of being generous and simple and true, too adorably unaffected and without the least mesquinerie. She's a great calm silver statue."

Mr. Cashmore showed, on this, something of the strength that comes from the practice of public debate. "Then why are you glad your daughter doesn't like her?"

Mrs. Brook smiled as with the sadness of having too much to triumph. "Because I'm not, like Fanny, without mesquinerie. I'm not generous and simple. I'm exaggeratedly anxious about Nanda. I care, in spite of myself, for what people may say. Your wife doesn't—she towers above them. I can be a shade less brave through the chance of my girl's not happening to feel her as the rest of us do."

Mr. Cashmore too heavily followed. "To 'feel' her?"

Mrs. Brook floated over. "There would be in that case perhaps something to hint to her not to shriek on the house-tops. When you say," she continued, "that one admits, as regards Fanny, anything wrong, you pervert dreadfully what one does freely grant—that she's a great glorious pagan. It's a real relief to know such a type—it's like a flash of insight into history. None the less if you ask me why then it isn't all right for young things to 'shriek' as I say, I have my answer perfectly ready." After which, as her visitor seemed not only too reduced to doubt it, but too baffled to distinguish audibly, for his credit, between resignation and admiration, she produced: "Because

she's purely instinctive. Her instincts are splendid—but it's terrific."

"That's all I ever maintained it to be!" Mr. Cashmore cried. "It IS terrific."

"Well," his friend answered, "I'm watching her. We're all watching her. It's like some great natural poetic thing—an Alpine sunrise or a big high tide."

"You're amazing!" Mr. Cashmore laughed. "I'm watching her too."

"And I'm also watching YOU!" Mrs. Brook lucidly continued. "What I don't for a moment believe is that her bills are paid by any one. It's MUCH more probable," she sagaciously observed, "that they're not paid at all."

"Oh well, if she can get on that way—!"

"There can't be a place in London," Mrs. Brook pursued, "where they're not delighted to dress such a woman. She shows things, don't you see? as some fine tourist region shows the placards in the fields and the posters on the rocks. And what proof can you adduce?" she asked.

Mr. Cashmore had grown restless; he picked a stray thread off the knee of his trousers. "Ah when you talk about 'adducing'—!" He appeared to intimate—as with the hint that if she didn't take care she might bore him—that it was the kind of word he used only in the House of Commons.

"When I talk about it you can't meet me," she placidly returned. But she fixed him with her weary penetration. "You try to believe what you CAN'T believe, in order to give yourself excuses. And she does the same—only less, for she recognises less in general the need of them. She's so grand and simple."

Poor Mr. Cashmore stared. "Grander and simpler than I, you mean?"

Mrs. Brookenham thought. "Not simpler—no; but very much grander. She wouldn't, in the case you conceive, recognise really the need of WHAT you conceive."

Mr. Cashmore wondered—it was almost mystic. “I don’t understand you.”

Mrs. Brook, seeing it all from dim depths, tracked it further and further. “We’ve talked her over so!”

Mr. Cashmore groaned as if too conscious of it. “Indeed we have!”

“I mean WE”—and it was wonderful how her accent discriminated. “We’ve talked you too—but of course we talk to every one.” She had a pause through which there glimmered a ray from luminous hours, the inner intimacy which, privileged as he was, he couldn’t pretend to share; then she broke out almost impatiently: “We’re looking after her—leave her to US!”

His envy of this nearer approach to what so touched him than he could himself achieve was in his face, but he tried to throw it off. “I doubt if after all you’re good for her.”

But Mrs. Brookenham knew. “She’s just the sort of person we ARE good for, and the thing for her is to be with us as much as possible—just live with us naturally and easily, listen to our talk, feel our confidence in her, be kept up, don’t you know? by the sense of what we expect of her splendid type, and so, little by little, let our influence act. What I meant to say just now is that I do perfectly see her taking what you call presents.”

“Well then,” Mr. Cashmore enquired, “what do you want more?”

Mrs. Brook hung fire an instant—she seemed on the point of telling him. “I DON’T see her, as I said, recognising the obligation.”

“The obligation—?”

“To give anything back. Anything at all.” Mrs. Brook was positive. “The comprehension of petty calculations? Never!”

“I don’t say the calculations are petty,” Mr. Cashmore objected.

“Well, she’s a great creature. If she does fall—!” His hostess lost herself in the view, which was at last all before her. “Be sure we shall all know it.”

"That's exactly what I'm afraid of!"

"Then don't be afraid till we do. She would fall, as it were, on US, don't you see? and," said Mrs. Brook, with decision this time in her headshake, "that couldn't be. We MUST keep her up—that's your guarantee. It's rather too much," she added with the same increase of briskness, "to have to keep YOU up too. Be very sure that if Carrie really wavers—"

"Carrie?"

His interruption was clearly too vague to be sincere, and it was as such that, going straight on, she treated it. "I shall never again give her three minutes' attention. To answer to you for Fanny without being able—"

"To answer to Fanny for me, do you mean?" He had flushed quickly as if he awaited her there. "It wouldn't suit you, you contend? Well then, I hope it will ease you off," he went on with spirit, "to know that I wholly LOATHE Mrs. Donner."

Mrs. Brook, staring, met the announcement with an absolute change of colour. "And since when, pray?" It was as if a fabric had crumbled. "She was here but the other day, and as full of you, poor thing, as an egg of meat."

Mr. Cashmore could only blush for her. "I don't say she wasn't. My life's a burden from her."

Nothing, for a spectator, could have been so odd as Mrs. Brook's disappointment unless it had been her determination. "Have you done with her already?"

"One has never done with a buzzing insect—!"

"Until one has literally killed it?" Mrs. Brookenham wailed. "I can't take that from you, my dear man: it was yourself who originally distilled the poison that courses through her veins." He jumped up at this as if he couldn't bear it, presenting as he walked across the room, however, a large foolish fugitive back on which her eyes rested as on a proof of her penetration. "If you spoil everything by trying to deceive me, how can I help you?"

He had looked, in his restlessness, at a picture or two, but he finally turned round. "With whom is it you talk us over? With

Petherton and his friend Mitchy? With your adored Vanderbank? With your awful Duchess?"

"You know my little circle, and you've not always despised it." She met him on his return with a figure that had visibly flashed out for her. "Don't foul your own nest! Remember that after all we've more or less produced you." She had a smile that attenuated a little her image, for there were things that on a second thought he appeared ready to take from her. She patted the sofa as if to invite him again to be seated, and though he still stood before her it was with a face that seemed to show how her touch went home. "You know I've never quite thought you do us full honour, but it was because SHE took you for one of us that Carrie first—"

At this, to stop her, he dropped straight into the seat. "I assure you there has really been nothing." With a continuation of his fidget he pulled out his watch. "Won't she come in at all?"

"Do you mean Nanda?"

"Talk me over with HER!" he smiled, "if you like. If you don't believe Mrs. Donner is dust and ashes to me," he continued, "you do little justice to your daughter."

"Do you wish to break it to me that you're in love with Nanda?"

He hesitated, but only as if to give weight to his reply. "Awfully. I can't tell you how I like her."

She wondered. "And pray how will THAT help me? Help me, I mean, to help you. Is it what I'm to tell your wife?"

He sat looking away, but he evidently had his idea, which he at last produced. "Why wouldn't it be just the thing? It would exactly prove my purity."

There might have been in her momentary silence a hint of acceptance of it as a practical contribution to their problem, and there were indeed several lights in which it could be considered. Mrs. Brook, on a quick survey, selected the ironic. "I see, I see. I might by the same law arrange somehow that Lady Fanny should find herself in love with Edward. That

would 'prove' HER purity. And you could be quite at ease," she laughed—"he wouldn't make any presents!"

Mr. Cashmore regarded her with a candour that was almost a reproach to her mirth. "I like your daughter better than I like you."

But it only amused her more. "Is that perhaps because *I* don't prove your purity?"

What he might have replied remained in the air, for the door opened so exactly at the moment she spoke that he rose again with a start and the butler, coming in, received her enquiry full in the face. This functionary's answer to it, however, had no more than the usual austerity. "Mr. Vanderbank and Mr. Longdon."

These visitors took a minute to appear, and Mrs. Brook, not stirring—still only looking from the sofa calmly up at Mr. Cashmore—used the time, it might have seemed, for correcting any impression of undue levity made by her recent question. "Where did you last meet Nanda?"

He glanced at the door to see if he were heard. "At the Grendons'."

"So you do go there?"

"I went over from Hicks the other day for an hour."

"And Carrie was there?"

"Yes. It was a dreadful horrid bore. But I talked only to your daughter."

She got up—the others were at hand—and offered Mr. Cashmore an expression that might have struck him as strange. "It's serious."

"Serious?"—he had no eyes for the others.

"She didn't tell me."

He gave a sound, controlled by discretion, which sufficed none the less to make Mr. Longdon—beholding him for the first time—receive it with a little of the stiffness of a person greeted with a guffaw. Mr. Cashmore visibly liked this silence of Nanda's about their meeting.

II

Mrs. Brookenham, who had introduced him to the elder of her visitors, had also found in serving these gentlemen with tea, a chance to edge at him with an intensity not to be resisted: "Talk to Mr. Longdon—take him off THERE." She had indicated the sofa at the opposite end of the room and had set him an example by possessing herself, in the place she already occupied, of her "adored" Vanderbank. This arrangement, however, constituted for her, in her own corner, as soon as she had made it, the ground of an appeal. "Will he hate me any worse for doing that?"

Vanderbank glanced at the others. "Will Cashmore, do you mean?"

"Dear no—I don't care whom HE hates. But with Mr. Longdon I want to avoid mistakes."

"Then don't try quite so hard!" Vanderbank laughed. "Is that your reason for throwing him into Cashmore's arms?"

"Yes, precisely—so that I shall have these few moments to ask you for directions: you must know him by this time so well. I only want, heaven help me, to be as nice to him as I possibly can."

"That's quite the best thing for you and altogether why, this afternoon, I brought him: he might have better luck in finding you—it was he who suggested it—than he has had by himself. I'm in a general way," Vanderbank added, "watching over him."

"I see—and he's watching over you." Mrs. Brook's sweet vacancy had already taken in so much. "He wants to judge of what I may be doing to you—he wants to save you from me. He quite detests me."

Vanderbank, with the interest as well as the amusement, fairly threw himself back. "There's nobody like you—you're too magnificent!"

"I AM; and that I can look the truth in the face and not be angry or silly about it is, as you know, the one thing in the world for which I think a bit well of myself."

"Oh yes, I know—I know; you're too wonderful!"

Mrs. Brookenham, in a brief pause, completed her covert consciousness. “They’re doing beautifully—he’s taking Cashmore with a seriousness!”

“And with what is Cashmore taking him?”

“With the hope that from one moment to another Nanda may come in.”

“But how on earth does that concern him?”

“Through an extraordinary fancy he has suddenly taken to her.” Mrs. Brook had been swift to master the facts. “He has been meeting her at Tishy’s, and she has talked to him so effectually about his behaviour that she has quite made him cease to care for Carrie. He prefers HER now—and of course she’s much nicer.”

Vanderbank’s attention, it was clear, had now been fully seized. “She’s much nicer. Rather! What you mean is,” he asked the next moment, “that Nanda, this afternoon, has been the object of his call?”

“Yes—really; though he tried to keep it from me. She makes him feel,” she went on, “so innocent and good.”

Her companion for a moment said nothing; but then at last: “And WILL she come in?”

“I haven’t the least idea.”

“Don’t you know where she is?”

“I suppose she’s with Tishy, who has returned to town.”

Vanderbank turned this over. “Is that your system now—to ask no questions?”

“Why SHOULD I ask any—when I want her life to be as much as possible like my own? It’s simply that the hour has struck, as you know. From the moment she IS down the only thing for us is to live as friends. I think it’s so vulgar,” Mrs. Brook sighed, “not to have the same good manners with one’s children as one has with other people. She asks ME nothing.”

“Nothing?” Vanderbank echoed.

“Nothing.”

He paused again; after which, “It’s very disgusting!” he declared. Then while she took it up as he had taken her word of a moment before, “It’s very preposterous,” he continued.

Mrs. Brook appeared at a loss. “Do you mean her helping him?”

“It’s not of Nanda I’m speaking—it’s of him.” Vanderbank spoke with a certain impatience. “His being with her in any sort of direct relation at all. His mixing her up with his other beastly affairs.”

Mrs. Brook looked intelligent and wan about it, but also perfectly good-humoured. “My dear man, he and his affairs ARE such twaddle!”

Vanderbank laughed in spite of himself. “And does that make it any better?”

Mrs. Brook thought, but presently had a light—she almost smiled with it. “For US!” Then more woefully, “Don’t you want Carrie to be saved?” she asked.

“Why should I? Not a jot. Carrie be hanged!”

“But it’s for Fanny,” Mrs. Brook protested. “If Carrie IS rescued it’s a pretext the less for Fanny.” As the young man looked for an instant rather gloomily vague she softly quavered: “I suppose you don’t positively WANT Fanny to bolt?”

“To bolt?”

“Surely I’ve not to remind you at this time of day how Captain Dent-Douglas is always round the corner with the post-chaise, and how tight, on our side, we’re all clutching her.”

“But why not let her go?”

Mrs. Brook, at this, showed real resentment. “‘Go’? Then what would become of us?” She recalled his wandering fancy. “She’s the delight of our life.”

“Oh!” Vanderbank sceptically murmured.

“She’s the ornament of our circle,” his companion insisted. “She will, she won’t—she won’t, she will! It’s the excitement, every day, of plucking the daisy over.” Vanderbank’s attention, as she spoke, had attached itself across the room to Mr.

Longdon; it gave her thus an image of the way his imagination had just seemed to her to stray, and she saw a reason in it moreover for her coming up in another place.

"Isn't he rather rich?" She allowed the question all its effect of abruptness.

Vanderbank looked round at her. "Mr. Longdon? I haven't the least idea."

"Not after becoming so intimate? It's usually, with people, the very first thing I get my impression of." There came into her face for another glance at their friend no crudity of curiosity, but an expression more tenderly wistful. "He must have some mysterious box under his bed."

"Down in Suffolk?—a miser's hoard? Who knows? I dare say," Vanderbank went on. "He isn't a miser, but he strikes me as careful."

Mrs. Brook meanwhile had thought it out. "Then he has something to be careful of; it would take something really handsome to inspire in a man like him that sort of interest. With his small expenses all these years his savings must be immense. And how could he have proposed to mamma unless he had originally had money?"

If Vanderbank a little helplessly wondered he also laughed. "You must remember your mother refused him."

"Ah but not because there wasn't enough."

"No—I imagine the force of the blow for him was just in the other reason."

"Well, it would have been in that one just as much if that one had been the other." Mrs. Brook was sagacious, though a trifle obscure, and she pursued the next moment: "Mamma was so sincere. The fortune was nothing to her. That shows it was immense."

"It couldn't have been as great as your logic," Vanderbank smiled; "but of course if it has been growing ever since—!"

"I can see it grow while he sits there," Mrs. Brook declared. But her logic had in fact its own law, and her next transition

was an equal jump. “It was too lovely, the frankness of your admission a minute ago that I affect him uncannily. Ah don’t spoil it by explanations!” she beautifully pleaded: “he’s not the first and he won’t be the last with whom I shall not have been what they call a combination. The only thing that matters is that I mustn’t, if possible, make the case worse. So you must guide me. What IS one to do?”

Vanderbank, now amused again, looked at her kindly. “Be yourself, my dear woman. Obey your fine instincts.”

“How can you be,” she sweetly asked, “so hideously hypocritical? You know as well as you sit there that my fine instincts are the thing in the world you’re most in terror of. ‘Be myself?’” she echoed. “What you’d LIKE to say is: ‘Be somebody else—that’s your only chance.’ Well, I’ll try—I’ll try.”

He laughed again, shaking his head. “Don’t—don’t.”

“You mean it’s too hopeless? There’s no way of effacing the bad impression or of starting a good one?” On this, with a drop of his mirth, he met her eyes, and for an instant, through the superficial levity of their talk, they might have appeared to sound each other. It lasted till Mrs. Brook went on: “I should really like not to lose him.”

Vanderbank seemed to understand and at last said: “I think you won’t lose him.”

“Do you mean you’ll help me, Van, you WILL?” Her voice had at moments the most touching tones of any in England, and humble, helpless, affectionate, she spoke with a familiarity of friendship. “It’s for the sense of the link with mamma,” she explained. “He’s simply full of her.”

“Oh I know. He’s prodigious.”

“He has told you more—he comes back to it?” Mrs. Brook eagerly asked.

“Well,” the young man replied a trifle evasively, “we’ve had a great deal of talk, and he’s the jolliest old boy possible, and in short I like him.”

“I see,” said Mrs. Brook blandly, “and he likes you in return as much as he despises me. That makes it all right—makes me

somehow so happy for you. There's something in him—what is it?—that suggests the oncle d'Amerique, the eccentric benefactor, the fairy godmother. He's a little of an old woman—but all the better for it." She hung fire but an instant before she pursued: "What can we make him do for you?"

Vanderbank at this was very blank. "Do for me?"

"How can any one love you," she asked, "without wanting to show it in some way? You know all the ways, dear Van," she breathed, "in which I want to show it."

He might have known them, something suddenly fixed in his face appeared to say, but they were not what was, on this speech of hers, most immediately present to him. "That for instance is the tone not to take with him."

"There you are!" she sighed with discouragement. "Well, only TELL me." Then as he said nothing: "I must be more like mamma?"

His expression confessed to his feeling an awkwardness. "You're perhaps not quite enough like her."

"Oh I know that if he deplores me as I am now she would have done so quite as much; in fact probably, as seeing it nearer, a good deal more. She'd have despised me even more than he. But if it's a question," Mrs. Brook went on, "of not saying what mamma wouldn't, how can I know, don't you see, what she WOULD have said?" Mrs. Brook became as wonderful as if she saw in her friend's face some admiring reflexion of the fine freedom of mind that—in such a connexion quite as much as in any other—she could always show. "Of course I revere mamma just as much as he does, and there was everything in her to revere. But she was none the less in every way a charming woman too, and I don't know, after all, do I? what even she—in their peculiar relation—may not have said to him."

Vanderbank's laugh came back. "Very good—very good. I return to my first idea. Try with him whatever comes into your head. You're a woman of genius after all, and genius mostly justifies itself. To make you right," he went on pleasantly and inexorably, "might perhaps be to make you wrong. Since you

HAVE so great a charm trust it not at all or all in all. That, I dare say, is all you can do. Therefore—yes—be yourself."

These remarks were followed on either side by the repetition of a somewhat intenser mutual gaze, though indeed the speaker's eyes had more the air of meeting his friend's than of seeking them. "I can't be YOU certainly, Van," Mrs. Brook sadly brought forth.

"I know what you mean by that," he rejoined in a moment. "You mean I'm hypocritical."

"Hypocritical?"

"I'm diplomatic and calculating—I don't show him how bad I am; whereas with you he knows the worst."

Of this observation Mrs. Brook, whose eyes attached themselves again to Mr. Longdon, took at first no further notice than might have been indicated by the way it set her musing.

"'Calculating'?"—she at last took him up. "On what is there to calculate?"

"Why," said Vanderbank, "if, as you just hinted, he's a blessing in disguise—! I perfectly admit," he resumed, "that I'm capable of sacrifices to keep on good terms with him."

"You're not afraid he'll bore you?"

"Oh yes—distinctly."

"But he'll be worth it? Then," Mrs. Brook said as he appeared to assent, "he'll be worth a great deal." She continued to watch Mr. Longdon, who, without his glasses, stared straight at the floor while Mr. Cashmore talked to him. She pursued, however, dispassionately enough: "He must be of a narrowness—!"

"Oh beautiful!"

She was silent again. "I shall broaden him. YOU won't."

"Heaven forbid!" Vanderbank heartily concurred. "But none the less, as I've said, I'll help you."

Her attention was still fixed. "It will be him you'll help. If you're to make sacrifices to keep on good terms with him the first sacrifice will be of me." Then on his leaving this remark so

long unanswered that she had finally looked at him again: “I’m perfectly prepared for it.”

It was as if, jocosely enough, he had had time to make up his mind how to meet her. “What will you have—when he loved my mother?”

Nothing could have been droller than the gloom of her surprise. “Yours too?”

“I didn’t tell you the other day—out of delicacy.”

Mrs. Brookenham darkly thought. “HE didn’t tell me either.”

“The same consideration deterred him. But if I didn’t speak of it,” Vanderbank continued, “when I arranged with you, after meeting him here at dinner, that you should come to tea with him at my rooms—if I didn’t mention it then it wasn’t because I hadn’t learnt it early.”

Mrs. Brook more deeply sounded this affair, but she spoke with the exaggerated mildness that was the form mostly taken by her gaiety. “It was because of course it makes him out such a wretch! What becomes in that case of his loyalty?”

“To YOUR mother’s memory? Oh it’s all right—he has it quite straight. She came later. Mine, after my father’s death, had refused him. But you see he might have been my stepfather.”

Mrs. Brookenham took it in, but she had suddenly a brighter light. “He might have been my OWN father! Besides,” she went on, “if his line is to love the mothers why on earth doesn’t he love ME? I’m in all conscience enough of one.”

“Ah but isn’t there in your case the fact of a daughter?” Vanderbank asked with a slight embarrassment.

Mrs. Brookenham stared. “What good does that do me?”

“Why, didn’t she tell you?”

“Nanda? She told me he doesn’t like her any better than he likes me.”

Vanderbank in his turn showed surprise. “That’s really what she said?”

“She had on her return from your rooms a most unusual fit of frankness, for she generally tells me nothing.”

"Well," said Vanderbank, "how did she put it?"

Mrs. Brook reflected—recovered it. "'I like him awfully, but I am not in the least HIS idea.'"

"His idea of what?"

"That's just what I asked her. Of the proper grandchild for mamma."

Vanderbank hesitated. "Well, she isn't." Then after another pause: "But she'll do."

His companion gave him a deep look. "You'll make her?"

He got up, and on seeing him move Mr. Longdon also rose, so that, facing each other across the room, they exchanged a friendly signal or two. "I'll make her."

III

Their hostess's account of Mr. Cashmore's motive for his staying on was so far justified as that Vanderbank, while Mr. Longdon came over to Mrs. Brook, appeared without difficulty further to engage him. The lady in question meanwhile had drawn her old friend down, and her present method of approach would have interested an observer aware of the unhappy conviction she had just privately expressed. Some trace indeed of the glimpse of it enjoyed by Mr. Cashmere's present interlocutor might have been detected in the restlessness that Vanderbank's desire to keep the other pair uninterrupted was still not able to banish from his attitude. Not, however, that Mrs. Brook took the smallest account of it as she quickly broke out: "How can we thank you enough, my dear man, for your extraordinary kindness?" The reference was vivid, yet Mr. Longdon looked so blank about it that she had immediately to explain. "I mean to dear Van, who has told us of your giving him the great happiness—unless he's too dreadfully mistaken—of letting him really know you. He's such a tremendous friend of ours that nothing so delightful can befall him without its affecting us in the same way." She had proceeded with confidence, but suddenly she pulled up. "Don't tell me he IS mistaken—I shouldn't be able to bear it." She

challenged the pale old man with a loveliness that was for the moment absolutely juvenile. “Aren’t you letting him—really?”

Mr. Longdon’s smile was queer. “I can’t prevent him. I’m not a great house—to give orders to go over me. The kindness is Mr. Vanderbank’s own, and I’ve taken up, I’m afraid, a great deal of his precious time.”

“You have indeed.” Mrs. Brook was undiscouraged. “He has been talking with me just now of nothing else. You may say,” she went on, “that it’s I who have kept him at it. So I have, for his pleasure’s a joy to us. If you can’t prevent what he feels, you know, you can’t prevent either what WE feel.”

Mr. Longdon’s face reflected for a minute something he could scarcely have supposed her acute enough to make out, the struggle between his real mistrust of her, founded on the unconscious violence offered by her nature to his every memory of her mother, and his sense on the other hand of the high propriety of his liking her; to which latter force his interest in Vanderbank was a contribution, inasmuch as he was obliged to recognise on the part of the pair an alliance it would have been difficult to explain at Beccles. “Perhaps I don’t quite see the value of what your husband and you and I are in a position to do for him.”

“Do you mean because he’s himself so clever?”

“Well,” said Mr. Longdon, “I dare say that’s at the bottom of my feeling so proud to be taken up by him. I think of the young men of MY time and see that he takes in more. But that’s what you all do,” he rather helplessly sighed. “You’re very, very wonderful!”

She met him with an almost extravagant eagerness that the meeting should be just where he wished. “I don’t take in everything, but I take in all I can. That’s a great affair in London to-day, and I often feel as if I were a circus-woman, in pink tights and no particular skirts, riding half a dozen horses at once. We’re all in the troupe now, I suppose,” she smiled, “and we must travel with the show. But when you say we’re different,” she added, “think, after all, of mamma.”

Mr. Longdon stared. “It’s from her you ARE different.”

“Ah but she had an awfully fine mind. We’re not cleverer than she.”

His conscious honest eyes looked away an instant. “It’s perhaps enough for the present that you’re cleverer than I! I was very glad the other day,” he continued, “to make the acquaintance of your daughter. I hoped I should find her with you.”

If Mrs. Brook cast about it was but for a few seconds. “If she had known you were coming she would certainly have been here. She wanted so to please you.” Then as her visitor took no further notice of this speech than to ask if Nanda were out of the house she had to admit it as an aggravation of failure; but she pursued in the next breath: “Of course you won’t care, but she raves about you.”

He appeared indeed at first not to care. “Isn’t she eighteen?”—it was oddly abrupt.

“I have to think. Wouldn’t it be nearer twenty?” Mrs. Brook audaciously returned. She tried again. “She told me all about your interview. I stayed away on purpose—I had my idea.”

“And what WAS your idea?”

“I thought she’d remind you more of mamma if I wasn’t there. But she’s a little person who sees. Perhaps you didn’t think it, but she knew.”

“And what did she know?” asked Mr. Longdon, who was unable, however, to keep from his tone a certain coldness which really deprived the question of its proper curiosity.

Mrs. Brook just showed the chill of it, but she had always her courage. “Why that you don’t like her.” She had the courage of carrying off as well as of backing out. “She too has her little place with the circus—it’s the way we earn our living.”

Mr. Longdon said nothing for a moment and when he at last spoke it was almost with an air of contradiction. “She’s your mother to the life.”

His hostess, for three seconds, looked at him hard. “Ah but with such differences! You’ll lose it,” she added with a headshake of pity.

He had his eyes only on Vanderbank. “Well, my losses are my own affair.” Then his face came back. “Did she tell you I didn’t like her?”

The indulgence in Mrs. Brook’s view of his simplicity was marked. “You thought you succeeded so in hiding it? No matter—she bears up. I think she really feels a great deal as I do—that it’s no matter how many of us you hate if you’ll only go on feeling as you do about mamma. Show us THAT—that’s what we want.”

Nothing could have expressed more the balm of reassurance, but the mild drops had fallen short of the spot to which they were directed. “‘Show’ you?”

Oh how he had sounded the word! “I see—you DON’T show. That’s just what Nanda saw you thought! But you can’t keep us from knowing it—can’t keep it in fact, I think, from affecting your own behaviour. You’d be much worse to us if it wasn’t for the still warm ashes of your old passion.” It was an immense pity for Vanderbank’s amusement that he was at this moment too far off to fit to the expression of his old friend’s face so much of the cause of it as had sprung from the deeply informed tone of Mrs. Brook’s allusion. To what degree the speaker herself made the connexion will never be known to history, nor whether as she went on she thought she bettered her case or she simply lost her head. “The great thing for us is that we can never be for you quite like other ordinary people.”

“And what’s the great thing for ME?”

“Oh for you, there’s nothing, I’m afraid, but small things—so small that they can scarcely be worth the trouble of your making them out. Our being so happy that you’ve come back to us—if only just for a glimpse and to leave us again, in no matter what horror, for ever; our positive delight in your being exactly so different; the pleasure we have in talking about you, and shall still have—or indeed all the more—even if we’ve seen you

only to lose you: whatever all this represents for ourselves it's for none of us to pretend to say how much or how little YOU may pick out of it. And yet," Mrs. Brook wandered on, "however much we may disappoint you some little spark of the past can't help being in us—for the past is the one thing beyond all spoiling: there it is, don't you think?—to speak for itself and, if need be, only OF itself." She pulled up, but she appeared to have destroyed all power of speech in him, so that while she waited she had time for a fresh inspiration. It might perhaps frankly have been mentioned as on the whole her finest. "Don't you think it possible that if you once get the point of view of realising that I KNOW—?"

She held the note so long that he at last supplied a sound. "That you know what?"

"Why that compared with her I'm a poor creeping thing. I mean"—she hastened to forestall any protest of mere decency that would spoil her idea—"that of course I ache in every limb with the certainty of my dreadful difference. It isn't as if I DIDN'T know it, don't you see? There it is as a matter of course: I've helplessly but finally and completely accepted it. Won't THAT help you?" she so ingeniously pleaded. "It isn't as if I tormented you with any recall of her whatever. I can quite see how awful it would be for you if, with the effect I produce on you, I did have her lovely eyes or her distinguished nose or the shape of her forehead or the colour of her hair. Strange as it is in a daughter I'm disconnected altogether, and don't you think I MAY be a little saved for you by becoming thus simply out of the question? Of course," she continued, "your real trial is poor Nanda—she's likewise so fearfully out of it and yet she's so fearfully in it. And she," said Mrs. Brook for a climax—"SHE doesn't know!"

A strange faint flush, while she talked, had come into Mr. Longdon's face, and, whatever effect, as she put it, she produced on him, it was clearly not that of causing his attention to wander. She held him at least for weal or woe; his bright eyes grew brighter and opened into a stare that finally seemed to offer him as submerged in mere wonder. At last, however, he

rose to the surface, and he appeared to have lighted at the bottom of the sea on the pearl of the particular wisdom he needed. “I dare say there may be something in what you so extraordinarily suggest.”

She jumped at it as if in pleasant pain. “In just letting me go—?”

But at this he dropped. “I shall never let you go.”

It renewed her fear. “Not just for what I AM?”

He rose from his place beside her, but looking away from her and with his colour marked. “I shall never let you go,” he repeated.

“Oh you angel!” She sprang up more quickly and the others were by this time on their feet. “I’ve done it, I’ve done it!” she joyously cried to Vanderbank; “he likes me, or at least he can bear me—I’ve found him the way; and now I don’t care even if he SAYS I haven’t.” Then she turned again to her old friend. “We can manage about Nanda—you needn’t ever see her. She’s ‘down’ now, but she can go up again. We can arrange it at any rate—c’est la moindre des choses.”

“Upon my honour I protest,” Mr. Cashmore exclaimed, “against anything of the sort! I defy you to ‘arrange’ that young lady in any such manner without also arranging ME. I’m one of her greatest admirers,” he gaily announced to Mr. Longdon.

Vanderbank said nothing, and Mr. Longdon seemed to show he would have preferred to do the same: that visitor’s eyes might have represented an appeal to him somehow to intervene, to show the due acquaintance, springing from practice and wanting in himself, with the art of conversation developed to the point at which it could thus sustain a lady in the upper air. Vanderbank’s silence might, without his mere kind pacific look, have seemed almost inhuman. Poor Mr. Longdon had finally to do his own simple best. “Will you bring your daughter to see me?” he asked of Mrs. Brookenham.

“Oh, oh—that’s an idea: will you bring her to see ME?” Mr. Cashmore again broke out.

Mrs. Brook had only fixed Mr. Longdon with the air of unutterable things. “You angel, you angel!”—they found expression but in that.

“I don’t need to ask you to bring her, do I?” Vanderbank now said to his hostess. “I hope you don’t mind my bragging all over the place of the great honour she did me the other day in appearing quite by herself.”

“Quite by herself? I say, Mrs. Brook!” Mr. Cashmore flourished on.

It was only now that she noticed him; which she did indeed but by answering Vanderbank. “She didn’t go for YOU I’m afraid—though of course she might: she went because you had promised her Mr. Longdon. But I should have no more feeling about her going to you—and should expect her to have no more—than about her taking a pound of tea, as she sometimes does, to her old nurse, or her going to read to the old women at the workhouse. May you never have less to brag of!”

“I wish she’d bring ME a pound of tea!” Mr. Cashmore resumed. “Or ain’t I enough of an old woman for her to come and read to me at home?”

“Does she habitually visit the workhouse?” Mr. Longdon enquired of Mrs. Brook.

This lady kept him in a moment’s suspense, which another contemplation might moreover have detected that Vanderbank in some degree shared. “Every Friday at three.”

Vanderbank, with a sudden turn, moved straight to one of the windows, and Mr. Cashmore had a happy remembrance. “Why, this is Friday—she must have gone to-day. But does she stay so late?”

“She was to go afterwards to little Aggie: I’m trying so, in spite of difficulties,” Mrs. Brook explained, “to keep them on together.” She addressed herself with a new thought to Mr. Longdon. “You must know little Aggie—the niece of the Duchess: I forget if you’ve met the Duchess, but you must know HER too—there are so many things on which I’m sure she’ll feel

with you. Little Aggie's the one," she continued; "you'll delight in her; SHE ought to have been mamma's grandchild."

"Dearest lady, how can you pretend or for a moment compare her—?" Mr. Cashmore broke in. "She says nothing to me at all."

"She says nothing to any one," Mrs. Brook serenely replied; "that's just her type and her charm—just above all her education." Then she appealed to Vanderbank. "Won't Mr. Longdon be struck with little Aggie and won't he find it interesting to talk about all that sort of thing with the Duchess?"

Vanderbank came back laughing, but Mr. Longdon anticipated his reply. "What sort of thing do you mean?"

"Oh," said Mrs. Brook, "the whole question, don't you know? of bringing girls forward or not. The question of—well, what do you call it?—their exposure. It's THE question, it appears—the question—of the future; it's awfully interesting and the Duchess at any rate is great on it. Nanda of course is exposed," Mrs. Brook pursued—"fearfully."

"And what on earth is she exposed to?" Mr. Cashmore gaily demanded.

"She's exposed to YOU, it would seem, my dear fellow!" Vanderbank spoke with a certain discernible impatience not so much of the fact he mentioned as of the turn of their talk.

It might have been in almost compassionate deprecation of this weak note that Mrs. Brookenham looked at him. Her own reply to Mr. Cashmere's question, however, was uttered at Mr. Longdon. "She's exposed—it's much worse—to ME. But Aggie isn't exposed to anything—never has been and never is to be; and we're watching to see if the Duchess can carry it through."

"Why not," asked Mr. Cashmore, "if there's nothing she CAN be exposed to but the Duchess herself?"

He had appealed to his companions impartially, but Mr. Longdon, whose attention was now all for his hostess, appeared unconscious. "If you're all watching is it your idea that I should watch WITH you?"

The enquiry, on his lips, was a waft of cold air, the sense of which clearly led Mrs. Brook to put her invitation on the right ground. “Not of course on the chance of anything’s happening to the dear child—to whom nothing obviously CAN happen but that her aunt will marry her off in the shortest possible time and in the best possible conditions. No, the interest is much more in the way the Duchess herself steers.”

“Ah, she’s in a boat,” Mr. Cashmore fully concurred, “that will take a good bit of that.”

It is not for Mr. Longdon’s historian to overlook that if he was, not unnaturally, mystified he was yet also visibly interested. “What boat is she in?”

He had addressed his curiosity, with politeness, to Mr. Cashmore, but they were all arrested by the wonderful way in which Mrs. Brook managed to smile at once very dimly, very darkly, and yet make it take them all in. “I think YOU must tell him, Van.”

“Heaven forbid!”—and Van again retreated.

“I’LL tell him like a shot—if you really give me leave,” said Mr. Cashmore, for whom any scruple referred itself manifestly not to the subject of the information but to the presence of a lady.

“I DON’T give you leave and I beg you’ll hold your tongue,” Mrs. Brookenham returned. “You handle such matters with a minuteness—! In short,” she broke off to Mr. Longdon, “he would tell you a good deal more than you’ll care to know. She IS in a boat—but she’s an experienced mariner. Basta, as she would say. Do you know Mitchy?” Mrs. Brook suddenly asked.

“Oh yes, he knows Mitchy”—Vanderbank had approached again.

“Then make HIM tell him”—she put it before the young man as a charming turn for them all. “Mitchy CAN be refined when he tries.”

“Oh dear—when Mitchy ‘tries’!” Vanderbank laughed. “I think I should rather, for the job, offer him to Mr. Longdon abandoned to his native wild impulse.”

"I LIKE Mr. Mitchett," the old man said, endeavouring to look his hostess straight in the eye and speaking as if somewhat to defy her to convict him, even from the point of view of Beccles, of a mistake.

Mrs. Brookenham took it with a wonderful bright emotion. "My dear friend, vous me rendez la vie! If you can stand Mitchy you can stand any of us!"

"Upon my honour I should think so!" Mr. Cashmore was eager to remark. "What on earth do you mean," he demanded of Mrs. Brook, "by saying that I'm more 'minute' than he?"

She turned her beauty an instant on this critic. "I don't say you're more minute—I say he's more brilliant. Besides, as I've told you before, you're not one of us." With which, as a check to further discussion, she went straight on to Mr. Longdon: "The point about Aggie's conservative education is the wonderful sincerity with which the Duchess feels that one's girl may so perfectly and consistently be hedged in without one's really ever (for it comes to that) depriving one's own self—"

"Well, of what?" Mr. Longdon boldly demanded while his hostess appeared thoughtfully to falter.

She addressed herself mutely to Vanderbank, in whom the movement produced a laugh. "I defy you," he exclaimed, "to say!"

"Well, you don't defy ME!" Mr. Cashmore cried as Mrs. Brook failed to take up the challenge. "If you know Mitchy," he went on to Mr. Longdon, "you must know Petherton."

The elder man remained vague and not imperceptibly cold. "Petherton?"

"My brother-in-law—whom, God knows why, Mitchy runs."

"Runs?" Mr. Longdon again echoed.

Mrs. Brook appealed afresh to Vanderbank. "I think we ought to spare him. I may not remind you of mamma," she continued to their companion, "but I hope you don't mind my saying how much you remind me. Explanations, after all, spoil things, and if you CAN make anything of us and will sometimes come back

you'll find everything in its native freshness. You'll see, you'll feel for yourself."

Mr. Longdon stood before her and raised to Vanderbank, when she had ceased, the eyes he had attached to the carpet while she talked. "And must I go now?" Explanations, she had said, spoiled things, but he might have been a stranger at an Eastern court—comically helpless without his interpreter.

"If Mrs. Brook desires to 'spare' you," Vanderbank kindly replied, "the best way to make sure of it would perhaps indeed be to remove you. But hadn't we a hope of Nanda?"

"It might be of use for us to wait for her?"—it was still to his young friend that Mr. Longdon put it.

"Ah when she's once on the loose—!" Mrs. Brookenham sighed.

"Unless la voila," she said as a hand was heard at the door-latch. It was only, however, a footman who entered with a little tray that, on his approaching his mistress, offered to sight the brown envelope of a telegram. She immediately took leave to open this missive, after the quick perusal of which she had another vision of them all. "It IS she—the modern daughter. 'Tishy keeps me dinner and opera; clothes all right; return uncertain, but if before morning have latch-key.' She won't come home till morning!" said Mrs. Brook.

"But think of the comfort of the latch-key!" Vanderbank laughed. "You might go to the opera," he said to Mr. Longdon.

"Hanged if *I* don't!" Mr. Cashmore exclaimed.

Mr. Longdon appeared to have caught from Nanda's message an obscure agitation; he met his young friend's suggestion at all events with a visible intensity. "Will you go with me?"

Vanderbank had just debated, recalling engagements; which gave Mrs. Brook time to intervene. "Can't you live without him?" she asked of her elder friend.

Vanderbank had looked at her an instant. "I think I can get there late," he then replied to Mr. Longdon.

"I think *I* can get there early," Mr. Cashmore declared. "Mrs. Grendon must have a box; in fact I know which, and THEY don't," he jocosely continued to his hostess.

Mrs. Brook meanwhile had given Mr. Longdon her hand. "Well, in any case the child SHALL soon come to you. And oh alone," she insisted: "you needn't make phrases—I know too well what I'm about."

"One hopes really you do," pursued the unquenched Mr. Cashmore.

"If that's what one gets by having known your mother—!"

"It wouldn't have helped YOU" Mrs. Brook retorted. "And won't you have to say it's ALL you were to get?" she pityingly murmured to her other visitor.

He turned to Vanderbank with a strange gasp, and that comforter said "Come!"

BOOK FIFTH. THE DUCHESS

The lower windows of the great white house, which stood high and square, opened to a wide flagged terrace, the parapet of which, an old balustrade of stone, was broken in the middle of its course by a flight of stone steps that descended to a wonderful garden. The terrace had the afternoon shade and fairly hung over the prospect that dropped away and circled it—the prospect, beyond the series of gardens, of scattered splendid trees and green glades, an horizon mainly of woods. Nanda Brookenham, one day at the end of July, coming out to find the place unoccupied as yet by other visitors, stood there a while with an air of happy possession. She moved from end to end of the terrace, pausing, gazing about her, taking in with a face that showed the pleasure of a brief independence the combination of delightful things—of old rooms with old decorations that gleamed and gloomed through the high windows, of old gardens that squared themselves in the wide angles of old walls, of wood-walks rustling in the afternoon breeze and stretching away to further reaches of solitude and summer. The scene had an expectant stillness that she was too charmed to desire to break; she watched it, listened to it, followed with her eyes the white butterflies among the flowers below her, then gave a start as the cry of a peacock came to her from an unseen alley. It set her after a minute into less difficult motion; she passed slowly down the steps, wandering further, looking back at the big bright house but pleased again to see no one else appear. If the sun was still high enough she had a pink parasol. She went through the gardens one by one, skirting the high walls that were so like “collections” and thinking how, later on, the nectarines and plums would flush there. She exchanged a friendly greeting with a man at work, passed through an open door and, turning this way and that, finally found herself in the park, at some distance from the house. It was a point she had had to take another rise to reach, a place marked by an old green bench for a larger sweep of the view, which, in the

distance where the woods stopped, showed in the most English way in the world the colour-spot of an old red village and the tower of an old grey church. She had sunk down upon the bench almost with a sense of adventure, yet not too fluttered to wonder if it wouldn't have been happy to bring a book; the charm of which precisely would have been in feeling everything about her too beautiful to let her read.

The sense of adventure grew in her, presently becoming aware of a stir in the thicket below, followed by the coming into sight, on a path that, mounting, passed near her seat, of a wanderer whom, had his particular, his exceptional identity not quickly appeared, it might have disappointed her a trifle to have to recognise as a friend. He saw her immediately, stopped, laughed, waved his hat, then bounded up the slope and, brushing his forehead with his handkerchief, confessing as to a red face, was rejoicingly there before her. Her own ejaculation on first seeing him—"Why, Mr. Van!"—had had an ambiguous sharpness that was rather for herself than for her visitor. She made room for him on the bench, where in a moment he was cooling off and they were both explaining. The great thing was that he had walked from the station to stretch his legs, coming far round, for the lovely hour and the pleasure of it, by a way he had learnt on some previous occasion of being at Mertle.

"You've already stayed here then?" Nanda, who had arrived but half an hour before, spoke as if she had lost the chance to give him a new impression.

"I've stayed here—yes, but not with Mitchy; with some people or other—who the deuce can they have been?—who had the place for a few months a year or two ago."

"Don't you even remember?"

Vanderbank wondered and laughed. "It will come to me. But it's a charming sign of London relations, isn't it?—that one CAN come down to people this way and be awfully well 'done for' and all that, and then go away and lose the whole thing, quite forget to whom one has been beholden. It's a queer life."

Nanda seemed for an instant to wish to say that one might deny the queerness, but she said something else instead. “I suppose a man like you doesn’t quite feel that he IS beholden. It’s awfully good of him—it’s doing a great deal for anybody—that he should come down at all; so that it would add immensely to his burden if anybody had to be remembered for it.”

“I don’t know what you mean by a man ‘like me,’” Vanderbank returned. “I’m not any particular kind of a man.” She had been looking at him, but she looked away on this, and he continued good-humoured and explanatory. “If you mean that I go about such a lot, how do you know it but by the fact that you’re everywhere now yourself?—so that, whatever I am, in short, you’re just as bad.”

“You admit then that you ARE everywhere. I may be just as bad,” the girl went on, “but the point is that I’m not nearly so good. Girls are such natural hacks—they can’t be anything else.”

“And pray what are fellows who are in the beastly grind of fearfully busy offices? There isn’t an old cabhorse in London that’s kept at it, I assure you, as I am. Besides,” the young man added, “if I’m out every night and off somewhere like this for Sunday, can’t you understand, my dear child, the fundamental reason of it?”

Nanda, with her eyes on him again, studied an instant this mystery. “Am I to infer with delight that it’s the sweet hope of meeting ME? It isn’t,” she continued in a moment, “as if there were any necessity for your saying that. What’s the use?” But all impatiently she stopped short.

He was eminently gay even if his companion was not. “Because we’re such jolly old friends that we really needn’t so much as speak at all? Yes, thank goodness—thank goodness.” He had been looking round him, taking in the scene; he had dropped his hat on the ground and, completely at his ease, though still more wishing to show it, had crossed his legs and closely folded his arms. “What a tremendously jolly place! If I can’t for the life of me recall who they were—the other

people—I've the comfort of being sure their minds are an equal blank. Do they even remember the place they had? 'We had some fellows down at—where was it, the big white house last November?—and there was one of them, out of the What-do-you-call-it?—YOU know—who might have been a decent enough chap if he hadn't presumed so on his gifts.'" Vanderbank paused a minute, but his companion said nothing, and he pursued. "It does show, doesn't it?—the fact that we do meet this way—the tremendous change that has taken place in your life in the last three months. I mean, if I'm everywhere as you said just now, your being just the same."

"Yes—you see what you've done."

"How, what I'VE done?"

"You plunge into the woods for change, for solitude," the girl said, "and the first thing you do is to find me waylaying you in the depths of the forest. But I really couldn't—if you'll reflect upon it—know you were coming this way."

He sat there with his position unchanged but with a constant little shake in the foot that hung down, as if everything—and what she now put before him not least—was much too pleasant to be reflected on. "May I smoke a cigarette?"

Nanda waited a little; her friend had taken out his silver case, which was of ample form, and as he extracted a cigarette she put forth her hand. "May *I*?" She turned the case over with admiration.

Vanderbank demurred. "Do you smoke with Mr. Longdon?"

"Immensely. But what has that to do with it?"

"Everything, everything." He spoke with a faint ring of impatience. "I want you to do with me exactly as you do with him."

"Ah that's soon said!" the girl replied in a peculiar tone. "How do you mean, to 'do'?"

"Well then to BE. What shall I say?" Vanderbank pleasantly wondered while his foot kept up its motion. "To feel."

She continued to handle the cigarette-case, without, however, having profited by its contents. “I don’t think that as regards Mr. Longdon and me you know quite so much as you suppose.”

Vanderbank laughed and smoked. “I take for granted he tells me everything.”

“Ah but you scarcely take for granted *I* do!” She rubbed her cheek an instant with the polished silver and again the next moment turned over the case. “This is the kind of one I should like.”

Her companion glanced down at it. “Why it holds twenty.”

“Well, I want one that holds twenty.”

Vanderbank only threw out his smoke. “I want so to give you something,” he said at last, “that, in my relief at lighting on an object that will do, I will, if you don’t look out, give you either that or a pipe.”

“Do you mean this particular one?”

“I’ve had it for years—but even that one if you like it.”

She kept it—continued to finger it. “And by whom was it given you?”

At this he turned to her smiling. “You think I’ve forgotten that too?”

“Certainly you must have forgotten, to be willing to give it away again.”

“But how do you know it was a present?”

“Such things always are—people don’t buy them for themselves.”

She had now relinquished the object, laying it upon the bench, and Vanderbank took it up. “Its origin’s lost in the night of time—it has no history except that I’ve used it. But I assure you that I do want to give you something. I’ve never given you anything.”

She was silent a little. “The exhibition you’re making,” she seriously sighed at last, “of your inconstancy and superficiality!

All the relics of you that I've treasured and that I supposed at the time to have meant something!"

"The 'relics'? Have you a lock of my hair?" Then as her meaning came to him: "Oh little Christmas things? Have you really kept them?"

"Laid away in a drawer of their own—done up in pink paper."

"I know what you're coming to," Vanderbank said. "You've given ME things, and you're trying to convict me of having lost the sweet sense of them. But you can't do it. Where my heart's concerned I'm a walking reliquary. Pink paper? *I* use gold paper—and the finest of all, the gold paper of the mind." He gave a flip with a fingernail to his cigarette and looked at its quickened fire; after which he pursued very familiarly, but with a kindness that of itself qualified the mere humour of the thing: "Don't talk, my dear child, as if you didn't really know me for the best friend you have in the world." As soon as he had spoken he pulled out his watch, so that if his words had led to something of a pause this movement offered a pretext for breaking it. Nanda asked the hour and, on his replying "Five-fifteen," remarked that there would now be tea on the terrace with every one gathered at it. "Then shall we go and join them?" her companion demanded.

He had made, however, no other motion, and when after hesitating she said "Yes, with pleasure" it was also without a change of position. "I like this," she inconsequently added.

"So do I awfully. Tea on the terrace," Vanderbank went on, "isn't 'in' it. But who's here?"

"Oh every one. All your set."

"Mine? Have I still a set—with the universal vagabondism you accuse me of?"

"Well then Mitchy's—whoever they are."

"And nobody of yours?"

"Oh yes," Nanda said, "all mine. He must at least have arrived by this time. My set's Mr. Longdon," she explained. "He's all of it now."

"Then where in the world am I?"

"Oh you're an extra. There are always extras."

"A complete set and one over?" Vanderbank laughed. "Where then's Tishy?"

Charming and grave, the girl thought a moment. "She's in Paris with her mother—on their way to Aix-les-Bains." Then with impatience she continued: "Do you know that's a great deal to say—what you said just now? I mean about your being the best friend I have."

"Of course I do, and that's exactly why I said it. You see I'm not in the least delicate or graceful or shy about it—I just come out with it and defy you to contradict me. Who, if I'm not the best, is a better one?"

"Well," Nanda replied, "I feel since I've known Mr. Longdon that I've almost the sort of friend who makes every one else not count."

"Then at the end of three months he has arrived at a value for you that I haven't reached in all these years?"

"Yes," she returned—"the value of my not being afraid of him."

Vanderbank, on the bench, shifted his position, turning more to her and throwing an arm over the back. "And you're afraid of ME?"

"Horribly—hideously."

"Then our long, our happy relations—?"

"They're just what makes my terror," she broke in, "particularly abject. Happy relations don't matter. I always think of you with fear."

His elbow rested on the back and his hand supported his head. "How awfully curious—if it be true!"

She had been looking away to the sweet English distance, but at this she made a movement. "Oh Mr. Van, I'm 'true'!"

As Mr. Van himself couldn't have expressed at any subsequent time to any interested friend the particular effect upon him of the tone of these words his chronicler takes

advantage of the fact not to pretend to a greater intelligence—to limit himself on the contrary to the simple statement that they produced in Mr. Van's cheek a flush just discernible. "Fear of what?"

"I don't know. Fear is fear."

"Yes, yes—I see." He took out another cigarette and occupied a moment in lighting it. "Well, kindness is kindness too—that's all one can say."

He had smoked again a while before she turned to him. "Have I wounded you by saying that?"

A certain effect of his flush was still in his smile. "It seems to me I should like you to wound me. I did what I wanted a moment ago," he continued with some precipitation: "I brought you out handsomely on the subject of Mr. Longdon. That was my idea—just to draw you."

"Well," said Nanda, looking away again, "he has come into my life."

"He couldn't have come into a place where it gives me more pleasure to see him."

"But he didn't like, the other day when I used it to him, that expression," the girl returned. "He called it 'mannered modern slang' and came back again to the extraordinary difference between my speech and my grandmother's."

"Of course," the young man understandingly assented. "But I rather like your speech. Hasn't he by this time, with you," he pursued, "crossed the gulf? He has with me."

"Ah with you there was no gulf. He liked you from the first."

Vanderbank wondered. "You mean I managed him so well?"

"I don't know how you managed him, but liking me has been for him a painful gradual process. I think he does now," Nanda declared. "He accepts me at last as different—he's trying with me on that basis. He has ended by understanding that when he talks to me of Granny I can't even imagine her."

Vanderbank puffed away. "I can."

“That’s what Mitchy says too. But you’ve both probably got her wrong.”

“I don’t know,” said Vanderbank—“I’ve gone into it a good deal. But it’s too late. We can’t be Greeks if we would.”

Even for this Nanda had no laugh, though she had a quick attention. “Do you call Granny a Greek?”

Her companion slowly rose. “Yes—to finish her off handsomely and have done with her.” He looked again at his watch. “Shall we go? I want to see if my man and my things have turned up.”

She kept her seat; there was something to revert to. “My fear of you isn’t superficial. I mean it isn’t immediate—not of you just as you stand,” she explained. “It’s of some dreadfully possible future you.”

“Well,” said the young man, smiling down at her, “don’t forget that if there’s to be such a monster there’ll also be a future you, proportionately developed, to deal with him.”

She had closed her parasol in the shade and her eyes attached themselves to the small hole she had dug in the ground with its point. “We shall both have moved, you mean?”

“It’s charming to feel we shall probably have moved together.”

“Ah if moving’s changing,” she returned, “there won’t be much for me in that. I shall never change—I shall be always just the same. The same old mannered modern slangy hack,” she continued quite gravely. “Mr. Longdon has made me feel that.”

Vanderbank laughed aloud, and it was especially at her seriousness. “Well, upon my soul!”

“Yes,” she pursued, “what I am I must remain. I haven’t what’s called a principle of growth.” Making marks in the earth with her umbrella she appeared to cipher it out. “I’m about as good as I can be—and about as bad. If Mr. Longdon can’t make me different nobody can.”

Vanderbank could only speak in the tone of high amusement. “And he has given up the hope?”

"Yes—though not ME altogether. He has given up the hope he originally had."

"He gives up quickly—in three months!"

"Oh these three months," she answered, "have been a long time: the fullest, the most important, for what has happened in them, of my life." She still poked at the ground; then she added: "And all thanks to YOU."

"To me?"—Vanderbank couldn't fancy!

"Why, for what we were speaking of just now—my being to-day so in everything and squeezing up and down no matter whose staircase. Isn't it one crowded hour of glorious life?" she asked. "What preceded it was an age, no doubt—but an age without a name."

Vanderbank watched her a little in silence, then spoke quite beside the question. "It's astonishing how at moments you remind me of your mother!"

At this she got up. "Ah there it is! It's what I shall never shake off. That, I imagine, is what Mr. Longdon feels."

Both on their feet now, as if ready for the others, they yet—and even a trifle awkwardly—lingered. It might in fact have appeared to a spectator that some climax had come, on the young man's part, to some state of irresolution about the utterance of something. What were the words so repeatedly on his lips, yet so repeatedly not sounded? It would have struck our observer that they were probably not those his lips even now actually formed. "Doesn't he perhaps talk to you too much about yourself?"

Nanda gave him a dim smile, and he might indeed then have exclaimed on a certain resemblance, a resemblance of expression that had nothing to do with form. It wouldn't have been diminished for him moreover by her successful suppression of every sign that she felt his question a little of a snub. The recall he had previously mentioned could, however, as she answered him, only have been brushed away by a supervening sense of his roughness. "It probably isn't so much that as my own way of going on." She spoke with a mildness

that could scarce have been so full without being an effort. “Between his patience and my egotism anything’s possible. It isn’t his talking—it’s his listening.” She gave up the point, at any rate, as if from softness to her actual companion. “Wasn’t it you who spoke to mamma about my sitting with her? That’s what I mean by my debt to you. It’s through you that I’m always there—through you and perhaps a little through Mitchy.”

“Oh through Mitchy—it MUST have been—more than through me.” Vanderbank spoke with the manner of humouring her about a trifle. “Mitchy, delightful man, felt on the subject of your eternal exile, I think, still more strongly.”

They quitted their place together and at the end of a few steps became aware of the approach of one of the others, a figure but a few yards off, arriving from the quarter from which Nanda had come. “Ah Mr. Longdon!”—she spoke with eagerness now.

Vanderbank instantly waved his hat. “Dear old boy!”

“Between you all, at any rate,” she said more gaily, “you’ve brought me down.”

Vanderbank made no answer till they met their friend, when, by way of greeting, he simply echoed her words. “Between us all, you’ll be glad to know, we’ve brought her down.”

Mr. Longdon looked from one of them to the other. “Where have you been together?”

Nanda was the first to respond. “Only talking—on a bench.”

“Well, *I* want to talk on a bench!” Their friend showed a spirit.

“With me, of course?”—Vanderbank met it with encouragement.

The girl said nothing, but Mr. Longdon sought her eyes. “No—with Nanda. You must mingle in the crowd.”

“Ah,” the their companion laughed, “you two are the crowd!”

“Well—have your tea first.”

Vanderbank on this, giving it up with the air of amused accommodation that was never—certainly for these two—at fault in him, offered to Mr. Longdon before departing the

handshake of greeting he had omitted; a demonstration really the warmer for the tone of the joke that went with it. “Intrigant!”

II

Nanda praised to the satellite so fantastically described the charming spot she had quitted, with the effect that they presently took fresh possession of it, finding the beauty of the view deepened as the afternoon grew old and the shadows long. They were of a comfortable agreement on these matters, by which moreover they were but little delayed, one of the pair at least being too conscious, for the hour, of still other phenomena than the natural and peaceful process that filled the air. “Well, you must tell me about these things,” Mr. Longdon sociably said: he had joined his young friend with a budget of impressions rapidly gathered at the house; as to which his appeal to her for a light or two may be taken as the measure of the confidence now ruling their relations. He had come to feel at last, he mentioned, that he could allow for most differences; yet in such a situation as the present bewilderment could only come back. There were no differences in the world—so it had all ended for him—but those that marked at every turn the manners he had for three months been observing in good society. The general wide deviation of this body occupied his mind to the exclusion of almost everything else, and he had finally been brought to believe that even in his slow-paced prime he must have hung behind his contemporaries. He had not supposed at the moment—in the fifties and the sixties—that he passed for old-fashioned, but life couldn’t have left him so far in the rear had the start between them originally been fair. This was the way he had more than once put the matter to the girl; which gives a sufficient hint, it is hoped, of the range of some of their talk. It had always wound up indeed, their talk, with some assumption of the growth of his actual understanding; but it was just these pauses in the fray that seemed to lead from time to time to a sharper clash. It was apt to be when he felt as if he had exhausted surprises that he really received his greatest shocks. There were no such queer-tasting

draughts as some of those yielded by the bucket that had repeatedly, as he imagined, touched the bottom of the well. "Now this sudden invasion of somebody's—heaven knows whose—house, and our dropping down on it like a swarm of locusts: I dare say it isn't civil to criticise it when one's going too, so almost culpably, with the stream; but what are people made of that they consent, just for money, to the violation of their homes?"

Nanda wondered; she cultivated the sense of his making her intensely reflect, "But haven't people in England always let their places?"

"If we're a nation of shopkeepers, you mean, it can't date, on the scale on which we show it, only from last week? No doubt, no doubt, and the more one thinks of it the more one seems to see that society—for we're IN society, aren't we, and that's our horizon?—can never have been anything but increasingly vulgar. The point is that in the twilight of time—and I belong, you see, to the twilight—it had made out much less how vulgar it COULD be. It did its best very probably, but there were too many superstitions it had to get rid of. It has been throwing them overboard one by one, so that now the ship sails uncommonly light. That's the way"—and with his eyes on the golden distance he ingeniously followed it out—"I come to feel so the lurching and pitching. If I weren't a pretty fair sailor—well, as it is, my dear," he interrupted himself with a laugh, "I show you often enough what grabs I make for support." He gave a faint gasp, half amusement, half anguish, then abruptly relieved himself by a question. "To whom in point of fact does the place belong?"

"I'm awfully ashamed, but I'm afraid I don't know. That just came up here," the girl went on, "for Mr. Van."

Mr. Longdon seemed to think an instant. "Oh it came up, did it? And Mr. Van couldn't tell?"

"He has quite forgotten—though he has been here before. Of course it may have been with other people," she added in

extenuation. “I mean it mayn’t have been theirs then any more than it’s Mitchy’s.”

“I see. They too had just bundled in.”

Nanda completed the simple history. “To-day it’s Mitchy who bundles, and I believe that really he bundled only yesterday. He turned in his people and here we are.”

“Here we are, here we are!” her friend more gravely echoed. “Well, it’s splendid!”

As if at a note in his voice her eyes, while his own still strayed away, just fixed him. “Don’t you think it’s really rather exciting? Everything’s ready, the feast all spread, and with nothing to blunt our curiosity but the general knowledge that there will be people and things—with nothing but that we comfortably take our places.” He answered nothing, though her picture apparently reached him. “There ARE people, there ARE things, and all in a plenty. Had every one, when you came away, turned up?” she asked as he was still silent.

“I dare say. There were some ladies and gentlemen on the terrace whom I didn’t know. But I looked only for you and came this way on an indication of your mother’s.”

“And did she ask that if you should find me with Mr. Van you’d make him come to her?”

Mr. Longdon replied to this with some delay and without movement. “How could she have supposed he was here?”

“Since he had not yet been to the house? Oh it has always been a wonder to me, the things that mamma supposes! I see she asked you,” Nanda insisted.

At this her old friend turned to her. “But it wasn’t because of that I got rid of him.”

She had a pause. “No—you don’t mind everything mamma says.”

“I don’t mind ‘everything’ anybody says: not even, my dear, when the person’s you.”

Again she waited an instant. “Not even when it’s Mr. Van?”

Mr. Longdon candidly considered. “Oh I take him up on all sorts of things.”

“That shows then the importance they have for you. Is HE like his grandmother?” the girl pursued. Then as her companion looked vague: “Wasn’t it his grandmother too you knew?”

He had an extraordinary smile. “His mother.”

She exclaimed, colouring, on her mistake, and he added: “I’m not so bad as that. But you’re none of you like them.”

“Wasn’t she pretty?” Nanda asked.

“Very handsome. But it makes no difference. She herself to-day wouldn’t know him.”

She gave a small gasp. “His own mother wouldn’t—?”

His headshake just failed of sharpness. “No, nor he her. There’s a link missing.” Then as if after all she might take him too seriously, “Of course it’s I,” he more gently moralised, “who have lost the link in my sleep. I’ve slept half the century—I’m Rip Van Winkle.” He went back after a moment to her question. “He’s not at any rate like his mother.”

She turned it over. “Perhaps you wouldn’t think so much of her now.”

“Perhaps not. At all events my snatching you from Mr. Vanderbank was my own idea.”

“I wasn’t thinking,” Nanda said, “of your snatching me. I was thinking of your snatching yourself.”

“I might have sent YOU to the house? Well,” Mr. Longdon replied, “I find I take more and more the economical view of my pleasures. I run them less and less together. I get all I can out of each.”

“So now you’re getting all you can out of ME?”

“All I can, my dear—all I can.” He watched a little the flushed distance, then mildly broke out: “It IS, as you said just now, exciting! But it makes me”—and he became abrupt again—“want you, as I’ve already told you, to come to MY place. Not, however, that we may be still more mad together.”

The girl shared from the bench his contemplation. “Do you call THIS madness?”

Well, he rather stuck to it. “You spoke of it yourself as excitement. You’ll make of course one of your fine distinctions, but I take it in my rough way as a whirl. We’re going round and round.” In a minute he had folded his arms with the same closeness Vanderbank had used—in a minute he too was nervously shaking his foot. “Steady, steady; if we sit close we shall see it through. But come down to Suffolk for sanity.”

“You do mean then that I may come alone?”

“I won’t receive you, I assure you, on any other terms. I want to show you,” he continued, “what life CAN give. Not of course,” he subjoined, “of this sort of thing.”

“No—you’ve told me. Of peace.”

“Of peace,” said Mr. Longdon. “Oh you don’t know—you haven’t the least idea. That’s just why I want to show you.”

Nanda looked as if already she saw it in the distance. “But will it be peace if I’m there? I mean for YOU,” she added.

“It isn’t a question of ‘me.’ Everybody’s omelet is made of somebody’s eggs. Besides, I think that when we’re alone together—!”

He had dropped for so long that she wondered. “Well, when we are—?”

“Why, it will be all right,” he simply concluded. “Temples of peace, the ancients used to call them. We’ll set up one, and I shall be at least doorkeeper. You’ll come down whenever you like.”

She gave herself to him in her silence more than she could have done in words. “Have you arranged it with mamma?” she said, however, at last.

“I’ve arranged everything.”

“SHE won’t want to come?”

Her friend’s laugh turned him to her. “Don’t be nervous. There are things as to which your mother trusts me.”

“But others as to which not.”

Their eyes met for some time on this, and it ended in his saying: "Well, you must help me." Nanda, but without shrinking, looked away again, and Mr. Longdon, as if to consecrate their understanding by the air of ease, passed to another subject. "Mr. Mitchett's the most princely host."

"Isn't he too kind for anything? Do you know what he pretends?" Nanda went on. "He says in the most extraordinary way that he does it all for ME."

"Takes this great place and fills it with servants and company—?"

"Yes, just so that I may come down for a Sunday or two. Of course he has only taken it for three or four weeks, but even for that time it's a handsome compliment. He doesn't care what he does. It's his way of amusing himself. He amuses himself at our expense," the girl continued.

"Well, I hope that makes up, my dear, for the rate at which we're doing so at his!"

"His amusement," said Nanda, "is to see us believe what he says."

Mr. Longdon thought a moment. "Really, my child, you're most acute."

"Oh I haven't watched life for nothing! Mitchy doesn't care," she repeated.

Her companion seemed divided between a desire to draw and a certain fear to encourage her. "Doesn't care for what?"

She considered an instant, all coherently, and it might have added to Mr. Longdon's impression of her depth. "Well, for himself. I mean for his money. For anything any one may think. For Lord Petherton, for instance, really at all. Lord Petherton thinks he has helped him—thinks, that is, that Mitchy thinks he has. But Mitchy's more amused at HIM than at anybody else. He takes every one in."

"Every one but you?"

"Oh I like him."

"My poor child, you're of a profundity!" Mr. Longdon murmured.

He spoke almost uneasily, but she was not too much alarmed to continue lucid. "And he likes me, and I know just how much—and just how little. He's the most generous man in the world. It pleases him to feel that he's indifferent and splendid—there are so many things it makes up to him for." The old man listened with attention, and his young friend conscious of it, proceeded as on ground of which she knew every inch. "He's the son, as you know, of a great bootmaker—'to all the Courts of Europe'—who left him a large fortune, which had been made, I believe, in the most extraordinary way, by building-speculations as well."

"Oh yes, I know. It's astonishing!" her companion sighed.

"That he should be of such extraction?"

"Well, everything. That you should be talking as you are—that you should have 'watched life,' as you say, to such purpose. That we should any of us be here—most of all that Mr. Mitchett himself should. That your grandmother's daughter should have brought HER daughter—"

"To stay with a person"—Nanda took it up as, apparently out of delicacy, he fairly failed—"whose father used to take the measure, down on his knees on a little mat, as mamma says, of my grandfather's remarkably large foot? Yes, we none of us mind. Do you think we should?" Nanda asked.

Mr. Longdon turned it over. "I'll answer you by a question. Would you marry him?"

"Never." Then as if to show there was no weakness in her mildness, "Never, never, never," she repeated.

"And yet I dare say you know—?" But Mr. Longdon once more faltered; his scruple came uppermost. "You don't mind my speaking of it?"

"Of his thinking he wants to marry me? Not a bit. I positively enjoy telling you there's nothing in it."

"Not even for HIM?"

Nanda considered. “Not more than is made up to him by his having found out through talks and things—which mightn’t otherwise have occurred—that I do like him. I wouldn’t have come down here if I hadn’t liked him.”

“Not for any other reason?”—Mr. Longdon put it gravely.

“Not for YOUR being here, do you mean?”

He delayed. “Me and other persons.”

She showed somehow that she wouldn’t flinch. “You weren’t asked till after he had made sure I’d come. We’ve become, you and I,” she smiled, “one of the couples who are invited together.”

These were couples, his speculative eye seemed to show, he didn’t even yet know about, and if he mentally took them up a moment it was all promptly to drop them. “I don’t think you state it quite strongly enough, you know.”

“That Mitchy IS hard hit? He states it so strongly himself that it will surely do for both of us. I’m a part of what I just spoke of—his indifference and magnificence. It’s as if he could only afford to do what’s not vulgar. He might perfectly marry a duke’s daughter, but that WOULD be vulgar—would be the absolute necessity and ideal of nine out of ten of the sons of shoemakers made ambitious by riches. Mitchy says ‘No; I take my own line; I go in for a beggar-maid.’ And it’s only because I’m a beggar-maid that he wants me.”

“But there are plenty of other beggar-maids,” Mr. Longdon objected.

“Oh I admit I’m the one he least dislikes. But if I had any money,” Nanda went on, “or if I were really good-looking—for that to-day, the real thing, will do as well as being a duke’s daughter—he wouldn’t come near me. And I think that ought to settle it. Besides, he must marry Aggie. She’s a beggar-maid too—as well as an angel. So there’s nothing against it.”

Mr. Longdon stared, but even in his surprise seemed to take from the swiftness with which she made him move over the ground a certain agreeable glow. “Does ‘Aggie’ like him?”

"She likes every one. As I say, she's an angel—but a real, real, real one. The kindest man in the world's therefore the proper husband for her. If Mitchy wants to do something thoroughly nice," she declared with the same high competence, "he'll take her out of her situation, which is awful."

Mr. Longdon looked graver. "In what way awful?"

"Why, don't you know?" His eye was now cold enough to give her, in her chill, a flurried sense that she might displease him least by a graceful lightness. "The Duchess and Lord Petherton are like you and me."

"Is it a conundrum?" He was serious indeed.

"They're one of the couples who are invited together." But his face reflected so little success for her levity that it was in another tone she presently added: "Mitchy really oughtn't." Her friend, in silence, fixed his eyes on the ground; an attitude in which there was something to make her strike rather wild. "But of course, kind as he is, he can scarcely be called particular. He has his ideas—he thinks nothing matters. He says we've all come to a pass that's the end of everything."

Mr. Longdon remained mute a while, and when he at last, raised his eyes it was without meeting Nanda's and with some dryness of manner. "The end of everything? One might easily receive that impression."

He again became mute, and there was a pause between them of some length, accepted by Nanda with an anxious stillness that it might have touched a spectator to observe. She sat there as if waiting for some further sign, only wanting not to displease her friend, yet unable to pretend to play any part and with something in her really that she couldn't take back now, something involved in her original assumption that there was to be a kind of intelligence in their relation. "I dare say," she said at last, "that I make allusions you don't like. But I keep forgetting."

He waited a moment longer, then turned to her with a look rendered a trifle strange by the way it happened to reach over

his glasses. It was even austerer than before. “Keep forgetting what?”

She gave after an instant a faint feeble smile which seemed to speak of helplessness and which, when at rare moments it played in her face, was expressive from her positive lack of personal, superficial diffidence. “Well—I don’t know.” It was as if appearances became at times so complicated that—so far as helping others to understand was concerned—she could only give up.

“I hope you don’t think I want you to be with me as you wouldn’t be—so to speak—with yourself. I hope you don’t think I don’t want you to be frank. If you were to try to APPEAR to me anything—!” He ended in simple sadness: that, for instance, would be so little what he should like.

“Anything different, you mean, from what I am? That’s just what I’ve thought from the first. One’s just what one IS—isn’t one? I don’t mean so much,” she went on, “in one’s character or temper—for they have, haven’t they? to be what’s called ‘properly controlled’—as in one’s mind and what one sees and feels and the sort of thing one notices.” Nanda paused an instant; then “There you are!” she simply but rather desperately brought out.

Mr. Longdon considered this with visible intensity. “What you suggest is that the things you speak of depend on other people?”

“Well, every one isn’t so beautiful as you.” She had met him with promptitude, yet no sooner had she spoken than she appeared again to encounter a difficulty. “But there it is—my just saying even that. Oh how I always know—as I’ve told you before—whenever I’m different! I can’t ask you to tell me the things Granny WOULD have said, because that’s simply arranging to keep myself back from you, and so being nasty and underhand, which you naturally don’t want, nor I either. Nevertheless when I say the things she wouldn’t, then I put before you too much—too much for your liking it—what I know and see and feel. If we’re both partly the result of other people,

HER other people were so different." The girl's sensitive boldness kept it up, but there was something in her that pleaded for patience. "And yet if she had YOU, so I've got you too. It's the flattery of that, or the sound of it, I know, that must be so unlike her. Of course it's awfully like mother; yet it isn't as if you hadn't already let me see—is it?—that you don't really think me the same." Again she stopped a minute, as to find her scarce possible way with him, and again for the time he gave no sign. She struck out once more with her strange cool limpidity. "Granny wasn't the kind of girl she COULDN't be—and so neither am I."

Mr. Longdon had fallen while she talked into something that might have been taken for a conscious temporary submission to her; he had uncrossed his fidgety legs and, thrusting them out with the feet together, sat looking very hard before him, his chin sunk on his breast and his hands, clasped as they met, rapidly twirling their thumbs. So he remained for a time that might have given his young friend the sense of having made herself right for him so far as she had been wrong. He still had all her attention, just as previously she had had his, but, while he now simply gazed and thought, she watched him with a discreet solicitude that would almost have represented him as a near relative whom she supposed unwell. At the end he looked round, and then, obeying some impulse that had gathered in her while they sat mute, she put out to him the tender hand she might have offered to a sick child. They had been talking about frankness, but she showed a frankness in this instance that made him perceptibly colour. To that in turn, however, he responded only the more completely, taking her hand and holding it, keeping it a long minute during which their eyes met and something seemed to clear up that had been too obscure to be dispelled by words. Finally he brought out as if, though it was what he had been thinking of, her gesture had most determined him: "I wish immensely you'd get married!"

His tone betrayed so special a meaning that the words had a sound of suddenness; yet there was always in Nanda's face that odd preparedness of the young person who has unlearned

surprise through the habit, in company, of studiously not compromising her innocence by blinking at things said. “How CAN I?” she asked, but appearing rather to take up the proposal than to put it by.

“Can’t you, CAN’T you?” He spoke pressingly and kept her hand. She shook her head slowly, markedly; on which he continued: “You don’t do justice to Mr. Mitchy.” She said nothing, but her look was there and it made him resume: “Impossible?”

“Impossible.” At this, letting her go, Mr. Longden got up; he pulled out his watch. “We must go back.” She had risen with him and they stood face to face in the faded light while he slipped the watch away. “Well, that doesn’t make me wish it any less.”

“It’s lovely of you to wish it, but I shall be one of the people who don’t. I shall be at the end,” said Nanda, “one of those who haven’t.”

“No, my child,” he returned gravely—“you shall never be anything so sad.”

“Why not—if YOU’VE been?” He looked at her a little, quietly, and then, putting out his hand, passed her own into his arm. “Exactly because I have.”

III

“Would you” the Duchess said to him the next day, “be for five minutes awfully kind to my poor little niece?” The words were spoken in charming entreaty as he issued from the house late on the Sunday afternoon—the second evening of his stay, which the next morning was to bring to an end—and on his meeting the speaker at one of the extremities of the wide cool terrace. There was at this point a subsidiary flight of steps by which she had just mounted from the grounds, one of her purposes being apparently to testify afresh to the anxious supervision of little Aggie she had momentarily suffered herself to be diverted from. This young lady, established in the pleasant shade on a sofa of light construction designed for the open air, offered the image of a patience of which it was a questionable

kindness to break the spell. It was that beautiful hour when, toward the close of the happiest days of summer, such places as the great terrace at Mertle present to the fancy a recall of the banquet-hall deserted—deserted by the company lately gathered at tea and now dispersed, according to affinities and combinations promptly felt and perhaps quite as promptly criticised, either in quieter chambers where intimacy might deepen or in gardens and under trees where the stillness knew the click of balls and the good humour of games. There had been chairs, on the terrace, pushed about; there were ungathered teacups on the level top of the parapet; the servants in fact, in the manner of "hands" mustered by a whistle on the deck of a ship, had just arrived to restore things to an order soon again to be broken. There were scattered couples in sight below and an idle group on the lawn, out of the midst of which, in spite of its detachment, somebody was sharp enough sometimes to cry "Out!" The high daylight was still in the sky, but with just the foreknowledge already of the long golden glow in which the many-voiced caw of the rooks would sound at once sociable and sad. There was a great deal all about to be aware of and to look at, but little Aggie had her eyes on a book over which her pretty head was bent with a docility visible even from afar. "I've a friend—down there by the lake—to go back to," the Duchess went on, "and I'm on my way to my room to get a letter that I've promised to show him. I shall immediately bring it down and then in a few minutes be able to relieve you,—I don't leave her alone too much—one doesn't, you know, in a house full of people, a child of that age. Besides"—and Mr. Longdon's interlocutress was even more confiding—"I do want you so very intensely to know her. You, par exemple, you're what I SHOULD like to give her." Mr. Longdon looked the noble lady, in acknowledgement of her appeal, straight in the face, and who can tell whether or no she acutely guessed from his expression that he recognised this particular juncture as written on the page of his doom?—whether she heard him inaudibly say "Ah here it is: I knew it would have to come!" She would at any rate have been astute enough, had this miracle occurred, quite to

complete his sense for her own understanding and suffer it to make no difference in the tone in which she still confronted him. “Oh I take the bull by the horns—I know you haven’t wanted to know me. If you had you’d have called on me—I’ve given you plenty of hints and little coughs. Now, you see, I don’t cough any more—I just rush at you and grab you. You don’t call on me—so I call on YOU. There isn’t any indecency moreover that I won’t commit for my child.”

Mr. Longdon’s impenetrability crashed like glass at the elbow-touch of this large handsome practised woman, who walked for him, like some brazen pagan goddess, in a cloud of queer legend. He looked off at her child, who, at a distance and not hearing them, had not moved. “I know she’s a great friend of Nanda’s.”

“Has Nanda told you that?”

“Often—taking such an interest in her.”

“I’m glad she thinks so then—though really her interests are so various. But come to my baby. I don’t make HER come,” she explained as she swept him along, “because I want you just to sit down by her there and keep the place, as one may say—!”

“Well, for whom?” he demanded as she stopped. It was her step that had checked itself as well as her tongue, and again, suddenly, they stood quite consciously and vividly opposed. “Can I trust you?” the Duchess brought out. Again then she took herself up. “But as if I weren’t already doing it! It’s because I do trust you so utterly that I haven’t been able any longer to keep my hands off you. The person I want the place for is none other than Mitchy himself, and half my occupation now is to get it properly kept for him. Lord Petherton’s immensely kind, but Lord Petherton can’t do everything. I know you really like our host—!”

Mr. Longdon, at this, interrupted her with a certain coldness. “How, may I ask, do you know it?”

But with a brazen goddess to deal with—! This personage had to fix him but an instant. “Because, you dear honest man, you’re

here. You wouldn't be if you hated him, for you don't practically condone—!"

This time he broke in with his eyes on the child. "I feel on the contrary, I assure you, that I condone a great deal."

"Well, don't boast of your cynicism," she laughed, "till you're sure of all it covers. Let the right thing for you be," she went on, "that Nanda herself wants it."

"Nanda herself?" He continued to watch little Aggie, who had never yet turned her head. "I'm afraid I don't understand you."

She swept him on again. "I'll come to you presently and explain. I MUST get my letter for Petherton; after which I'll give up Mitchy, whom I was going to find, and since I've broken the ice—if it isn't too much to say to such a polar bear!—I'll show you le fond de ma pensee. Baby darling," she said to her niece, "keep Mr. Longdon. Show him," she benevolently suggested, "what you've been reading." Then again to her fellow guest, as arrested by this very question: "Caro signore, have YOU a possible book?"

Little Aggie had got straight up and was holding out her volume, which Mr. Longdon, all courtesy for her, glanced at. "Stories from English History. Oh!"

His ejaculation, though vague, was not such as to prevent the girl from venturing gently: "Have you read it?"

Mr. Longdon, receiving her pure little smile, showed he felt he had never so taken her in as at this moment, as well as also that she was a person with whom he should surely get on. "I think I must have."

Little Aggie was still more encouraged, but not to the point of keeping anything back. "It hasn't any author. It's anonymous."

The Duchess borrowed, for another question to Mr. Longdon, not a little of her gravity. "Is it all right?"

"I don't know"—his answer was to Aggie. "There have been some horrid things in English history."

"Oh horrid—HAVEN'T there?" Aggie, whose speech had the prettiest faintest foreignness, sweetly and eagerly quavered.

"Well, darling, Mr. Longdon will recommend to you some nice historical work—for we love history, don't we?—that leaves the horrors out. We like to know," the Duchess explained to the authority she invoked, "the cheerful happy RIGHT things. There are so many, after all, and this is the place to remember them. A tantot."

As she passed into the house by the nearest of the long windows that stood open Mr. Longdon placed himself beside her little charge, whom he treated, for the next ten minutes, with an exquisite courtesy. A person who knew him well would, if present at the scene, have found occasion in it to be freshly aware that he was in his quiet way master of two distinct kinds of urbanity, the kind that added to distance and the kind that diminished it. Such an analyst would furthermore have noted, in respect to the aunt and the niece, of which kind each had the benefit, and might even have gone so far as to detect in him some absolute betrayal of the impression produced on him by his actual companion, some irradiation of his certitude that, from the point of view under which she had been formed, she was a remarkable, a rare success. Since to create a particular little rounded and tinted innocence had been aimed at, the fruit had been grown to the perfection of a peach on a sheltered wall, and this quality of the object resulting from a process might well make him feel himself in contact with something wholly new. Little Aggie differed from any young person he had ever met in that she had been deliberately prepared for consumption and in that furthermore the gentleness of her spirit had immensely helped the preparation. Nanda, beside her, was a Northern savage, and the reason was partly that the elements of that young lady's nature were already, were publicly, were almost indecorously active. They were practically there for good or for ill; experience was still to come and what they might work out to still a mystery; but the sum would get itself done with the figures now on the slate. On little Aggie's slate the figures were yet to be written; which sufficiently accounted for the difference of the two surfaces. Both the girls struck him as lambs with the great shambles of life in their future; but while one, with its

neck in a pink ribbon, had no consciousness but that of being fed from the hand with the small sweet biscuit of unobjectionable knowledge, the other struggled with instincts and forebodings, with the suspicion of its doom and the far-borne scent, in the flowery fields, of blood.

"Oh Nanda, she's my best friend after three or four others."

"After so many?" Mr. Longdon laughed. "Don't you think that's rather a back seat, as they say, for one's best?"

"A back seat?"—she wondered with a purity!

"If you don't understand," said her companion, "it serves me right, as your aunt didn't leave me with you to teach you the slang of the day."

"The 'slang'?"—she again spotlessly speculated.

"You've never even heard the expression? I should think that a great compliment to our time if it weren't that I fear it may have been only the name that has been kept from you."

The light of ignorance in the child's smile was positively golden. "The name?" she again echoed.

She understood too little—he gave it up. "And who are all the other best friends whom poor Nanda comes after?"

"Well, there's my aunt, and Miss Merriman, and Gelsomina, and Dr. Beltram."

"And who, please, is Miss Merriman?"

"She's my governess, don't you know?—but such a deliciously easy governess."

"That, I suppose, is because she has such a deliciously easy pupil. And who is Gelsomina?" Mr. Longdon enquired.

"She's my old nurse—my old maid."

"I see. Well, one must always be kind to old maids. But who's Dr. Beltram?"

"Oh the most intimate friend of all. We tell him everything."

There was for Mr. Longdon in this, with a slight incertitude, an effect of drollery. "Your little troubles?"

"Ah they're not always so little! And he takes them all away."

"Always?—on the spot?"

“Sooner or later,” said little Aggie with serenity. “But why not?”

“Why not indeed?” he laughed. “It must be very plain sailing.” Decidedly she was, as Nanda had said, an angel, and there was a wonder in her possession on this footing of one of the most expressive little faces that even her expressive race had ever shown him. Formed to express everything, it scarce expressed as yet even a consciousness. All the elements of play were in it, but they had nothing to play with. It was a rest moreover, after so much that he had lately been through, to be with a person for whom questions were so simple. “But he sounds all the same like the kind of doctor whom, as soon as one hears of him, one wants to send for.”

The young girl had at this a small light of confusion. “Oh I don’t mean he’s a doctor for medicine. He’s a clergyman—and my aunt says he’s a saint. I don’t think you’ve many in England,” little Aggie continued to explain.

“Many saints? I’m afraid not. Your aunt’s very happy to know one. We should call Dr. Beltram in England a priest.”

“Oh but he’s English. And he knows everything we do—and everything we think.”

“‘We’—your aunt, your governess and your nurse? What a varied wealth of knowledge!”

“Ah Miss Merriman and Gelsomina tell him only what they like.”

“And do you and the Duchess tell him what you DON’T like?”

“Oh often—but we always like HIM—no matter what we tell him. And we know that just the same he always likes us.”

“I see then of course,” said Mr. Longdon, very gravely now, “what a friend he must be. So it’s after all this,” he continued in a moment, “that Nanda comes in?”

His companion had to consider, but suddenly she caught assistance. “This one, I think, comes before.” Lord Petherton, arriving apparently from the garden, had drawn near unobserved by Mr. Longdon and the next moment was within hail. “I see him very often,” she continued—“oftener than

Nanda. Oh but THEN Nanda. And then," little Aggie wound up, "Mr. Mitchy."

"Oh I'm glad HE comes in," Mr. Longdon returned, "though rather far down in the list." Lord Petherton was now before them, there being no one else on the terrace to speak to, and, with the odd look of an excess of physical power that almost blocked the way, he seemed to give them in the flare of his big teeth the benefit of a kind of brutal geniality. It was always to be remembered for him that he could scarce show without surprising you an adjustment to the smaller conveniences; so that when he took up a trifle it was not perforce in every case the sign of an uncanny calculation. When the elephant in the show plays the fiddle it must be mainly with the presumption of consequent apples; which was why, doubtless, this personage had half the time the air of assuring you that, really civilised as his type had now become, no apples were required. Mr. Longdon viewed him with a vague apprehension and as if quite unable to meet the question of what he would have called for such a personage the social responsibility. Did this specimen of his class pull the tradition down or did he just take it where he found it—in the very different place from that in which, on ceasing so long ago to "go out," Mr. Longdon had left it? Our friend doubtless averted himself from the possibility of a mental dilemma; if the man didn't lower the position was it the position then that let down the man? Somehow he wasn't positively up. More evidence would be needed to decide; yet it was just of more evidence that one remained rather in dread. Lord Petherton was kind to little Aggie, kind to her companion, kind to every one, after Mr. Longdon had explained that she was so good as to be giving him the list of her dear friends. "I'm only a little dismayed," the elder man said, "to find Mr. Mitchett at the bottom."

"Oh but it's an awfully short list, isn't it? If it consists only of me and Mitchy he's not so very low down. We don't allow her very MANY friends; we look out too well for ourselves." He addressed the child as on an easy jocose understanding. "Is the question, Aggie, whether we shall allow you Mr. Longdon?

Won't that rather 'do' for us—for Mitchy and me? I say, Duchess," he went on as this lady reappeared, "ARE we going to allow her Mr. Longdon and do we quite realise what we're about? We mount guard awfully, you know"—he carried the joke back to the person he had named. "We sift and we sort, we pick the candidates over, and I should like to hear any one say that in this case at least I don't keep a watch on my taste. Oh we close in!"

The Duchess, the object of her quest in her hand, had come back. "Well then Mr. Longdon will close WITH us—you'll consider henceforth that he's as safe as yourself. Here's the letter I wanted you to read—with which you'll please take a turn, in strict charge of the child, and then restore her to us. If you don't come I shall know you've found Mitchy and shall be at peace. Go, little heart," she continued to the child, "but leave me your book to look over again. I don't know that I'm quite sure!" She sent them off together, but had a grave protest as her friend put out his hand for the volume. "No, Petherton—not for books; for her reading I can't say I do trust you. But for everything else—quite!" she declared to Mr. Longdon with a look of conscientious courage as their companion withdrew. "I do believe," she pursued in the same spirit, "in a certain amount of intelligent confidence. Really nice men are steadied by the sense of your having had it. But I wouldn't," she added gaily, "trust him all round!"

IV

Many things at Mertle were strange for her interlocutor, but nothing perhaps as yet had been so strange as the sight of this arrangement for little Aggie's protection; an arrangement made in the interest of her remaining as a young person of her age and her monde—so her aunt would have put it—should remain. The strangest part of the impression too was that the provision might really have its happy side and his lordship understand definitely better than any one else his noble friend's whole theory of perils and precautions. The child herself, the spectator of the incident was sure enough, understood nothing; but the understandings that surrounded her, filling all the air, made it a

heavier compound to breathe than any Mr. Longdon had yet tasted. This heaviness had grown for him through the long sweet summer day, and there was something in his at last finding himself ensconced with the Duchess that made it supremely oppressive. The contact was one that, none the less, he would not have availed himself of a decent pretext to avoid. With so many fine mysteries playing about him there was relief, at the point he had reached, rather than alarm, in the thought of knowing the worst; which it pressed upon him somehow that the Duchess must not only altogether know but must in any relation quite naturally communicate. It fluttered him rather that a person who had an understanding with Lord Petherton should so single him out as to wish for one also with himself; such a person must either have great variety of mind or have a wonderful idea of HIS variety. It was true indeed that Mr. Mitchett must have the most extraordinary understanding, and yet with Mr. Mitchett he now found himself quite pleasantly at his ease. Their host, however, was a person sui generis, whom he had accepted, once for all, the inconsequence of liking in conformity with the need he occasionally felt to put it on record that he was not narrow-minded. Perhaps at bottom he most liked Mitchy because Mitchy most liked Nanda; there hung about him still moreover the faded fragrance of the superstition that hospitality not declined is one of the things that "oblige." It obliged the thoughts, for Mr. Longdon, as well as the manners, and in the especial form in which he was now committed to it would have made him, had he really thought any ill, ask himself what the deuce then he was doing in the man's house. All of which didn't prevent some of Mitchy's queer condonations—if condonations in fact they were—from not wholly, by themselves, soothing his vague unrest, an unrest which never had been so great as at the moment he heard the Duchess abruptly say to him: "Do you know my idea about Nanda? It's my particular desire you should—the reason, really, why I've thus laid violent hands on you. Nanda, my dear man, should marry at the very first moment."

This was more interesting than he had expected, and the effect produced by his interlocutress, as well as doubtless not lost on her, was shown in his suppressed start. “There has been no reason why I should attribute to you any judgement of the matter; but I’ve had one myself, and I don’t see why I shouldn’t say frankly that it’s very much the one you express. It would be a very good thing.”

“A very good thing, but none of my business?”—the Duchess’s vivacity was not unamiable.

It was on this circumstance that her companion for an instant perhaps meditated. “It’s probably not in my interest to say that. I should give you too easy a retort. It would strike any one as quite as much your business as mine.”

“Well, it ought to be somebody’s, you know. One would suppose it to be her mother’s—her father’s; but in this country the parents are even more emancipated than the children. Suppose, really, since it appears to be nobody’s affair, that you and I do make it ours. We needn’t either of us,” she continued, “be concerned for the other’s reasons, though I’m perfectly ready, I assure you, to put my cards on the table. You’ve your feelings—we know they’re beautiful. I, on my side, have mine—for which I don’t pretend anything but that they’re strong. They can dispense with being beautiful when they’re so perfectly settled. Besides, I may mention, they’re rather nice than otherwise. Edward and I have a cousinage, though for all he does to keep it up—! If he leaves his children to play in the street I take it seriously enough to make an occasional dash for them before they’re run over. And I want for Nanda simply the man she herself wants—it isn’t as if I wanted for her a dwarf or a hunchback or a coureur or a drunkard. Vanderbank’s a man whom any woman, don’t you think? might be—whom more than one woman IS—glad of for herself: beau comme le jour, awfully conceited and awfully patronising, but clever and successful and yet liked, and without, so far as I know, any of the terrific appendages which in this country so often diminish the value of even the pleasantest people. He hasn’t five horrible unmarried sisters for his wife to have always on a visit. The way

your women don't marry is the ruin here of society, and I've been assured in good quarters—though I don't know so much about that—the ruin also of conversation and of literature. Isn't it precisely just a little to keep Nanda herself from becoming that kind of appendage—say to poor Harold, say, one of these days, to her younger brother and sister—that friends like you and me feel the importance of bestirring ourselves in time? Of course she's supposedly young, but she's really any age you like: your London world so fearfully batters and bruises them." She had gone fast and far, but it had given Mr. Longdon time to feel himself well afloat. There were so many things in it all to take up that he laid his hand—of which, he was not unconscious, the feebleness exposed him—on the nearest. "Why I'm sure her mother—after twenty years of it—is fresh enough."

"Fresh? You find Mrs. Brook fresh?" The Duchess had a manner that, in its all-knowingness, rather humiliated than encouraged; but he was all the more resolute for being conscious of his own reserves. "It seems to me it's fresh to look about thirty."

"That indeed would be perfect. But she doesn't—she looks about three. She simply looks a baby."

"Oh Duchess, you're really too particular!" he retorted, feeling that, as the trodden worm will turn, anxiety itself may sometimes tend to wit.

She met him in her own way. "I know what I mean. My niece is a person *I* call fresh. It's warranted, as they say in the shops. Besides," she went on, "if a married woman has been knocked about that's only a part of her condition. Elle l'a lien voulu, and if you're married you're married; it's the smoke—or call it the soot!—of the fire. You know, yourself," she roundly pursued, "that Nanda's situation appals you."

"Oh 'appals'!" he restrictively murmured.

It even tried a little his companion's patience. "There you are, you English—you'll never face your own music. It's amazing what you'd rather do with a thing—anything not to shoot at or to make money with—than look at its meaning. If I wished to

save the girl as YOU wish it I should know exactly from what. But why differ about reasons," she asked, "when we're at one about the fact? I don't mention the greatest of Vanderbank's merits," she added—"his having so delicious a friend. By whom, let me hasten to assure you," she laughed, "I don't in the least mean Mrs. Brook! She IS delicious if you like, but believe me when I tell you, caro mio—if you need to be told—that for effective action on him you're worth twenty of her."

What was most visible in Mr. Longdon was that, however it came to him, he had rarely before, all at once, had so much given him to think about. Again the only way to manage was to take what came uppermost. "By effective action you mean action on the matter of his proposing for Nanda?"

The Duchess's assent was noble. "You can make him propose—you can make, I mean, a sure thing of it. You can doter the bride." Then as with the impulse to meet benevolently and more than halfway her companion's imperfect apprehension: "You can settle on her something that will make her a parti." His apprehension was perhaps imperfect, but it could still lead somehow to his flushing all over, and this demonstration the Duchess as quickly took into account. "Poor Edward, you know, won't give her a penny."

Decidedly she went fast, but Mr. Longdon in a moment had caught up. "Mr. Vanderbank—your idea is—would require on the part of his wife something of that sort?"

"Pray who wouldn't—in the world we all move in—require it quite as much? Mr. Vanderbank, I'm assured, has no means of his own at all, and if he doesn't believe in impecunious marriages it's not I who shall be shocked at him. For myself I simply despise them. He has nothing but a poor official salary. If it's enough for one it would be little for two, and would be still less for half a dozen. They're just the people to have, that blessed pair, a fine old English family."

Mr. Longdon was now fairly abreast of it. "What it comes to then, the idea you're so good as to put before me, is to bribe him to take her."

The Duchess remained bland, but she fixed him. “You say that as if you were scandalised, but if you try Mr. Van with it I don’t think he’ll be. And you won’t persuade me,” she went on finely, “that you haven’t yourself thought of it.” She kept her eyes on him, and the effect of them, soon enough visible in his face, was such as presently to make her exult at her felicity. “You’re of a limpidity, dear man—you’ve only to be said ‘bo!’ to and you confess. Consciously or unconsciously—the former, really, I’m inclined to think—you’ve wanted him for her.” She paused an instant to enjoy her triumph, after which she continued: “And you’ve wanted her for him. I make you out, you’ll say—for I see you coming—one of those horrible benevolent busy-bodies who are the worst of the class, but you’ve only to think a little—if I may go so far—to see that no ‘making’ at all is required. You’ve only one link with the Brooks, but that link is golden. How can we, all of us, by this time, not have grasped and admired the beauty of your feeling for Lady Julia? There it is—I make you wince: to speak of it is to profane it. Let us by all means not speak of it then, but let us act on it.” He had at last turned his face from her, and it now took in, from the vantage of his high position, only the loveliness of the place and the hour, which included a glimpse of Lord Petherton and little Aggie, who, down in the garden, slowly strolled in familiar union. Each had a hand in the other’s, swinging easily as they went; their talk was evidently of flowers and fruits and birds; it was quite like father and daughter. One could see half a mile off in short that THEY weren’t flirting. Our friend’s bewilderment came in odd cold gusts: these were unreasoned and capricious; one of them, at all events, during his companion’s pause, must have roared in his ears. Was it not therefore through some continuance of the sound that he heard her go on speaking? “Of course you know the poor child’s own condition.”

It took him a good while to answer. “Do YOU know it?” he asked with his eyes still away.

“If your question’s ironical,” she laughed, “your irony’s perfectly wasted. I should be ashamed of myself if, with my relationship and my interest, I hadn’t made sure. Nanda’s fairly

sick—as sick as a little cat—with her passion." It was with an intensity of silence that he appeared to accept this; he was even so dumb for a minute that the oddity of the image could draw from him no natural sound. The Duchess once more, accordingly, recognised an occasion. "It has doubtless already occurred to you that, since your sentiment for the living is the charming fruit of your sentiment for the dead, there would be a sacrifice to Lady Julia's memory more exquisite than any other."

At this finally Mr. Longdon turned. "The effort—on the lines you speak of—for Nanda's happiness?"

She fairly glowed with hope. "And by the same token such a piece of poetic justice! Quite the loveliest it would be, I think, one had ever heard of."

So, for some time more, they sat confronted. "I don't quite see your difficulty," he said at last. "I do happen to know, I confess, that Nanda herself extremely desires the execution of your project."

His friend's smile betrayed no surprise at this effect of her eloquence. "You're bad at dodging. Nanda's desire is inevitably to stop off for herself every question of any one but Vanderbank. If she wants me to succeed in arranging with Mr. Mitchett can you ask for a plainer sign of her private predicament? But you've signs enough, I see"—she caught herself up: "we may take them all for granted. I've known perfectly from the first that the only difficulty would come from her mother—but also that that would be stiff."

The movement with which Mr. Longdon removed his glasses might have denoted a certain fear to participate in too much of what the Duchess had known. "I've not been ignorant that Mrs. Brookenham favours Mr. Mitchett."

But he was not to be let off with that. "Then you've not been blind, I suppose, to her reason for doing so." He might not have been blind, but his vision, at this, scarce showed sharpness, and it determined in his interlocutress the shortest of short cuts. "She favours Mr. Mitchett because she wants 'old Van' herself."

He was evidently conscious of looking at her hard. “In what sense—herself?”

“Ah you must supply the sense; I can give you only the fact—and it’s the fact that concerns us. Voyons” she almost impatiently broke out; “don’t try to create unnecessary obscurities by being unnecessarily modest. Besides, I’m not touching your modesty. Supply any sense whatever that may miraculously satisfy your fond English imagination: I don’t insist in the least on a bad one. She does want him herself—that’s all I say. ‘Pourquoi faires’ you ask—or rather, being too shy, don’t ask, but would like to if you dared or didn’t fear I’d be shocked. I CAN’T be shocked, but frankly I can’t tell you either. The situation belongs, I think, to an order I don’t understand. I understand either one thing or the other—I understand taking a man up or letting him alone. But I don’t really get at Mrs. Brook. You must judge at any rate for yourself. Vanderbank could of course tell you if he would—but it wouldn’t be right that he should. So the one thing we have to do with is that she’s in fact against us. I can only work Mitchy through Petherton, but Mrs. Brook can work him straight. On the other hand that’s the way you, my dear man, can work Vanderbank.”

One thing evidently beyond the rest, as a result of this vivid demonstration, disengaged itself to our old friend’s undismayed sense, but his consternation needed a minute or two to produce it. “I can absolutely assure you that Mr. Vanderbank entertains no sentiment for Mrs. Brookenham—!”

“That he may not keep under by just setting his teeth and holding on? I never dreamed he does, and have nothing so alarming in store for you—rassurez-vous bien!—as to propose that he shall be invited to sink a feeling for the mother in order to take one up for the child. Don’t, please, flutter out of the whole question by a premature scare. I never supposed it’s he who wants to keep HER. He’s not in love with her—be comforted! But she’s amusing—highly amusing. I do her perfect justice. As your women go she’s rare. If she were French she’d be a femme d’esprit. She has invented a nuance of her own and

she has done it all by herself, for Edward figures in her drawing-room only as one of those queer extinguishers of fire in the corridors of hotels. He's just a bucket on a peg. The men, the young and the clever ones, find it a house—and heaven knows they're right—with intellectual elbow-room, with freedom of talk. Most English talk is a quadrille in a sentry-box. You'll tell me we go further in Italy, and I won't deny it, but in Italy we have the common sense not to have little girls in the room. The young men hang about Mrs. Brook, and the clever ones ply her with the uproarious appreciation that keeps her up to the mark. She's in a prodigious fix—she must sacrifice either her daughter or what she once called to me her intellectual habits. Mr. Vanderbank, you've seen for yourself, is of these one of the most cherished, the most confirmed. Three months ago—it couldn't be any longer kept off—Nanda began definitely to 'sit'; to be there and look, by the tea-table, modestly and conveniently abstracted."

"I beg your pardon—I don't think she looks that, Duchess," Mr. Longdon lucidly broke in. How much she had carried him with her in spite of himself was betrayed by the very terms of his dissent. "I don't think it would strike any one that she looks 'convenient.'"

His companion, laughing, gave a shrug. "Try her and perhaps you'll find her so!" But his objection had none the less pulled her up a little. "I don't say she's a hypocrite, for it would certainly be less decent for her to giggle and wink. It's Mrs. Brook's theory moreover, isn't it? that she has, from five to seven at least, lowered the pitch. Doesn't she pretend that she bears in mind every moment the tiresome difference made by the presence of sweet virginal eighteen?"

"I haven't, I'm afraid, a notion of what she pretends!"

Mr. Longdon had spoken with a curtness to which his friend's particular manner of overlooking it only added significance. "They've become," she pursued, "superficial or insincere or frivolous, but at least they've become, with the way the drag's put on, quite as dull as other people."

He showed no sign of taking this up; instead of it he said abruptly: “But if it isn’t Mr. Mitchett’s own idea?”

His fellow visitor barely hesitated. “It would be his own if he were free—and it would be Lord Petherton’s FOR him. I mean by his being free Nanda’s becoming definitely lost to him. Then it would be impossible for Mrs. Brook to continue to persuade him, as she does now, that by a waiting game he’ll come to his chance. His chance will cease to exist, and he wants so, poor darling, to marry. You’ve really now seen my niece,” she went on. “That’s another reason why I hold you can help me.”

“Yes—I’ve seen her.”

“Well, there she is.” It was as if in the pause that followed this they sat looking at little absent Aggie with a wonder that was almost equal. “The good God has given her to me,” the Duchess said at last.

“It seems to me then that she herself is, in her remarkable loveliness, really your help.”

“She’ll be doubly so if you give me proofs that you believe in her.” And the Duchess, appearing to consider that with this she had made herself clear and her interlocutor plastic, rose in confident majesty. “I leave it to you.”

Mr. Longdon did the same, but with more consideration now. “Is it your expectation that I shall speak to Mr. Mitchett?”

“Don’t flatter yourself he won’t speak to YOU!”

Mr. Longdon made it out. “As supposing me, you mean, an interested party?”

She clapped her gloved hands for joy. “It’s a delight to hear you practically admit that you ARE one! Mr. Mitchett will take anything from you—above all perfect candour. It isn’t every day one meets YOUR kind, and he’s a connoisseur. I leave it to you—I leave it to you.”

She spoke as if it were something she had thrust bodily into his hands and wished to hurry away from. He put his hands behind him—straightening himself a little, half-kindled, still half-confused. “You’re all extraordinary people!”

She gave a toss of her head that showed her as not so dazzled. “You’re the best of us, caro mio—you and Aggie: for Aggie’s as good as you. Mitchy’s good too, however—Mitchy’s beautiful. You see it’s not only his money. He’s a gentleman. So are you. There aren’t so many. But we must move fast,” she added more sharply.

“What do you mean by fast?”

“What should I mean but what I say? If Nanda doesn’t get a husband early in the business—”

“Well?” said Mr. Longdon, as she appeared to pause with the weight of her idea.

“Why she won’t get one late—she won’t get one at all. One, I mean, of the kind she’ll take. She’ll have been in it over-long for THEIR taste.”

She had moved, looking off and about her—little Aggie always on her mind—to the flight of steps, where she again hung fire; and had really ended by producing in him the manner of keeping up with her to challenge her. “Been in what?”

She went down a few steps while he stood with his face full of perceptions strained and scattered. “Why in the air they themselves have infected for her!”

V

Late that night, in the smoking room, when the smokers—talkers and listeners alike—were about to disperse, Mr. Longdon asked Vanderbank to stay, and then it was that the young man, to whom all the evening he had not addressed a word, could make out why, a little unnaturally, he had prolonged his vigil. “I’ve something particular to say to you and I’ve been waiting. I hope you don’t mind. It’s rather important.” Vanderbank expressed on the spot the liveliest desire to oblige him and, quickly lighting another cigarette, mounted again to the deep divan with which a part of the place was furnished. The smoking-room at Mertle was not unworthy of the general nobleness, and the fastidious spectator had clearly been reckoned on in the great leather-covered lounge that, raised by

a step or two above the floor, applied its back to two quarters of the wall and enjoyed most immediately a view of the billiard-table. Mr. Longdon continued for a minute to roam with the air of dissimulated absence that, during the previous hour and among the other men, his companion's eye had not lost; he pushed a ball or two about, examined the form of an ash-stand, swung his glasses almost with violence and declined either to smoke or to sit down. Vanderbank, perched aloft on the bench and awaiting developments, had a little the look of some prepossessing criminal who, in court, should have changed places with the judge. He was unlike many a man of marked good looks in that the effect of evening dress was not, with a perversity often observed in such cases, to over-emphasise his fineness. His type was rather chastened than heightened, and he sat there moreover with a primary discretion quite in the note of the deference that from the first, with his friend of the elder fashion, he had taken as imposed. He had a strong sense for shades of respect and was now careful to loll scarcely more than with an official superior. "If you ask me," Mr. Longdon presently continued, "why at this hour of the night—after a day at best too heterogeneous—I don't keep over till to-morrow whatever I may have to say, I can only tell you that I appeal to you now because I've something on my mind that I shall sleep the better for being rid of."

There was space to circulate in front of the haut-pas, where he had still paced and still swung his glasses; but with these words he had paused, leaning against the billiard-table, to meet the interested urbanity of the answer they produced. "Are you very sure that having got rid of it you WILL sleep? Is it a pure confidence," Vanderbank said, "that you do me the honour to make me? Is it something terrific that requires a reply, so that I shall have to take account on my side of the rest I may deprive you of?"

"Don't take account of anything—I'm myself a man who always takes too much. It isn't a matter about which I press you for an immediate answer. You can give me no answer probably without a good deal of thought. I'VE thought a good

deal—otherwise I wouldn't speak. I only want to put something before you and leave it there."

"I never see you," said Vanderbank, "that you don't put something before me."

"That sounds," his friend returned, "as if I rather overloaded—what's the sort of thing you fellows nowadays say?—your intellectual board. If there's a congestion of dishes sweep everything without scruple away. I've never put before you anything like this."

He spoke with a weight that in the great space, where it resounded a little, made an impression—an impression marked by the momentary pause that fell between them. He partly broke the silence first by beginning to walk again, and then Vanderbank broke it as through the apprehension of their becoming perhaps too solemn. "Well, you immensely interest me and you really couldn't have chosen a better time. A secret—for we shall make it that of course, shan't we?—at this witching hour, in this great old house, is all my visit here will have required to make the whole thing a rare remembrance. So I assure you the more you put before me the better."

Mr. Longdon took up another ash-tray, but with the air of doing so as a direct consequence of Vanderbank's tone. After he had laid it down he put on his glasses; then fixing his companion he brought out: "Have you no idea at all—?"

"Of what you have in your head? Dear Mr. Longdon, how SHOULD I have?"

"Well, I'm wondering if I shouldn't perhaps have a little in your place. There's nothing that in the circumstances occurs to you as likely I should want to say?"

Vanderbank gave a laugh that might have struck an auditor as a trifle uneasy. "When you speak of 'the circumstances' you do a thing that—unless you mean the simple thrilling ones of this particular moment—always of course opens the door of the lurid for a man of any imagination. To such a man you've only to give a nudge for his conscience to jump. That's at any rate the case with mine. It's never quite on its feet—so it's now already

on its back." He stopped a little—his smile was even strained. "Is what you want to put before me something awful I've done?"

"Excuse me if I press this point." Mr. Longdon spoke kindly, but if his friend's anxiety grew his own thereby diminished. "Can you think of nothing at all?"

"Do you mean that I've done?"

"No, but that—whether you've done it or not—I may have become aware of."

There could have been no better proof than Vanderbank's expression, on this, of his having mastered the secret of humouring without appearing to patronise. "I think you ought to give me a little more of a clue."

Mr. Longdon took off his glasses. "Well—the clue's Nanda Brookenham."

"Oh I see." His friend had responded quickly, but for a minute said nothing more, and the great marble clock that gave the place the air of a club ticked louder in the stillness. Mr. Longdon waited with a benevolent want of mercy, yet with a look in his face that spoke of what depended for him—though indeed very far within—on the upshot of his patience. The hush between them, for that matter, became a conscious public measure of the young man's honesty. He evidently at last felt it as such, and there would have been for an observer of his handsome controlled face a study of some sharp things. "I judge that you ask me for such an utterance," he finally said, "as very few persons at any time have the right to expect of a man. Think of the people—and very decent ones—to whom on so many a question one must only reply that it's none of their business."

"I see you know what I mean," said Mr. Longdon.

"Then you know also the distinguished exception I make of you. There isn't another man with whom I'd talk of it."

"And even to me you don't! But I'm none the less obliged to you," Mr. Longdon added.

"It isn't only the gravity," his companion went on; "it's the ridicule that inevitably attaches—!"

The manner in which Mr. Longdon indicated the empty room was in itself an interruption. “Don’t I sufficiently spare you?”

“Thank you, thank you,” said Vanderbank.

“Besides, it’s not for nothing.”

“Of course not!” the young man returned, though with a look of noting the next moment a certain awkwardness in his concurrence. “But don’t spare me now.”

“I don’t mean to.” Mr. Longdon had his back to the table again, on which he rested with each hand on the rim. “I don’t mean to,” he repeated.

His victim gave a laugh that betrayed at least the drop of a tension. “Yet I don’t quite see what you can do to me.”

“It’s just what for some time past I’ve been trying to think.”

“And at last you’ve discovered?”

“Well—it has finally glimmered out a little in this extraordinary place.”

Vanderbank frankly wondered. “In consequence of anything particular that has happened?”

Mr. Longdon had a pause. “For an old idiot who notices as much as I something particular’s always happening. If you’re a man of imagination—”

“Oh,” Vanderbank broke in, “I know how much more in that case you’re one! It only makes me regret,” he continued, “that I’ve not attended more since yesterday to what you’ve been about.”

“I’ve been about nothing but what among you people I’m always about. I’ve been seeing, feeling, thinking. That makes no show, of course I’m aware, for any one but myself, and it’s wholly my own affair. Except indeed,” he added, “so far as I’ve taken into my head to make, on it all, this special appeal. There are things that have come home to me.”

“Oh I see, I see,” Vanderbank showed the friendliest alertness. “I’m to take it from you then, with all the avidity of my vanity, that I strike you as the person best able to understand what they are.”

Mr. Longdon appeared to wonder an instant if his intelligence now had not almost too much of a glitter: he kept the same position, his back against the table, and while Vanderbank, on the settee, pressed upright against the wall, they recognised in silence that they were trying each other. "You're much the best of them. I've my ideas about you. You've great gifts."

"Well then, we're worthy of each other. When Greek meets Greek—!" and the young man laughed while, a little with the air of bracing himself, he folded his arms. "Here we are."

His companion looked at him a moment longer, then, turning away, went slowly round the table. On the further side of it he stopped again and, after a minute, with a nervous movement, set a ball or two in motion. "It's beautiful—but it's terrible!" he finally murmured. He hadn't his eyes on Vanderbank, who for a minute said nothing, and he presently went on: "To see it and not to want to try to help—well, I can't do that." Vanderbank, still neither speaking nor moving, remained as if he might interrupt something of high importance, and his friend, passing along the opposite edge of the table, continued to produce in the stillness, without the cue, the small click of the ivory. "How long—if you don't mind my asking—have you known it?"

Even for this at first Vanderbank had no answer—none but to rise from his place, come down to the floor and, standing there, look at Mr. Longdon across the table. He was serious now, but without being solemn. "How can one tell? One can never be sure. A man may fancy, may wonder; but about a girl, a person so much younger than himself and so much more helpless, he feels a—what shall I call it?"

"A delicacy?" Mr. Longdon suggested. "It may be that; the name doesn't matter; at all events he's embarrassed. He wants not to be an ass on the one side and yet not some other kind of brute on the other."

Mr. Longdon listened with consideration—with a beautiful little air indeed of being, in his all but finally benighted state,

earnestly open to information on such points from a magnificent young man. “He doesn’t want, you mean, to be a coxcomb?—and he doesn’t want to be cruel?”

Vanderbank, visibly preoccupied, produced a faint kind smile. “Oh you KNOW!”

“I? I should know less than any one.” Mr. Longdon had turned away from the table on this, and the eyes of his companion, who after an instant had caught his meaning, watched him move along the room and approach another part of the divan. The consequence of the passage was that Vanderbank’s only rejoinder was presently to say: “I can’t tell you how long I’ve imagined—have asked myself. She’s so charming, so interesting, and I feel as if I had known her always. I’ve thought of one thing and another to do—and then, on purpose, haven’t thought at all. That has mostly seemed to me best.”

“Then I gather,” said Mr. Longdon, “that your interest in her—?”

“Hasn’t the same character as her interest in ME?” Vanderbank had taken him up responsively, but after speaking looked about for a match and lighted a new cigarette. “I’m sure you understand,” he broke out, “what an extreme effort it is to me to talk of such things!”

“Yes, yes. But it’s just effort only? It gives you no pleasure? I mean the fact of her condition,” Mr. Longdon explained.

Vanderbank had really to think a little. “However much it might give me I should probably not be a fellow to gush. I’m a self-conscious stick of a Briton.”

“But even a stick of a Briton—!” Mr. Longdon faltered and hovered. “I’ve gushed in short to YOU.”

“About Lady Julia?” the young man frankly asked. “Is gushing what you call what you’ve done?”

“Say then we’re sticks of Britons. You’re not in any degree at all in love?”

There fell between them, before Vanderbank replied, another pause, of which he took advantage to move once more round

the table. Mr. Longdon meanwhile had mounted to the high bench and sat there as if the judge were now in his proper place. At last his companion spoke. “What you’re coming to is of course that you’ve conceived a desire.”

“That’s it—strange as it may seem. But believe me, it has not been precipitate. I’ve watched you both.”

“Oh I knew you were watching HER,” said Vanderbank.

“To such a tune that I’ve made up my mind. I want her so to marry—!” But on the odd little quaver of longing with which he brought it out the elder man fairly hung.

“Well?” said Vanderbank.

“Well, so that on the day she does she’ll come into the interest of a considerable sum of money—already very decently invested—that I’ve determined to settle on her.”

Vanderbank’s instant admiration flushed across the room. “How awfully jolly of you—how beautiful!”

“Oh there’s a way to show practically your appreciation of it.”

But Vanderbank, for enthusiasm, scarcely heard him. “I can’t tell you how admirable I think you.” Then eagerly, “Does Nanda know it?” he demanded.

Mr. Longdon, after a wait, spoke with comparative dryness. “My idea has been that for the present you alone shall.”

Vanderbank took it in. “No other man?”

His companion looked still graver. “I need scarcely say that I depend on you to keep the fact to yourself.”

“Absolutely then and utterly. But that won’t prevent what I think of it. Nothing for a long time has given me such joy.”

Shining and sincere, he had held for a minute Mr. Longdon’s eyes. “Then you do care for her?”

“Immensely. Never, I think, so much as now. That sounds of a grossness, doesn’t it?” the young man laughed. “But your announcement really lights up the mind.”

His friend for a moment almost glowed with his pleasure. “The sum I’ve fixed upon would be, I may mention, substantial,

and I should of course be prepared with a clear statement—a very definite pledge—of my intentions."

"So much the better! Only"—Vanderbank suddenly pulled himself up—"to get it she MUST marry?"

"It's not in my interest to allow you to suppose she needn't, and it's only because of my intensely wanting her marriage that I've spoken to you."

"And on the ground also with it"—Vanderbank so far concurred—"of your quite taking for granted my only having to put myself forward?"

If his friend seemed to cast about it proved but to be for the fullest expression. Nothing in fact could have been more charged than the quiet way in which he presently said: "My dear boy, I back you."

Vanderbank clearly was touched by it. "How extraordinarily kind you are to me!" Mr. Longdon's silence appeared to reply that he was willing to let it go for that, and the young man next went on: "What it comes to then—as you put it—is that it's a way for me to add something handsome to my income."

Mr. Longdon sat for a little with his eyes attached to the green field of the billiard-table, vivid in the spreading suspended lamplight. "I think I ought to tell you the figure I have in mind."

Another person present might have felt rather taxed either to determine the degree of provocation represented by Vanderbank's considerate smile, or to say if there was an appreciable interval before he rang out: "I think, you know, you oughtn't to do anything of the sort. Let that alone, please. The great thing is the interest—the great thing is the wish you express. It represents a view of me, an attitude toward me—!" He pulled up, dropping his arms and turning away before the complete image.

"There's nothing in those things that need overwhelm you. It would be odd if you hadn't yourself, about your value and your future a feeling quite as lively as any feeling of mine. There IS

mine at all events. I can't help it. Accept it. Then of the other feeling—how SHE moves me—I won't speak."

"You sufficiently show it!"

Mr. Longdon continued to watch the bright circle on the table, lost in which a moment he let his friend's answer pass. "I won't begin to you on Nanda."

"Don't," said Vanderbank. But in the pause that ensued each, in one way or another, might have been thinking of her for himself.

It was broken by Mr. Longdon's presently going on: "Of course what it superficially has the air of is my offering to pay you for taking a certain step. It's open to you to be grand and proud—to wrap yourself in your majesty and ask if I suppose you bribeable. I haven't spoken without having thought of that."

"Yes," said Vanderbank all responsively, "but it isn't as if you proposed to me, is it, anything dreadful? If one cares for a girl one's deucedly glad she has money. The more of anything good she has the better. I may assure you," he added with the brightness of his friendly intelligence and quite as if to show his companion the way to be least concerned—"I may assure you that once I were disposed to act on your suggestion I'd make short work of any vulgar interpretation of my motive. I should simply try to be as fine as yourself." He smoked, he moved about, then came up in another place. "I dare say you know that dear old Mitchy, under whose blessed roof we're plotting this midnight treason, would marry her like a shot and without a penny."

"I think I know everything—I think I've thought of everything. Mr. Mitchett," Mr. Longdon added, "is impossible."

Vanderbank appeared for an instant to wonder. "Wholly then through HER attitude?"

"Altogether."

Again he hesitated. "You've asked her?"

"I've asked her."

Once more Vanderbank faltered. "And that's how you know?"

“About YOUR chance? That’s how I know.”

The young man, consuming his cigarette with concentration, took again several turns. “And your idea IS to give one time?”

Mr. Longdon had for a minute to turn his idea over. “How much time do you want?”

Vanderbank gave a headshake that was both restrictive and indulgent. “I must live into it a little. Your offer has been before me only these few minutes, and it’s too soon for me to commit myself to anything whatever. Except,” he added gallantly, “to my gratitude.”

Mr. Longdon, at this, on the divan, got up, as Vanderbank had previously done, under the spring of emotion; only, unlike Vanderbank, he still stood there, his hands in his pockets and his face, a little paler, directed straight. There was disappointment in him even before he spoke. “You’ve no strong enough impulse—?”

His friend met him with admirable candour. “Wouldn’t it seem that if I had I would by this time have taken the jump?”

“Without waiting, you mean, for anybody’s money?” Mr. Longdon cultivated for a little a doubt. “Of course she has struck one as—till now—tremendously young.”

Vanderbank looked about once more for matches and occupied a time with relighting. “Till now—yes. But it’s not,” he pursued, “only because she’s so young that—for each of us, and for dear old Mitchy too—she’s so interesting.” Mr. Longdon had restlessly stepped down, and Vanderbank’s eyes followed him till he stopped again. “I make out that in spite of what you said to begin with you’re conscious of a certain pressure.”

“In the matter of time? Oh yes, I do want it DONE. That,” Nanda’s patron simply explained, “is why I myself put on the screw.” He spoke with the ring of impatience. “I want her got out.”

“‘Out’?”

“Out of her mother’s house.”

Vanderbank laughed though—more immediately—he had coloured. “Why, her mother’s house is just where I see her!”

“Precisely; and if it only weren’t we might get on faster.”

Vanderbank, for all his kindness, looked still more amused. “But if it only weren’t, as you say, I seem to understand you wouldn’t have your particular vision of urgency.”

Mr. Longdon, through adjusted glasses, took him in with a look that was sad as well as sharp, then jerked the glasses off. “Oh you do understand.”

“Ah,” said Vanderbank, “I’m a mass of corruption!”

“You may perfectly be, but you shall not,” Mr. Longdon returned with decision, “get off on any such plea. If you’re good enough for me you’re good enough, as you thoroughly know, on whatever head, for any one.”

“Thank you.” But Vanderbank, for all his happy appreciation, thought again. “We ought at any rate to remember, oughtn’t we? that we should have Mrs. Brook against us.”

His companion faltered but an instant. “Ah that’s another thing I know. But it’s also exactly why. Why I want Nanda away.”

“I see, I see.”

The response had been prompt, yet Mr. Longdon seemed suddenly to show that he suspected the superficial. “Unless it’s with Mrs. Brook you’re in love.” Then on his friend’s taking the idea with a mere headshake of negation, a repudiation that might even have astonished by its own lack of surprise, “Or unless Mrs. Brook’s in love with you,” he amended.

Vanderbank had for this any decent gaiety. “Ah that of course may perfectly be!”

“But IS it? That’s the question.”

He continued light. “If she had declared her passion shouldn’t I rather compromise her—?”

“By letting me know?” Mr. Longdon reflected. “I’m sure I can’t say—it’s a sort of thing for which I haven’t a measure or a precedent. In my time women didn’t declare their passion. I’m

thinking of what the meaning is of Mrs. Brookenham's wanting you—as I've heard it called—herself."

Vanderbank, still with his smile, smoked a minute. "That's what you've heard it called?"

"Yes, but you must excuse me from telling you by whom."

He was amused at his friend's discretion. "It's unimaginable. But it doesn't matter. We all call everything—anything. The meaning of it, if you and I put it so, is—well, a modern shade."

"You must deal then yourself," said Mr. Longdon, "with your modern shades." He spoke now as if the case simply awaited such dealing.

But at this his young friend was more grave. "YOU could do nothing?—to bring, I mean, Mrs. Brook round."

Mr. Longdon fairly started. "Propose on your behalf for her daughter? With your authority—tomorrow. Authorise me and I instantly act."

Vanderbank's colour again rose—his flush was complete. "How awfully you want it!"

Mr. Longdon, after a look at him, turned away. "How awfully YOU don't!"

The young man continued to blush. "No—you must do me justice. You've not made a mistake about me—I see in your proposal, I think, all you can desire I should. Only YOU see it much more simply—and yet I can't just now explain. If it WERE so simple I should say to you in a moment 'do speak to them for me'—I should leave the matter with delight in your hands. But I require time, let me remind you, and you haven't yet told me how much I may take."

This appeal had brought them again face to face, and Mr. Longdon's first reply to it was a look at his watch. "It's one o'clock."

"Oh I require"—Vanderbank had recovered his pleasant humour—"more than to-night!"

Mr. Longdon went off to the smaller table that still offered to view two bedroom candles. "You must take of course the time

you need. I won't trouble you—I won't hurry you. I'm going to bed."

Vanderbank, overtaking him, lighted his candle for him; after which, handing it and smiling: "Shall we have conduced to your rest?"

Mr. Longdon looked at the other candle. "You're not coming to bed?"

"To MY rest we shall not have conduced. I stay up a while longer."

"Good." Mr. Longdon was pleased. "You won't forget then, as we promised, to put out the lights?"

"If you trust me for the greater you can trust me for the less. Good-night."

Vanderbank had offered his hand. "Good-night." But Mr. Longdon kept him a moment. "You DON'T care for my figure?"

"Not yet—not yet. PLEASE." Vanderbank seemed really to fear it, but on Mr. Longdon's releasing him with a little drop of disappointment they went together to the door of the room, where they had another pause.

"She's to come down to me—alone—in September."

Vanderbank appeared to debate and conclude. "Then may I come?"

His friend, on this footing, had to consider. "Shall you know by that time?"

"I'm afraid I can't promise—if you must regard my coming as a pledge."

Mr. Longdon thought on; then raising his eyes: "I don't quite see why you won't suffer me to tell you—!"

"The detail of your intention? I do then. You've said quite enough. If my visit must commit me," Vanderbank pursued, "I'm afraid I can't come."

Mr. Longdon, who had passed into the corridor, gave a dry sad little laugh. "Come then—as the ladies say—'as you are'!"

On which, rather softly closing the door, the young man remained alone in the great emptily lighted billiard-room.

BOOK SIXTH. MRS. BROOK

Presenting himself at Buckingham Crescent three days after the Sunday spent at Mertle, Vanderbank found Lady Fanny Cashmore in the act of taking leave of Mrs. Brook and found Mrs. Brook herself in the state of muffled exaltation that was the mark of all her intercourse—and most of all perhaps of her farewells—with Lady Fanny. This splendid creature gave out, as it were, so little that Vanderbank was freshly struck with all Mrs. Brook could take in, though nothing, for that matter, in Buckingham Crescent, had been more fully formulated on behalf of the famous beauty than the imperturbable grandeur of her almost total absence of articulation. Every aspect of the phenomenon had been freely discussed there and endless ingenuity lavished on the question of how exactly it was that so much of what the world would in another case have called complete stupidity could be kept by a mere wonderful face from boring one to death. It was Mrs. Brook who, in this relation as in many others, had arrived at the supreme expression of the law, had thrown off, happily enough, to whomever it might have concerned: "My dear thing, it all comes back, as everything always does, simply to personal pluck. It's only a question, no matter when or where, of having enough. Lady Fanny has the courage of all her silence—so much therefore that it sees her completely through and is what really makes her interesting. Not to be afraid of what may happen to you when you've no more to say for yourself than a steamer without a light—that truly is the highest heroism, and Lady Fanny's greatness is that she's never afraid. She takes the risk every time she goes out—takes, as you may say, her life in her hand. She just turns that glorious mask upon you and practically says: 'No, I won't open my lips—to call it really open—for the forty minutes I shall stay; but I calmly defy you, all the same, to kill me for it.' And we don't kill her—we delight in her; though when either of us watches her in a circle of others it's like seeing a very large blind person in the middle of Oxford Street. One fairly looks about for

the police." Vanderbank, before his fellow visitor withdrew it, had the benefit of the glorious mask and could scarce have failed to be amused at the manner in which Mrs. Brook alone showed the stress of thought. Lady Fanny, in the other scale, sat aloft and Olympian, so that though visibly much had happened between the two ladies it had all happened only to the hostess. The sense in the air in short was just of Lady Fanny herself, who came to an end like a banquet or a procession. Mrs. Brook left the room with her and, on coming back, was full of it. "She'll go, she'll go!"

"Go where?" Vanderbank appeared to have for the question less attention than usual.

"Well, to the place her companion will propose. Probably—like Anna Karenine—to one of the smaller Italian towns."

"Anna Karenine? She isn't a bit like Anna."

"Of course she isn't so clever," said Mrs. Brook. "But that would spoil her. So it's all right."

"I'm glad it's all right," Vanderbank laughed. "But I dare say we shall still have her with us a while."

"We shall do that, I trust, whatever happens. She'll come up again—she'll remain, I feel, one of those enormous things that fate seems somehow to have given me as the occupation of my odd moments. I don't see," Mrs. Brook added, "what still keeps her on the edge, which isn't an inch wide."

Vanderbank looked this time as if he only tried to wonder. "Isn't it YOU?"

Mrs. Brook mused more deeply. "Sometimes I think so. But I don't know."

"Yes, how CAN you of course know, since she can't tell you?"

"Oh if I depended on her telling—!" Mrs. Brook shook out with this a sofa-cushion or two and sank into the corner she had arranged. The August afternoon was hot and the London air heavy; the room moreover, though agreeably bedimmed, gave out the staleness of the season's end. "If you hadn't come to-day," she went on, "you'd have missed me till I don't know

when, for we've let the Hovel again—wretchedly, but still we've let it—and I go down on Friday to see that it isn't too filthy. Edward, who's furious at what I've taken for it, had his idea that we should go there this year ourselves."

"And now"—Vanderbank took her up—"that fond fancy has become simply the ghost of a dead thought, a ghost that, in company with a thousand predecessors, haunts the house in the twilight and pops at you out of odd corners."

"Oh Edward's dead thoughts are indeed a cheerful company and worthy of the perpetual mental mourning we seem to go about in. They're worse than the relations we're always losing without seeming to have any fewer, and I expect every day to hear that the Morning Post regrets to have to announce in that line too some new bereavement. The apparitions following the deaths of so many thoughts ARE particularly awful in the twilight, so that at this season, while the day drags and drags, I'm glad to have any one with me who may keep them at a distance."

Vanderbank had not sat down; slowly, familiarly he turned about. "And where's Nanda?"

"Oh SHE doesn't help—she attracts rather the worst of the bogies. Edward and Nanda and Harold and I seated together are fairly a case for that—what do you call it?—investigating Society. Deprived of the sweet resource of the Hovel," Mrs. Brook continued, "we shall each, from about the tenth on, forage somehow or other for ourselves. Mitchy perhaps," she added, "will insist on taking us to Baireuth."

"That will be the form, you mean, of his own forage?"

Mrs. Brook just hesitated. "Unless you should prefer to take it as the form of yours."

Vanderbank appeared for a moment obligingly enough to turn this over, but with the effect of noting an objection. "Oh I'm afraid I shall have to grind straight through the month and that by the time I'm free every Ring at Baireuth will certainly have been rung. Is it your idea to take Nanda?" he asked.

She reached out for another cushion. “If it’s impossible for you to manage what I suggest why should that question interest you?”

“My dear woman”—and her visitor dropped into a chair—“do you suppose my interest depends on such poverties as what I can ‘manage’? You know well enough,” he went on in another tone, “why I care for Nanda and enquire about her.”

She was perfectly ready. “I know it, but only as a bad reason. Don’t be too sure!”

For a moment they looked at each other. “Don’t be so sure, you mean, that the elation of it may go to my head? Are you really warning me against vanity?”

“Your ‘reallys,’ my dear Van, are a little formidable, but it strikes me that before I tell you there’s something I’ve a right to ask. Are you ‘really’ what they call thinking of my daughter?”

“Your asking,” Vanderbank returned, “exactly shows the state of your knowledge of the matter. I don’t quite see moreover why you speak as if I were paying an abrupt and unnatural attention. What have I done the last three months but talk to you about her? What have you done but talk to ME about her? From the moment you first spoke to me—‘monstrously,’ I remember you called it—of the difference made in your social life by her finally established, her perpetual, her inexorable participation: from that moment what have we both done but put our heads together over the question of keeping the place tidy, as you called it—or as *I* called it, was it?—for the young female mind?”

Mrs. Brook faced serenely enough the directness of this challenge. “Well, what are you coming to? I spoke of the change in my life of course; I happen to be so constituted that my life has something to do with my mind and my mind something to do with my talk. Good talk: you know—no one, dear Van, should know better—what part for me that plays. Therefore when one has deliberately to make one’s talk bad—!”

“‘Bad’?” Vanderbank, in his amusement, fell back in his chair. “Dear Mrs. Brook, you’re too delightful!”

"You know what I mean—stupid, flat, fourth-rate. When one has to haul in sail to that degree—and for a perfectly outside reason—there's nothing strange in one's taking a friend sometimes into the confidence of one's irritation."

"Ah," Vanderbank protested, "you do yourself injustice. Irritation hasn't been for you the only consequence of the affair."

Mrs. Brook gloomily thought. "No, no—I've had my calmness: the calmness of deep despair. I've seemed to see everything go."

"Oh how can you say that," her visitor demanded, "when just what we've most been agreed upon so often is the practical impossibility of making any change? Hasn't it seemed as if we really can't overcome conversational habits so thoroughly formed?"

Again Mrs. Brook reflected. "As if our way of looking at things were too serious to be trifled with? I don't know—I think it's only you who have denied our sacrifices, our compromises and concessions. I myself have constantly felt smothered in them. But there it is," she impatiently went on. "What I don't admit is that you've given me ground to take for a proof of your 'intentions'—to use the odious term—your association with me on behalf of the preposterous fiction, as it after all is, of Nanda's blankness of mind."

Vanderbank's head, in his chair, was thrown back; his eyes ranged over the top of the room. "There never has been any mystery about my thinking her—all in her own way—the nicest girl in London. She IS."

His companion was silent a little. "She is, by all means. Well," she then added, "so far as I may have been alive to the fact of any one's thinking her so, it's not out of place I should mention to you the difference made in my appreciation of it by our delightful little stay at Mertle. My views for Nanda," said Mrs. Brook, "have somehow gone up."

Vanderbank was prompt to show how he could understand it. "So that you wouldn't consider even Mitchy now?"

But his friend took no notice of the question. “The way Mr. Longdon distinguishes her is quite the sort of thing that gives a girl, as Harold says, a ‘leg up.’ It’s awfully curious and has made me think: he isn’t anything whatever, as London estimates go, in himself—so that what is it, pray, that makes him, when ‘added on’ to her, so double Nanda’s value? I somehow or other see, through his being known to back her and through the pretty story of his loyalty to mamma and all the rest of it (oh if one chose to WORK that!) ever so much more of a chance for her.”

Vanderbank’s eyes were on the ceiling. “It IS curious, isn’t it?—though I think he’s rather more ‘in himself,’ even for the London estimate, than you quite understand.” He appeared to give her time to take this up, but as she said nothing he pursued: “I dare say that if even I now WERE to enter myself it would strike you as too late.”

Her attention to this was but indirect. “It’s awfully vulgar to be talking about it, but I can’t help feeling that something possibly rather big will come of Mr. Longdon.”

“Ah we’ve touched on that before,” said Vanderbank, “and you know you did think something might come even for me.”

She continued however, as if she scarce heard him, to work out her own vision. “It’s very true that up to now—”

“Well, up to now?” he asked as she faltered.

She faltered still a little. “I do say the most hideous things. But we HAVE said worse, haven’t we? Up to now, I mean, he hasn’t given her anything. Unless indeed,” she mused, “she may have had something without telling me.”

Vanderbank went much straighter. “What sort of thing have you in mind? Are you thinking of money?”

“Yes. Isn’t it awful?”

“That you should think of it?”

“That I should talk this way.” Her friend was apparently not prepared with an assent, and she quickly enough pursued: “If he HAD given her any it would come out somehow in her

expenditure. She has tremendous liberty and is very secretive, but still it would come out."

"He wouldn't give her any without letting you know. Nor would she, without doing so," Vanderbank added, "take it."

"Ah," Mrs. Brook quietly said, "she hates me enough for anything."

"That's only your romantic theory."

Once more she appeared not to hear him; she gave the discussion another turn. "Has he given YOU anything?"

Her visitor smiled. "Not so much as a cigarette. I've always my pockets full of them, and HE never: so he only takes mine. Oh Mrs. Brook," he continued, "with me too—though I've also tremendous liberty!—it would come out."

"I think you'd let me know," she returned.

"Yes, I'd let you know."

Silence, upon this, fell between them a little; which she was the first to break. "She has gone with him this afternoon—by solemn appointment—to the South Kensington Museum."

There was something in Mrs. Brook's dolorous drop that yet presented the news as a portent so great that he was moved again to mirth. "Ah that's where she is? Then I confess she has scored. He has never taken ME to the South Kensington Museum."

"You were asking what we're going to do," she went on. "What I meant was—about Baireuth—that the question for Nanda's simplified. He has pressed her so to pay him a visit."

Vanderbank's assent was marked. "I see: so that if you do go abroad she'll be provided for by that engagement."

"And by lots of other invitations."

These were such things as, for the most part, the young man could turn over. "Do you mean you'd let her go alone—?"

"To wherever she's asked?" said Mrs. Brook. "Why not? Don't talk like the Duchess."

Vanderbank seemed for a moment to try not to. "Couldn't Mr. Longdon take her? Why not?"

His friend looked really struck with it. “That WOULD be working him. But to a beautiful end!” she meditated. “The only thing would be to get him also asked.”

“Ah but there you are, don’t you see? Fancy ‘getting’ Mr. Longdon anything or anywhere whatever! Don’t you feel,” Vanderbank threw out, “how the impossibility of exerting that sort of patronage for him immediately places him?”

Mrs. Brook gave her companion one of those fitful glances of almost grateful appreciation with which their intercourse was even at its darkest hours frequently illumined. “As if he were the Primate or the French Ambassador? Yes, you’re right—one couldn’t do it; though it’s very odd and one doesn’t quite see why. It does place him. But he becomes thereby exactly the very sort of person with whom it would be most of an advantage for her to go about. What a pity,” Mrs. Brook sighed, “he doesn’t know more people!”

“Ah well, we ARE, in our way, bringing that to pass. Only we mustn’t rush it. Leave it to Nanda herself,” Vanderbank presently added; on which his companion so manifestly left it that she touched after a moment’s silence on quite a different matter. “I dare say he’d tell YOU—wouldn’t he?—if he were to give her any considerable sum.”

She had only obeyed his injunction, but he stared at the length of her jump. “He might attempt to do so, but I shouldn’t at all like it.” He was moved immediately to dismiss this branch of the subject and, apparently to help himself, take up another. “Do you mean she understands he has asked her down for a regular long stay?”

Mrs. Brook barely hesitated. “She understands, I think, that what I expect of her is to make it as long as possible.”

Vanderbank laughed out—as it was even after ten years still possible to laugh—at the childlike innocence with which her voice could invest the hardest teachings of life; then with something a trifle nervous in the whole sound and manner he sprang up from his chair. “What a blessing he is to us all!”

“Yes, but think what we must be to HIM.”

“An immense interest, no doubt.” He took a few aimless steps and, stooping over a basket of flowers, inhaled it with violence, almost buried his face. “I dare say we ARE interesting.” He had spoken rather vaguely, but Mrs. Brook knew exactly why. “We render him no end of a service. We keep him in touch with old memories.”

Vanderbank had reached one of the windows, shaded from without by a great striped sun-blind beneath which and between the flower-pots of the balcony he could see a stretch of hot relaxed street. He looked a minute at these things. “I do so like your phrases!”

She had a pause that challenged his tone. “Do you call mamma a ‘phrase’?”

He went off again, quite with extravagance, but quickly, leaving the window, pulled himself up. “I dare say we MUST put things for him—he does it, cares or is able to do it, so little himself.”

“Precisely. He just quietly acts. That’s his nature, dear thing. We must LET him act.”

Vanderbank seemed to stifle again too vivid a sense of her particular emphasis. “Yes, yes—we must let him.”

“Though it won’t prevent Nanda, I imagine,” his hostess pursued, “from finding the fun of a whole month at Beccles—or whatever she puts in—not exactly fast and furious.”

Vanderbank had the look of measuring what the girl might “put in.” “The place will be quiet, of course, but when a person’s so fond of a person—!”

“As she is of him, you mean?”

He hesitated. “Yes. Then it’s all right.”

“She IS fond of him, thank God!” said Mrs. Brook.

He was before her now with the air of a man who had suddenly determined on a great blind leap. “Do you know what he has done? He wants me so to marry her that he has proposed a definite basis.”

Mrs. Brook got straight up. “‘Proposed’? To HER?”

"No, I don't think he has said a word to Nanda—in fact I'm sure that, very properly, he doesn't mean to. But he spoke to me on Sunday night at Mertle—I had a big talk with him there alone, very late, in the smoking-room." Mrs. Brook's stare was serious, and Vanderbank now went on as if the sound of his voice helped him to meet it. "We had things out very much and his kindness was extraordinary—he's the most beautiful old boy that ever lived. I don't know, now that I come to think of it, if I'm within my rights in telling you—and of course I shall immediately let him know that I HAVE told you; but I feel I can't arrive at any respectable sort of attitude in the matter without taking you into my confidence. Which is really what I came here to-day to do, though till this moment I've funked it."

It was either, as her friends chose to think it, an advantage or a drawback of intercourse with Mrs. Brook that, her face being at any moment charged with the woe of the world, it was unavoidable to remain rather in the dark as to the effect there of particular strokes. Something in Vanderbank's present study of the signs accordingly showed he had had to learn to feel his way and had more or less mastered the trick. That she had turned a little pale was really the one fresh mark. "'Funked' it? Why in the world—?" His own colour deepened at her accent, which was a sufficient light on his having been stupid. "Do you mean you've declined the arrangement?"

He only, with a smile somewhat strained, continued for a moment to look at her; clearly, however, at last feeling, and not much caring, that he got in still deeper. "You're magnificent. You're magnificent."

Her lovely gaze widened out. "Comment donc? Where—why? You HAVE declined her?" she went on. After which, as he replied only with a slow head-shake that seemed to say it was not for the moment all so simple as that, she had one of the inspirations to which she was constitutionally subject. "Do you imagine I want you myself?"

"Dear Mrs. Brook, you're so admirable," he returned with gaiety, "that if by any chance you did, upon my honour, I don't

see how I should be able not to say 'All right.'" But he spoke too more responsibly. "I was shy of really bringing out to you what has happened to me, for a reason that I've of course to look in the face. Whatever you want yourself, for Nanda you want Mitchy."

"I see, I see." She did full justice to his explanation. "And what did you say about a 'basis'? The blessed man offers to settle—?"

"You're a real prodigy," her visitor answered, "and your imagination takes its fences in a way that, when I'm out with you, quite puts mine to shame. When he mentioned it to me I was quite surprised."

"And I," Mrs. Brook asked, "am not surprised a bit? Isn't it only," she modestly suggested, "because I've taken him in more than you? Didn't you know he WOULD?" she quavered.

Vanderbank thought or at least pretended to. "Make ME the condition? How could I be sure of it?"

But the point of his question was lost for her in the growing light. "Oh then the condition's 'you' only—?"

"That, at any rate, is all I have to do with. He's ready to settle if I'm ready to do the rest."

"To propose to her straight, you mean?" She waited, but as he said nothing she went on: "And you're not ready. Is that it?"

"I'm taking my time."

"Of course you know," said Mrs. Brook, "that she'd jump at you."

He turned away from her now, but after some steps came back. "Then you do admit it."

She hesitated. "To YOU."

He had a strange faint smile. "Well, as I don't speak of it—!"

"No—only to me. What is it he settles?" Mrs. Brook demanded.

"I can't tell you."

"You didn't ask?"

"On the contrary I stopped him off."

“Oh then,” Mrs. Brook exclaimed, “that’s what I call declining.”

The words appeared for an instant to strike her companion. “Is it? Is it?” he almost musingly repeated. But he shook himself the next moment free of his wonder, was more what would have been called in Buckingham Crescent on the spot. “Isn’t there rather something in my having thus thought it my duty to warn you that I’m definitely his candidate?”

Mrs. Brook turned impatiently away. “You’ve certainly—with your talk about ‘warning’—the happiest expressions!” She put her face into the flowers as he had done just before; then as she raised it: “What kind of a monster are you trying to make me out?”

“My dear lady”—Vanderbank was prompt—“I really don’t think I say anything but what’s fair. Isn’t it just my loyalty to you in fact that has in this case positively strained my discretion?”

She shook her head in mere mild despair. “‘Loyalty’ again is exquisite. The tact of men has a charm quite its own. And you’re rather good,” she continued, “as men go.”

His laugh was now a little awkward, as if she had already succeeded in making him uncomfortable. “I always become aware with you sooner or later that they don’t go at all—in your sense: but how am I, after all, so far out if you HAVE put your money on another man?”

“You keep coming back to that?” she wearily sighed.

He thought a little. “No, then. You’ve only to tell me not to, and I’ll never speak of it again.”

“You’ll be in an odd position for speaking of it if you do really go in. You deny that you’ve declined,” said Mrs. Brook; “which means then that you’ve allowed our friend to hope.”

Vanderbank met it bravely. “Yes, I think he hopes.”

“And communicates his hope to my child?”

This arrested the young man, but only for a moment. “I’ve the most perfect faith in his wisdom with her. I trust his

particular delicacy. He cares more for her," he presently added, "even than we do."

Mrs. Brook gazed away at the infinite of space. "'We,' my dear Van," she at last returned, "is one of your own real, wonderful touches. But there's something in what you say: I HAVE, as between ourselves—between me and him—been backing Mitchy. That is I've been saying to him 'Wait, wait: don't at any rate do anything else.' Only it's just from the depth of my thought for my daughter's happiness that I've clung to this resource. He would so absolutely, so unreservedly do anything for her." She had reached now, with her extraordinary self-control, the pitch of quiet bland demonstration. "I want the poor thing, que diable, to have another string to her bow and another loaf, for her desolate old age, on the shelf. When everything else is gone Mitchy will still be there. Then it will be at least her own fault—!" Mrs. Brook continued. "What can relieve me of the primary duty of taking precautions," she wound up, "when I know as well as that I stand here and look at you—"

"Yes, what?" he asked as she just paused.

"Why that so far as they count on you they count, my dear Van, on a blank." Holding him a minute as with the soft low voice of his fate, she sadly but firmly shook her head. "You won't do it."

"Oh!" he almost too loudly protested.

"You won't do it," she went on.

"I SAY!"—he made a joke of it.

"You won't do it," she repeated.

It was as if he couldn't at last but show himself really struck; yet what he exclaimed on was what might in truth most have impressed him. "You ARE magnificent, really!"

"Mr. Mitchett!" the butler, appearing at the door, almost familiarly dropped; after which Vanderbank turned straight to the person announced.

Mr. Mitchett was there, and, anticipating Mrs. Brook in receiving him, her companion passed it straighten. “She’s magnificent!”

Mitchy was already all interest. “Rather! But what’s her last?”

It had been, though so great, so subtle, as they said in Buckingham Crescent, that Vanderbank scarce knew how to put it. “Well, she’s so thoroughly superior.”

“Oh to whom do you say it?” Mitchy cried as he greeted her.

II

The subject of this eulogy had meanwhile returned to her sofa, where she received the homage of her new visitor. “It’s not I who am magnificent a bit—it’s dear Mr. Longdon. I’ve just had from Van the most wonderful piece of news about him—his announcement of his wish to make it worth somebody’s while to marry my child.”

“‘Make it’?”—Mitchy stared. “But ISN’T it?”

“My dear friend, you must ask Van. Of course you’ve always thought so. But I must tell you all the same,” Mrs. Brook went on, “that I’m delighted.”

Mitchy had seated himself, but Vanderbank remained erect and became perhaps even slightly stiff. He was not angry—no member of the inner circle at Buckingham Crescent was ever angry—but he looked grave and rather troubled. “Even if it IS decidedly fine”—he addressed his hostess straight—“I can’t make out quite why you’re doing THIS—I mean immediately making it known.”

“Ah but what do we keep from Mitchy?” Mrs. Brook asked.

“What CAN you keep? It comes to the same thing,” Mitchy said. “Besides, here we are together, share and share alike—one beautiful intelligence. Mr. Longdon’s ‘somebody’ is of course Van. Don’t try to treat me as an outsider.”

Vanderbank looked a little foolishly, though it was but the shade of a shade, from one of them to the other. “I think I’ve been rather an ass!”

"What then by the terms of our friendship—just as Mitchy says—can he and I have a better right to know and to feel with you about? You'll want, Mitchy, won't you?" Mrs. Brook went on, "to hear all about THAT?"

"Oh I only mean," Vanderbank explained, "in having just now blurted my tale out to you. However, I of course do know," he pursued to Mitchy, "that whatever's really between us will remain between us. Let me then tell you myself exactly what's the matter." The length of his pause after these words showed at last that he had stopped short; on which his companions, as they waited, exchanged a sympathetic look. They waited another minute, and then he dropped into a chair where, leaning forward, his elbows on the arms and his gaze attached to the carpet, he drew out the silence. Finally he looked at Mrs. Brook. "YOU make it clear."

The appeal called up for some reason her most infantine manner. "I don't think I CAN, dear Van—really CLEAR. You know however yourself," she continued to Mitchy, "enough by this time about Mr. Longdon and mamma."

"Oh rather!" Mitchy laughed.

"And about mamma and Nanda."

"Oh perfectly: the way Nanda reminds him, and the 'beautiful loyalty' that has made him take such a fancy to her. But I've already embraced the facts—you needn't dot any i's." With another glance at his fellow visitor Mitchy jumped up and stood there florid. "He has offered you money to marry her." He said this to Vanderbank as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Oh NO" Mrs. Brook interposed with promptitude: "he has simply let him know before any one else that the money's there FOR Nanda, and that therefore—!"

"First come first served?" Mitchy had already taken her up. "I see, I see. Then to make her sure of the money," he put to Vanderbank, "you MUST marry her?"

“If it depends upon that she’ll never get it,” Mrs. Brook returned. “Dear Van will think conscientiously a lot about it, but he won’t do it.”

“Won’t you, Van, really?” Mitchy asked from the hearth-rug.

“Never, never. We shall be very kind to him, we shall help him, hope and pray for him, but we shall be at the end,” said Mrs. Brook, “just where we are now. Dear Van will have done his best, and we shall have done ours. Mr. Longdon will have done his—poor Nanda even will have done hers. But it will all have been in vain. However,” Mrs. Brook continued to expound, “she’ll probably have the money. Mr. Longdon will surely consider that she’ll want it if she doesn’t marry still more than if she does. So we shall be SO much at least,” she wound up—“I mean Edward and I and the child will be—to the good.”

Mitchy, for an equal certainty, required but an instant’s thought. “Oh there can be no doubt about THAT. The things about which your mind may now be at ease—!” he cheerfully exclaimed.

“It does make a great difference!” Mrs. Brook comfortably sighed. Then in a different tone: “What dear Van will find at the end that he can’t face will be, don’t you see? just this fact of appearing to have accepted a bribe. He won’t want, on the one hand—out of kindness for Nanda—to have the money suppressed; and yet he won’t want to have the pecuniary question mixed up with the matter: to look in short as if he had had to be paid. He’s like you, you know—he’s proud; and it will be there we shall break down.”

Mitchy had been watching his friend, who, a few minutes before perceptibly embarrassed, had quite recovered himself and, at his ease, though still perhaps with a smile a trifle strained, leaned back and let his eyes play everywhere but over the faces of the others. Vanderbank evidently wished now to show a good-humoured detachment.

“See here,” Mitchy said to him: “I remember your once submitting to me a case of some delicacy.”

“Oh he’ll submit it to you—he’ll submit it even to ME” Mrs. Brook broke in. “He’ll be charming, touching, confiding—above all he’ll be awfully INTERESTING about it. But he’ll make up his mind in his own way, and his own way won’t be to accommodate Mr. Longdon.”

Mitchy continued to study their companion in the light of these remarks, then turned upon his hostess his sociable glare. “Splendid, isn’t it, the old boy’s infatuation with him?”

Mrs. Brook just delayed. “From the point of view of the immense interest it—just now, for instance—makes for you and me? Oh yes, it’s one of our best things yet. It places him a little with Lady Fanny—‘He will, he won’t; he won’t, he will!’ Only, to be perfect, it lacks, as I say, the element of real suspense.”

Mitchy frankly wondered. “It does, you think? Not for me—not wholly.” He turned again quite pleadingly to their friend. “I hope it doesn’t for yourself totally either?”

Vanderbank, cultivating his detachment, made at first no more reply than if he had not heard, and the others meanwhile showed faces that testified perhaps less than their respective speeches had done to the absence of anxiety. The only token he immediately gave was to get up and approach Mitchy, before whom he stood a minute laughing kindly enough, though not altogether gaily. As if then for a better proof of gaiety he presently seized him by the shoulders and, still without speaking, pushed him backward into the chair he himself had just quitted. Mrs. Brook’s eyes, from the sofa, while this went on, attached themselves to her visitors. It took Vanderbank, as he moved about and his companions waited, a minute longer to produce what he had in mind. “What IS splendid, as we call it, is this extraordinary freedom and good humour of our intercourse and the fact that we do care—so independently of our personal interests, with so little selfishness or other vulgarity—to get at the idea of things. The beautiful specimen Mrs. Brook had just given me of that,” he continued to Mitchy, “was what made me break out to you about her when you came in.” He spoke to one friend, but he looked at the other. “What’s

really ‘superior’ in her is that, though I suddenly show her an interference with a favourite plan, her personal resentment’s nothing—all she wants is to see what may really happen, to take in the truth of the case and make the best of that. She offers me the truth, as she sees it, about myself, and with no nasty elation if it does chance to be the truth that suits her best. It was a charming, charming stroke.”

Mitchy’s appreciation was no bar to his amusement. “You’re wonderfully right about us. But still it was a stroke.”

If Mrs. Brook was less diverted she followed perhaps more closely. “If you do me so much justice then, why did you put to me such a cold cruel question?—I mean when you so oddly challenged me on my handing on your news to Mitchy. If the principal beauty of our effort to live together is—and quite according to your own eloquence—in our sincerity, I simply obeyed the impulse to do the sincere thing. If we’re not sincere we’re nothing.”

“Nothing!”—it was Mitchy who first responded. “But we ARE sincere.”

“Yes, we ARE sincere,” Vanderbank presently said. “It’s a great chance for us not to fall below ourselves: no doubt therefore we shall continue to soar and sing. We pay for it, people who don’t like us say, in our self-consciousness—”

“But people who don’t like us,” Mitchy broke in, “don’t matter. Besides, how can we be properly conscious of each other—?”

“That’s it!”—Vanderbank completed his idea: “without my finding myself for instance in you and Mrs. Brook? We see ourselves reflected—we’re conscious of the charming whole. I thank you,” he pursued after an instant to Mrs. Brook—“I thank you for your sincerity.”

It was a business sometimes really to hold her eyes, but they had, it must be said for her, their steady moments. She exchanged with Vanderbank a somewhat remarkable look, then, with an art of her own, broke short off without appearing to drop him. “The thing is, don’t you think?”—she appealed to

Mitchy—"for us not to be so awfully clever as to make it believed that we can never be simple. We mustn't see TOO tremendous things—even in each other." She quite lost patience with the danger she glanced at. "We CAN be simple!"

"We CAN, by God!" Mitchy laughed.

"Well, we are now—and it's a great comfort to have it settled," said Vanderbank.

"Then you see," Mrs. Brook returned, "what a mistake you'd make to see abysses of subtlety in my having been merely natural."

"We CAN be natural," Mitchy declared.

"We can, by God!" Vanderbank laughed.

Mrs. Brook had turned to Mitchy. "I just wanted you to know. So I spoke. It's not more complicated than that. As for WHY I wanted you to know—!"

"What better reason could there be," Mitchy interrupted, "than your being filled to the finger-tips with the sense of how I would want it myself, and of the misery, the absolute pathos, of my being left out? Fancy, my dear chap"—he had only to put it to Van—"my NOT knowing!".

Vanderbank evidently couldn't fancy it, but he said quietly enough: "I should have told you myself."

"Well, what's the difference?"

"Oh there IS a difference," Mrs. Brook loyally said. Then she opened an inch or two, for Vanderbank, the door of her dim radiance. "Only I should have thought it a difference for the better. Of course," she added, "it remains absolutely with us three alone, and don't you already feel from it the fresh charm—with it here between us—of our being together?"

It was as if each of the men had waited for the other to assent better than he himself could and Mitchy then, as Vanderbank failed, had gracefully, to cover him, changed the subject. "But isn't Nanda, the person most interested, to know?"

Vanderbank gave on this a strange sound of hilarity. "Ah that would finish it off!"

It produced for a few seconds something like a chill, a chill that had for consequence a momentary pause which in its turn added weight to the words next uttered. “It’s not I who shall tell her,” Mrs. Brook said gently and gravely. “There!—you may be sure. If you want a promise, it’s a promise. So that if Mr. Longdon’s silent,” she went on, “and you are, Mitchy, and I am, how in the world shall she have a suspicion?”

“You mean of course except by Van’s deciding to mention it himself.”

Van might have been, from the way they looked at him, some beautiful unconscious object; but Mrs. Brook was quite ready to answer. “Oh poor man, HE’LL never breathe.”

“I see. So there we are.”

To this discussion the subject of it had for the time nothing to contribute, even when Mitchy, rising with the words he had last uttered from the chair in which he had been placed, took sociably as well, on the hearth-rug, a position before their hostess. This move ministered apparently to Vanderbank’s mere silence, for it was still without speaking that, after a little, he turned away from his friend and dropped once more into the same seat. “I’ve shown you already, you of course remember,” Vanderbank presently said to him, “that I’m perfectly aware of how much better Mrs. Brook would like YOU for the position.”

“He thinks I want him myself,” Mrs. Brook blandly explained.

She was indeed, as they always thought her, “wonderful,” but she was perhaps not even now so much so as Mitchy found himself able to be. “But how would you lose old Van—even at the worst?” he earnestly asked of her.

She just hesitated. “What do you mean by the worst?”

“Then even at the best,” Mitchy smiled. “In the event of his falsifying your prediction; which, by the way, has the danger, hasn’t it?—I mean for your intellectual credit—of making him, as we all used to be called by our nursemaids, ‘contrairy.’”

“Oh I’ve thought of that,” Mrs. Brook returned. “But he won’t do, on the whole, even for the sweetness of spiting me, what he

won't want to do. *I* haven't said I should lose him," she went on; "that's only the view he himself takes—or, to do him perfect justice, the idea he candidly imputes to me; though without, I imagine—for I don't go so far as that—attributing to me anything so unutterably bete as a feeling of jealousy."

"You wouldn't dream of my supposing anything inept of you," Vanderbank said on this, "if you understood to the full how I keep on admiring you. Only what stupefies me a little," he continued, "is the extraordinary critical freedom—or we may call it if we like the high intellectual detachment—with which we discuss a question touching you, dear Mrs. Brook, so nearly and engaging so your private and most sacred sentiments. What are we playing with, after all, but the idea of Nanda's happiness?"

"Oh I'm not playing!" Mrs. Brook declared with a little rattle of emotion.

"She's not playing"—Mr. Mitchett gravely confirmed it. "Don't you feel in the very air the vibration of the passion that she's simply too charming to shake at the window as the housemaid shakes the tablecloth or the jingo the flag?" Then he took up what Vanderbank had previously said. "Of course, my dear man, I'm 'aware,' as you just now put it, of everything, and I'm not indiscreet, am I, Mrs. Brook? in admitting for you as well as for myself that there WAS an impossibility you and I used sometimes to turn over together. Only—Lord bless us all!—it isn't as if I hadn't long ago seen that there's nothing at all FOR me."

"Ah wait, wait!" Mrs. Brook put in. "She has a theory"—Vanderbank, from his chair, lighted it up for Mitchy, who hovered before them—"that your chance WILL come, later on, after I've given my measure."

"Oh but that's exactly," Mitchy was quick to respond, "what you'll never do! You won't give your measure the least little bit. You'll walk in magnificent mystery 'later on' not a bit less than you do today; you'll continue to have the benefit of everything that our imagination, perpetually engaged, often baffled and

never fatigued, will continue to bedeck you with. Nanda, in the same way, to the end of all her time, will simply remain exquisite, or genuine, or generous—whatever we choose to call it. It may make a difference to us, who are comparatively vulgar, but what difference will it make to HER whether you do or you don't decide for her? You can't belong to her more, for herself, than you do already—and that's precisely so much that there's no room for any one else. Where therefore, without that room, do I come in?"

"Nowhere, I see," Vanderbank seemed obligingly to muse.

Mrs. Brook had followed Mitchy with marked admiration, but she gave on this a glance at Van that was like the toss of a blossom from the same branch. "Oh then shall I just go on with you BOTH? That WILL be joy!" She had, however, the next thing, a sudden drop which shaded the picture. "You're so divine, Mitchy, that how can you not in the long-run break ANY woman down?"

It was not as if Mitchy was struck—it was only that he was courteous. "What do you call the long-run? Taking about till I'm eighty?"

"Ah your genius is of a kind to which middle life will be particularly favourable. You'll reap then somehow, one feels, everything you've sown."

Mitchy still accepted the prophecy only to control it. "Do you call eighty middle life? Why, my moral beauty, my dear woman—if that's what you mean by my genius—is precisely my curse. What on earth—is left for a man just rotten with goodness? It renders necessary the kind of liking that renders unnecessary anything else."

"Now that IS cheap paradox!" Vanderbank patiently sighed. "You're down for a fine."

It was with less of the patience perhaps that Mrs. Brook took this up. "Yes, on that we ARE stiff. Five pounds, please."

Mitchy drew out his pocket-book even though he explained. "What I mean is that I don't give out the great thing." With which he produced a crisp banknote.

"DON'T you?" asked Vanderbank, who, having taken it from him to hand to Mrs. Brook, held it a moment, delicately, to accentuate the doubt.

"The great thing's the sacred terror. It's you who give THAT out."

"Oh!"—and Vanderbank laid the money on the small stand at Mrs. Brook's elbow.

"Ain't I right, Mrs. Brook?—doesn't he, tremendously, and isn't that more than anything else what does it?"

The two again, as if they understood each other, gazed in a unity of interest at their companion, who sustained it with an air clearly intended as the happy mean between embarrassment and triumph. Then Mrs. Brook showed she liked the phrase. "The sacred terror! Yes, one feels it. It IS that."

"The finest case of it," Mitchy pursued, "that I've ever met. So my moral's sufficiently pointed."

"Oh I don't think it can be said to be that," Vanderbank returned, "till you've put the whole thing into a box by doing for Nanda what she does most want you to do."

Mitchy caught on without a shade of wonder. "Oh by proposing to the Duchess for little Aggie?" He took but an instant to turn it over. "Well, I WOULD propose—to please Nanda. Only I've never yet quite made out the reason of her wish."

"The reason is largely," his friend answered, "that, being very fond of Aggie and in fact extremely admiring her, she wants to do something good for her and to keep her from anything bad. Don't you know—it's too charming—she regularly believes in her?" Mitchy, with all his recognition, vibrated to the touch. "Isn't it too charming?"

"Well then," Vanderbank went on, "she secures for her friend a phoenix like you, and secures for you a phoenix like her friend. It's hard to say for which of you she desires most to do the handsome thing. She loves you both in short"—he followed it up—"though perhaps when one thinks of it the price she puts on you, Mitchy, in the arrangement, is a little the higher.

Awfully fine at any rate—and yet awfully odd too—her feeling for Aggie's type, which is divided by such abysses from her own."

"Ah," laughed Mitchy, "but think then of her feeling for mine!"

Vanderbank, still more at his ease now and with his head back, had his eyes aloft and far. "Oh there are things in Nanda—!" The others exchanged a glance at this, while their companion added: "Little Aggie's really the sort of creature she would have liked to be able to be."

"Well," Mitchy said, "I should have adored her even if she HAD been able."

Mrs. Brook had for some minutes played no audible part, but the acute observer we are constantly taking for granted would perhaps have detected in her, as one of the effects of the special complexion to-day of Vanderbank's presence, a certain smothered irritation. "She couldn't possibly have been able," she now interposed, "with so loose—or rather, to express it more properly, with so perverse—a mother."

"And yet, my dear lady," Mitchy promptly qualified, "how if in little Aggie's case the Duchess hasn't prevented—?"

Mrs. Brook was full of wisdom. "Well, it's a different thing. I'm not, as a mother—am I, Van?—bad ENOUGH. That's what's the matter with me. Aggie, don't you see? is the Duchess's morality, her virtue; which, by having it that way outside of you, as one may say, you can make a much better thing of. The child has been for Jane, I admit, a capital little subject, but Jane has kept her on hand and finished her like some wonderful piece of stitching. Oh as work it's of a soigne! There it is—to show. A woman like me has to be HERSELF, poor thing, her virtue and her morality. What will you have? It's our lumbering English plan."

"So that her daughter," Mitchy sympathised, "can only, by the arrangement, hope to become at the best her immorality and her vice?"

But Mrs. Brook, without an answer for the question, appeared suddenly to have plunged into a sea of thought. “The only way for Nanda to have been REALLY nice—!”

“Would have been for YOU to be like Jane?”

Mitchy and his hostess seemed for a minute, on this, to gaze together at the tragic truth. Then she shook her head. “We see our mistakes too late.” She repeated the movement, but as if to let it all go, and Vanderbank meanwhile, pulling out his watch, had got up with a laugh that showed some inattention and made to Mitchy a remark about their walking away together. Mitchy, engaged for the instant with Mrs. Brook, had assented only with a nod, but the attitude of the two men had become that of departure. Their friend looked at them as if she would like to keep one of them, and for a purpose connected somehow with the other, but was oddly, almost ludicrously, embarrassed to choose. What was in her face indeed during this short passage might prove to have been, should we penetrate, the flicker of a sense that in spite of all intimacy and amiability they could, at bottom and as things commonly turned out, only be united against her. Yet she made at the end a sort of choice in going on to Mitchy: “He hasn’t at all told you the real reason of Nanda’s idea that you should go in for Aggie.”

“Oh I draw the line there,” said Vanderbank. “Besides, he understands that too.”

Mitchy, on the spot, did himself and every one justice. “Why it just disposes of me, doesn’t it?”

It made Vanderbank, restless now and turning about the room, stop with a smile at Mrs. Brook. “We understand too well!”

“Not if he doesn’t understand,” she replied after a moment while she turned to Mitchy, “that his real ‘combination’ can in the nature of the case only be—!”

“Oh yes”—Mitchy took her straight up—“with the young thing who is, as you say, positively and helplessly modern and the pious fraud of whose classic identity with a sheet of white paper has been—ah tacitly of course, but none the less

practically!—dropped. You've so often reminded me. I do understand. If I were to go in for Aggie it would only be to oblige. The modern girl, the product of our hard London facts and of her inevitable consciousness of them just as they are—she, wonderful being, IS, I fully recognise, my real affair, and I'm not ashamed to say that when I like the individual I'm not afraid of the type. She knows too much—I don't say; but she doesn't know after all a millionth part of what *I* do."

"I'm not sure!" Mrs. Brook earnestly exclaimed.

He had rung out and he kept it up with a limpidity unusual. "And product for product, when you come to that, I'm a queerer one myself than any other. The traditions *I* smash!" Mitchy laughed.

Mrs. Brook had got up and Vanderbank had gone again to the window. "That's exactly why," she returned. "You're a pair of monsters and your monstrosity fits. She does know too much," she added.

"Well," said Mitchy with resolution, "it's all my fault."

"Not ALL—unless," Mrs. Brook returned, "that's only a sweet way of saying that it's mostly mine."

"Oh yours too—immensely; in fact every one's. Even Edward's, I dare say; and certainly, unmistakably, Harold's. Ah and Van's own—rather!" Mitchy continued; "for all he turns his back and will have nothing to say to it."

It was on the back Vanderbank turned that Mrs. Brook's eyes now rested. "That's precisely why he shouldn't be afraid of her."

He faced straight about. "Oh I don't deny my part."

He shone at them brightly enough, and Mrs. Brook, thoughtful, wistful, candid, took in for a moment the radiance. "And yet to think that after all it has been mere TALK!"

Something in her tone again made her hearers laugh out; so it was still with the air of good humour that Vanderbank answered: "Mere, mere, mere. But perhaps it's exactly the 'mere' that has made us range so wide."

Mrs. Brook's intelligence abounded. "You mean that we haven't had the excuse of passion?"

Her companions once more gave way to mirth, but "There you are!" Vanderbank said after an instant less sociably. With it too he held out his hand.

"You ARE afraid," she answered as she gave him her own; on which, as he made no rejoinder, she held him before her. "Do you mean you REALLY don't know if she gets it?"

"The money, if he DOESN'T go in?"—Mitchy broke almost with an air of responsibility into Vanderbank's silence. "Ah but, as we said, surely—!"

It was Mitchy's eyes that Vanderbank met. "Yes, I should suppose she gets it."

"Perhaps then, as a compensation, she'll even get MORE—!"

"If I don't go in? Oh!" said Vanderbank. And he changed colour.

He was by this time off, but Mrs. Brook kept Mitchy a moment. "Now—by that suggestion—he has something to show. He won't go in."

III

Her visitors had been gone half an hour, but she was still in the drawing-room when Nanda came back. The girl found her, on the sofa, in a posture that might have represented restful oblivion, but that, after a glance, our young lady appeared to interpret as mere intensity of thought. It was a condition from which at all events Mrs. Brook was quickly roused by her daughter's presence: she opened her eyes and put down her feet, so that the two were confronted as closely as persons may be when it is only one of them who looks at the other. Nanda, gazing vaguely about and not seeking a seat, slowly drew off her gloves while her mother's sad eyes considered her from top to toe. "Tea's gone," Mrs. Brook then said as if there were something in the loss peculiarly irretrievable. "But I suppose," she added, "he gave you all you want."

"Oh dear yes, thank you—I've had lots."

Nanda hovered there slim and charming, feathered and ribboned, dressed in thin fresh fabrics and faint colours, with something in the effect of it all to which the sweeter deeper melancholy in her mother's eyes seemed happily to testify. "Just turn round, dear." The girl immediately obeyed, and Mrs. Brook once more took everything in. "The back's best—only she didn't do what she said she would. How they do lie!" she gently quavered.

"Yes, but we lie so to THEM." Nanda had swung round again, producing evidently on her mother's part, by the admirable "hang" of her light skirts, a still deeper peace. "Do you mean the middle fold?—I knew she wouldn't. I don't want my back to be best—I don't walk backward."

"Yes," Mrs. Brook resignedly mused; "you dress for yourself."

"Oh how can you say that," the girl asked, "when I never stick in a pin but what I think of YOU!"

"Well," Mrs. Brook moralised, "one must always, I consider, think, as a sort of point de repere, of some one good person. Only it's best if it's a person one's afraid of. You do very well, but I'm not enough. What one really requires is a kind of salutary terror. I never stick in a pin without thinking of your Cousin Jane. What is it that some one quotes somewhere about some one's having said that 'Our antagonist is our helper—he prevents our being superficial'? The extent to which with my poor clothes the Duchess prevents ME—!" It was a measure Mrs. Brook could give only by the general soft wail of her submission to fate.

"Yes, the Duchess isn't a woman, is she? She's a standard."

The speech had for Nanda's companion, however, no effect of pleasantry or irony, and it was a mark of the special intercourse of these good friends that though they showed each other, in manner and tone, such sustained consideration as might almost have given it the stamp of diplomacy, there was yet in it also something of that economy of expression which is the result of a common experience. The recurrence of opportunity to observe them together would have taught a spectator that—on Mrs.

Brook's side doubtless more particularly—their relation was governed by two or three remarkably established and, as might have been said, refined laws, the spirit of which was to guard against the vulgarity so often coming to the surface between parent and child. That they WERE as good friends as if Nanda had not been her daughter was a truth that no passage between them might fail in one way or another to illustrate. Nanda had gathered up, for that matter, early in life, a flower of maternal wisdom: "People talk about conscience, but it seems to me one must just bring it up to a certain point and leave it there. You can let your conscience alone if you're nice to the second housemaid." Mrs. Brook was as "nice" to Nanda as she was to Sarah Curd—which involved, as may easily be imagined, the happiest conditions for Sarah. "Well," she resumed, reverting to the Duchess on a final appraisement of the girl's air, "I really think I do well by you and that Jane wouldn't have anything to say to-day. You look awfully like mamma," she then threw off as if for the first time of mentioning it.

"Oh Cousin Jane doesn't care for that," Nanda returned. "What I don't look like is Aggie, for all I try."

"Ah you shouldn't try—you can do nothing with it. One must be what one is."

Mrs. Brook was almost sententious, but Nanda, with civility, let it pass. "No one in London touches her. She's quite by herself. When one sees her one feels her to be the real thing."

Mrs. Brook, without harshness, wondered. "What do you mean by the real thing?"

Even Nanda, however, had to think a moment.

"Well, the real young one. That's what Lord Petherton calls her," she mildly joked—"'the young 'un'"

Her mother's echo was not for the joke, but for something else. "I know what you mean. What's the use of being good?"

"Oh I didn't mean that," said Nanda. "Besides, isn't Aggie of a goodness—?"

"I wasn't talking of her. I was asking myself what's the use of MY being."

“Well, you can’t help it any more than the Duchess can help—!”

“Ah but she could if she would!” Mrs. Brook broke in with a sharper ring than she had yet given. “We can’t help being good perhaps, if that burden’s laid on us—but there are lengths in other directions we’re not absolutely obliged to go. And what I think of when I stick in the pins,” she went on, “is that Jane seems to me really never to have had to pay.” She appeared for a minute to brood on this till she could no longer bear it; after which she jerked out: “Why she has never had to pay for ANYthing!”

Nanda had by this time seated herself, taking her place, under the interest of their talk, on her mother’s sofa, where, except for the removal of her long soft gloves, which one of her hands again and again drew caressingly through the other, she remained very much as if she were some friendly yet circumspect young visitor to whom Mrs. Brook had on some occasion dropped “DO come.” But there was something perhaps more expressly conciliatory in the way she had kept everything on: as if, in particular serenity and to confirm kindly Mrs. Brook’s sense of what had been done for her, she had neither taken off her great feathered hat nor laid down her parasol of pale green silk, the “match” of hat and ribbons and which had an expensive precious knob. Our spectator would possibly have found too much earnestness in her face to be sure if there was also candour. “And do you mean that YOU have had to pay—?”

“Oh yes—all the while.” With this Mrs. Brook was a little short, and also as she added as if to banish a slight awkwardness: “But don’t let it discourage you.”

Nanda seemed an instant to weigh the advice, and the whole thing would have been striking as another touch in the picture of the odd want, on the part of each, of any sense of levity in the other. Whatever escape, face to face, mother or daughter might ever seek would never be the humorous one—a circumstance, notwithstanding, that would not in every case have failed to make their interviews droll for a third person. It would always

indeed for such a person have produced an impression of tension beneath the surface. “I could have done much better at the start and have lost less time,” the girl at last said, “if I hadn’t had the drawback of not really remembering Granny.”

“Oh well, *I* remember her!” Mrs. Brook moaned with an accent that evidently struck her the next moment as so much out of place that she slightly deflected. She took Nanda’s parasol and held it as if—a more delicate thing much than any one of hers—she simply liked to have it. “Her clothes—at your age at least—must have been hideous. Was it at the place he took you to that he gave you tea?” she then went on.

“Yes, at the Museum. We had an orgy in the refreshment-room. But he took me afterwards to Tishy’s, where we had another.”

“He went IN with you?” Mrs. Brook had suddenly flashed into eagerness.

“Oh yes—I made him.”

“He didn’t want to?”

“On the contrary—very much. But he doesn’t do everything he wants,” said Nanda.

Mrs. Brook seemed to wonder. “You mean you’ve also to want it?”

“Oh no—THAT isn’t enough. What I suppose I mean,” Nanda continued, “is that he doesn’t do anything he doesn’t want. But he does quite enough,” she added.

“And who then was at Tishy’s?”

“Oh poor old Tish herself, naturally, and Carrie Donner.”

“And no one else?”

The girl just waited. “Yes, Mr. Cashmore came in.”

Her mother gave a groan of impatience. “Ah AGAIN?”

Nanda thought an instant. “How do you mean, ‘again’? He just lives there as much as he ever did, and Tishy can’t prevent him.”

“I was thinking of Mr. Longdon—of THEIR meeting. When he met him here that time he liked it so little. Did he like it any more to-day?” Mrs. Brook quavered.

“Oh no, he hated it.”

“But hadn’t he—if he should go in—known he WOULD?”

“Yes, perfectly. But he wanted to see.”

“To see—?” Mrs. Brook just threw out.

“Well, where I go so much. And he knew I wished it.”

“I don’t quite see why,” Mrs. Brook mildly observed. And then as her daughter said nothing to help her: “At any rate he did loathe it?”

Nanda, for a reply, simply after an instant put a question. “Well, how can he understand?”

“You mean, like me, why you do go there so much? How can he indeed?”

“I don’t mean that,” the girl returned—“it’s just that he understands perfectly, because he saw them all, in such an extraordinary way—well, what can I ever call it?—clutch me and cling to me.”

Mrs. Brook, with full gravity, considered this picture. “And was Mr. Cashmore to-day so ridiculous?”

“Ah he’s not ridiculous, mamma—he’s very unhappy. He thinks now Lady Fanny probably won’t go, but he feels that may be after all only the worse for him.”

“She WILL go,” Mrs. Brook answered with one of her roundabout approaches to decision. “He IS too great an idiot. She was here an hour ago, and if ever a woman was packed—!”

“Well,” Nanda objected, “but doesn’t she spend her time in packing and unpacking?”

This enquiry, however, scarce pulled up her mother. “No—though she HAS, no doubt, hitherto wasted plenty of labour. She has now a dozen boxes—I could see them there in her wonderful eyes—just waiting to be called for. So if you’re counting on her not going, my dear—!” Mrs. Brook gave a head-shake that was the warning of wisdom.

“Oh I don’t care what she does!” Nanda replied. “What I meant just now was that Mr. Longdon couldn’t understand why, with so much to make them so, they couldn’t be decently happy.”

“And did he wish you to explain?”

“I tried to, but I didn’t make it any better. He doesn’t like them. He doesn’t even care for Tish.”

“He told you so—right out?”

“Oh,” Nanda said, “of course I asked him. I didn’t press him, because I never do—!”

“You never do?” Mrs. Brook broke in as with the glimpse of a new light.

The girl showed an indulgence for this interest that was for a moment almost elderly. “I enjoy awfully with him seeing just how to take him.”

Her tone and her face evidently put forth for her companion at this juncture something freshly, even quite supremely suggestive; and yet the effect of them on Mrs. Brook’s part was only a question so off-hand that it might already often have been asked. The mother’s eyes, to ask it, we may none the less add, attached themselves closely to the daughter’s, and her face just glowed. “You like him so very awfully?”

It was as if the next instant Nanda felt herself on her guard. Yet she spoke with a certain surrender. “Well, it’s rather intoxicating to be one’s self—!” She had only a drop over the choice of her term.

“So tremendously made up to, you mean—even by a little fussy ancient man? But DOESN’T he, my dear,” Mrs. Brook continued with encouragement, “make up to you?”

A supposititious spectator would certainly on this have imagined in the girl’s face the delicate dawn of a sense that her mother had suddenly become vulgar, together with a general consciousness that the way to meet vulgarity was always to be frank and simple and above all to ignore. “He makes one enjoy being liked so much—liked better, I do think, than I’ve ever been liked by any one.”

If Mrs. Brook hesitated it was, however, clearly not because she had noticed. “Not better surely than by dear Mitchy? Or even if you come to that by Tishy herself.”

Nanda’s simplicity maintained itself. “Oh Mr. Longdon’s different from Tishy.”

Her mother again hesitated. “You mean of course he knows more?”

The girl considered it. “He doesn’t know MORE. But he knows other things. And he’s pleasanter than Mitchy.”

“You mean because he doesn’t want to marry you?”

It was as if she had not heard that Nanda continued: “Well, he’s more beautiful.”

“O-oh!” cried Mrs. Brook, with a drawn-out extravagance of comment that amounted to an impugnment of her taste even by herself.

It contributed to Nanda’s quietness. “He’s one of the most beautiful people in the world.”

Her companion at this, with a quick wonder, fixed her. “DOES he, my dear, want to marry you?”

“Yes—to all sorts of ridiculous people.”

“But I mean—would you take HIM?”

Nanda, rising, met the question with a short ironic “Yes!” that showed her first impatience. “It’s so charming being liked without being approved.”

But Mrs. Brook only wanted to know. “He doesn’t approve—?”

“No, but it makes no difference. It’s all exactly right—it doesn’t matter.”

Mrs. Brook seemed to wonder, however, exactly how these things could be. “He doesn’t want you to give up anything?” She looked as if swiftly thinking what Nanda MIGHT give up.

“Oh yes, everything.”

It was as if for an instant she found her daughter inscrutable; then she had a strange smile. “Me?”

The girl was perfectly prompt. “Everything. But he wouldn’t like me nearly so much if I really did.”

Her mother had a further pause. “Does he want to ADOPT you?” Then more quickly and sadly, though also a little as if lacking nerve to push the research: “We couldn’t give you up, Nanda.”

“Thank you so much, mamma. But we shan’t be very much tried,” Nanda said, “because what it comes to seems to be that I’m really what you may call adopting HIM. I mean I’m little by little changing him—gradually showing him that, as I couldn’t possibly have been different, and as also of course one can’t keep giving up, the only way is for him not to mind, and to take me just as I am. That, don’t you see? is what he would never have expected to do.”

Mrs. Brook recognised in a manner the explanation, but still had her wistfulness. “But—a—to take you, ‘as you are,’ WHERE?”

“Well, to the South Kensington Museum.”

“Oh!” said Mrs. Brook. Then, however, in a more exemplary tone: “Do you enjoy so very much your long hours with him?”

Nanda appeared for an instant to think how to express it. “Well, we’re great friends.”

“And always talking about Granny?”

“Oh no—really almost never now.”

“He doesn’t think so awfully much of her?” There was an oddity of eagerness in the question—a hope, a kind of dash, for something that might have been in Nanda’s interest.

The girl met these things only with obliging gravity. “I think he’s losing any sense of my likeness. He’s too used to it—or too many things that are too different now cover it up.”

“Well,” said Mrs. Brook as she took this in, “I think it’s awfully clever of you to get only the good of him and have none of the worry.”

Nanda wondered. “The worry?”

"You leave that all to ME," her mother went on, but quite forgivingly. "I hope at any rate that the good, for you, will be real."

"Real?" the girl, remaining vague, again echoed.

Mrs. Brook showed for this not perhaps an irritation, but a flicker of austerity. "You must remember we've a great many things to think about. There are things we must take for granted in each other—we must all help in our way to pull the coach. That's what I mean by worry, and if you don't have any so much the better for you. For me it's in the day's work. Your father and I have most to think about always at this time, as you perfectly know—when we have to turn things round and manage somehow or other to get out of town, have to provide and pinch, to meet all the necessities, with money, money, money at every turn running away like water. The children this year seem to fit into nothing, into nowhere, and Harold's more dreadful than he has ever been, doing nothing at all for himself and requiring everything to be done for him. He talks about his American girl, with millions, who's so awfully taken with him, but I can't find out anything about her: the only one, just now, that people seem to have heard of is the one Booby Manger's engaged to. The Mangers literally snap up everything," Mrs. Brook quite wailingly now continued: "the Jew man, so gigantically rich—who is he? Baron Schack or Schmack—who has just taken Cumberland House and who has the awful stammer—or what is it? no roof to his mouth—is to give that horrid little Algie, to do his conversation for him, four hundred a year, which Harold pretended to me that, of all the rush of young men—dozens!—HE was most in the running for. Your father's settled gloom is terrible, and I bear all the brunt of it; we get literally nothing this year for the Hovel, yet have to spend on it heaven knows what; and everybody, for the next three months, in Scotland and everywhere, has asked us for the wrong time and nobody for the right: so that I assure you I don't know where to turn—which doesn't however in the least prevent every one coming to me with their own selfish troubles." It was as if Mrs. Brook had found the cup of her secret sorrows suddenly

jostled by some touch of which the perversity, though not completely noted at the moment, proved, as she a little let herself go, sufficient to make it flow over; but she drew, the next thing, from her daughter's stillness a reflexion of the vanity of such heat and speedily recovered herself as if in order with more dignity to point the moral. "I can carry my burden and shall do so to the end; but we must each remember that we shall fall to pieces if we don't manage to keep hold of some little idea of responsibility. I positively can't arrange without knowing when it is you go to him."

"To Mr. Longdon? Oh whenever I like," Nanda replied very gently and simply.

"And when shall you be so good as to like?"

"Well, he goes himself on Saturday, and if I want I can go a few days later."

"And what day can you go if I want?" Mrs. Brook spoke as with a small sharpness—just softened indeed in time—produced by the sight of a freedom in her daughter's life that suddenly loomed larger than any freedom of her own. It was still a part of the unsteadiness of the vessel of her anxieties; but she never after all remained publicly long subject to the influence she often comprehensively designated to others as well as to herself as "nastiness." "What I mean is that you might go the same day, mightn't you?"

"With him—in the train? I should think so if you wish it."

"But would HE wish it? I mean would he hate it?"

"I don't think so at all, but I can easily ask him."

Mrs. Brook's head inclined to the chimney and her eyes to the window. "Easily?"

Nanda looked for a moment mystified by her mother's insistence. "I can at any rate perfectly try it."

"Remembering even that mamma would never have pushed so?"

Nanda's face seemed to concede even that condition. "Well," she at all events serenely replied, "I really think we're good friends enough for anything."

It might have been, for the light it quickly produced, exactly what her mother had been working to make her say. "What do you call that then, I should like to know, but his adopting you?"

"Ah I don't know that it matters much what it's called."

"So long as it brings with it, you mean," Mrs. Brook asked, "all the advantages?"

"Well yes," said Nanda, who had now begun dimly to smile—"call them advantages."

Mrs. Brook had a pause. "One would be quite ready to do that if one only knew a little more exactly what they're to consist of."

"Oh the great advantage, I feel, is doing something for HIM."

Nanda's companion, at this, hesitated afresh. "But doesn't that, my dear, put the extravagance of your surrender to him on rather an odd footing? Charity, love, begins at home, and if it's a question of merely GIVING, you've objects enough for your bounty without going so far."

The girl, as her stare showed, was held a moment by her surprise, which presently broke out. "Why, I thought you wanted me so to be nice to him!"

"Well, I hope you won't think me very vulgar," said Mrs. Brook, "if I tell you that I want you still more to have some idea of what you'll get by it. I've no wish," she added, "to keep on boring you with Mitchy—"

"Don't, don't!" Nanda pleaded.

Her mother stopped as short as if there had been something in her tone to set the limit the more utterly for being unstudied. Yet poor Mrs. Brook couldn't leave it there. "Then what do you get instead?"

"Instead of Mitchy? Oh," said Nanda, "I shall never marry."

Mrs. Brook at this turned away, moving over to the window with quickened weariness. Nanda, on her side, as if their talk had ended, went across to the sofa to take up her parasol before

leaving the room, an impulse rather favoured than arrested by the arrival of her brother Harold, who came in at the moment both his relatives had turned a back to the door and who gave his sister, as she faced him, a greeting that made their mother look round. “Hallo, Nan—you ARE lovely! Ain’t she lovely, mother?”

“No!” Mrs. Brook answered, not, however, otherwise noticing him. Her domestic despair centred at this instant all in her daughter. “Well then, we shall consider—your father and I—that he must take the consequence.”

Nanda had now her hand on the door, while Harold had dropped on the sofa. “‘He’?” she just sounded.

“I mean Mr. Longdon.”

“And what do you mean by the consequence?”

“Well, it will do for the beginning of it that you’ll please go down WITH him.”

“On Saturday then? Thanks, mamma,” the girl returned.

She was instantly gone, on which Mrs. Brook had more attention for her son. This, after an instant, as she approached the sofa and raised her eyes from the little table beside it, came straight out. “Where in the world is that five-pound note?”

Harold looked vacantly about him. “What five-pound note?”

BOOK SEVENTH. MITCHY

Mr. Longdon's garden took in three acres and, full of charming features, had for its greatest wonder the extent and colour of its old brick wall, in which the pink and purple surface was the fruit of the mild ages and the protective function, for a visitor strolling, sitting, talking, reading, that of a nurse of reverie. The air of the place, in the August time, thrilled all the while with the bliss of birds, the hum of little lives unseen and the flicker of white butterflies. It was on the large flat enclosed lawn that Nanda spoke to Vanderbank of the three weeks she would have completed there on the morrow—weeks that had been—she made no secret of it—the happiest she had yet spent anywhere. The greyish day was soft and still and the sky faintly marbled, while the more newly arrived of the visitors from London, who had come late on the Friday afternoon, lounged away the morning in an attitude every relaxed line of which referred to the holiday he had, as it were—at first merely looking about and victualling—sat down in front of as a captain before a city. There were sitting-places, just there, out of the full light, cushioned benches in the thick wide spread of old mulberry-boughs. A large book of facts lay in the young man's lap, and Nanda had come out to him, half an hour before luncheon, somewhat as Beatrice came out to Benedick: not to call him immediately indeed to the meal, but mentioning promptly that she had come at a bidding. Mr. Longdon had rebuked her, it appeared, for her want of attention to their guest, showing her in this way, to her pleasure, how far he had gone toward taking her, as he called it, into the house.

"You've been thinking of yourself," Vanderbank asked, "as a mere clerk at a salary, and you now find that you're a partner and have a share in the concern?"

"It seems to be something like that. But doesn't a partner put in something? What have I put in?"

"Well—ME, for one thing. Isn't it your being here that has brought me down?"

“Do you mean you wouldn’t have come for him alone? Then don’t you make anything of his attraction? You ought to,” said Nanda, “when he likes you so.”

Vanderbank, longing for a river, was in white flannels, and he took her question with a happy laugh, a handsome face of good humour that completed the effect of his long, cool fairness. “Do you mind my just sitting still, do you mind letting me smoke and staying with me a while? Perhaps after a little we’ll walk about—shan’t we? But face to face with this dear old house, in this jolly old nook, one’s too contented to move, lest raising a finger even should break the spell. What WILL be perfect will be your just sitting down—DO sit down—and scolding me a little. That, my dear Nanda, will deepen the peace.” Some minutes later, while, near him but in another chair, she fingered the impossible book, as she pronounced it, that she had taken from him, he came back to what she had last said. “Has he talked to you much about his ‘liking’ me?”

Nanda waited a minute, turning over the book. “No.”

“Then how are you just now so struck with it?”

“I’m not struck only with what I’m talked to about. I don’t know,” she went on, “only what people tell me.”

“Ah no—you’re too much your mother’s daughter for that!” Vanderbank leaned back and smoked, and though all his air seemed to say that when one was so at ease for gossip almost any subject would do, he kept jogging his foot with the same small nervous motion as during the half-hour at Mertle that this record has commemorated. “You’re too much one of us all,” he continued. “We’ve tremendous perceptions,” he laughed. “Of course I SHOULD have come for him. But after all,” he added, as if all sorts of nonsense would equally serve, “he mightn’t, except for you, you know, have asked me.”

Nanda so far accepted this view as to reply: “That’s awfully weak. He’s so modest that he might have been afraid of your boring yourself.”

“That’s just what I mean.”

"Well, if you do," Nanda returned, "the explanation's a little conceited."

"Oh I only made it," Vanderbank said, "in reference to his modesty." Beyond the lawn the house was before him, old, square, red-roofed, well assured of its right to the place it took up in the world. This was a considerable space—in the little world at least of Suffolk—and the look of possession had everywhere mixed with it, in the form of old windows and doors, the tone of old red surfaces, the style of old white facings, the age of old high creepers, the long confirmation of time. Suggestive of panelled rooms, of precious mahogany, of portraits of women dead, of coloured china glimmering through glass doors and delicate silver reflected on bared tables, the thing was one of those impressions of a particular period that it takes two centuries to produce. "Fancy," the young man incoherently exclaimed, "his caring to leave anything so loveable as all this to come up and live with US!"

The girl also for a little lost herself. "Oh you don't know what it is—the charm comes out so as one stays. Little by little it grows and grows. There are old things everywhere that are too delightful. He lets me explore so—he lets me rummage and rifle. Every day I make discoveries."

Vanderbank wondered as he smoked. "You mean he lets you take things—?"

"Oh yes—up to my room, to study or to copy. There are old patterns that are too dear for anything. It's when you live with them, you see, that you know. Everything in the place is such good company."

"Your mother ought to be here," Vanderbank presently suggested. "She's so fond of good company." Then as Nanda answered nothing he went on: "Was your grandmother ever?"

"Never," the girl promptly said. "Never," she repeated in a tone quite different. After which she added: "I'm the only one."

"Oh, and I 'me and you,' as they say," her companion amended.

"Yes, and Mr. Mitchy, who's to come down—please don't forget—this afternoon."

Vanderbank had another of his contemplative pauses. "Thank you for reminding me. I shall spread myself as much as possible before he comes—try to produce so much of my effect that I shall be safe. But what did Mr. Longdon ask him for?"

"Ah," said Nanda gaily, "what did he ask YOU for?"

"Why, for the reason you just now mentioned—that his interest in me is so uncontrollable."

"Then isn't his interest in Mitchy—"

"Of the same general order?" Vanderbank broke in. "Not in the least." He seemed to look for a way to express the distinction—which suddenly occurred to him. "He wasn't in love with Mitchy's mother."

"No"—Nanda turned it over. "Mitchy's mother, it appears, was awful. Mr. Cashmore knew her."

Vanderbank's smoke-puffs were profuse and his pauses frequent. "Awful to Mr. Cashmore? I'm glad to hear it—he must have deserved it. But I believe in her all the same. Mitchy's often awful himself," the young man rambled on. "Just so I believe in HIM."

"So do I," said Nanda—"and that's why I asked him."

"YOU asked him, my dear child? Have you the inviting?"

"Oh yes."

The eyes he turned on her seemed really to try if she jested or were serious. "So you arranged for me too?"

She turned over again a few leaves of his book and, closing it with something of a clap, transferred it to the bench beside him—a movement in which, as if through a drop into thought, he rendered her no assistance. "What I mean is that I proposed it to Mr. Longdon, I suggested he should be asked. I've a reason for seeing him—I want to talk to him. And do you know," the girl went on, "what Mr. Longdon said?"

"Something splendid of course."

"He asked if you wouldn't perhaps dislike his being here with you."

Vanderbank, throwing back his head, laughed, smoked, jogged his foot more than ever. "Awfully nice. Dear old Mitch! How little afraid of him you are!"

Nanda wondered. "Of Mitch?"

"Yes, of the tremendous pull he really has. It's all very well to talk—he HAS it. But of course I don't mean I don't know"—and as with the effect of his nervous sociability he shifted his position. "I perfectly see that you're NOT afraid. I perfectly know what you have in your head. I should never in the least dream of accusing you—as far as HE is concerned—of the least disposition to flirt; any more indeed," Vanderbank pleasantly pursued, "than even of any general tendency of that sort. No, my dear Nanda"—he kindly kept it up—"I WILL say for you that, though a girl, thank heaven, and awfully MUCH a girl, you're really not on the whole more of a flirt than a respectable social ideal prescribes."

"Thank you most tremendously," his companion quietly replied.

Something in the tone of it made him laugh out, and the particular sound went well with all the rest, with the August day and the charming spot and the young man's lounging figure and Nanda's own little hovering hospitality. "Of course I strike you as patronising you with unconscious sublimity. Well, that's all right, for what's the most natural thing to do in these conditions but the most luxurious? Won't Mitchy be wonderful for feeling and enjoying them? I assure you I'm delighted he's coming." Then in a different tone a moment later, "Do you expect to be here long?" he asked.

It took Nanda some time to say. "As long as Mr. Longdon will keep me, I suppose—if that doesn't sound very horrible."

"Oh he'll keep you! Only won't he himself," Vanderbank went on, "be coming up to town in the course of the autumn?"

"Well, in that case I'd perfectly stay here without him."

“And leave him in London without YOU? Ah that’s not what we want: he wouldn’t be at all the same thing without you. Least of all for himself!” Vanderbank declared.

Nanda again thought. “Yes, that’s what makes him funny, I suppose—his curious infatuation. I set him off—what do you call it?—show him off: by his going round and round me as the acrobat on the horse in the circus goes round the clown. He has said a great deal to me of your mother,” she irrelevantly added.

“Ok everything that’s kind of course, or you wouldn’t mention it.”

“That’s what I mean,” said Nanda.

“I see, I see—most charming of him.” Vanderbank kept his high head thrown back as for the view, with a bright equal general interest, of everything that was before them, whether talked of or seen. “Who do you think I yesterday had a letter from? An extraordinary funny one from Harold. He gave me all the family news.”

“And what IS the family news?” the girl after a minute enquired.

“Well, the first great item is that he himself—”

“Wanted,” Nanda broke in, “to borrow five pounds of you? I say that,” she added, “because if he wrote to you—”

“It couldn’t have been in such a case for the simple pleasure of the intercourse?” Vanderbank hesitated, but continued not to look at her. “What do you know, pray, of poor Harold’s borrowings?”

“Oh I know as I know other things. Don’t I know everything?”

“DO you? I should rather ask,” the young man gaily enough replied.

“Why should I not? How should I not? You know what I know.” Then as to explain herself and attenuate a little the sudden emphasis with which she had spoken: “I remember your once telling me that I must take in things at my pores.”

Her companion stared, but with his laugh again changed his posture. “That you’ must—?”

"That I do—and you were quite right."

"And when did I make this extraordinary charge?"

"Ah then," said Nanda, "you admit it IS a charge. It was a long time ago—when I was a little girl. Which made it worse!" she dropped.

It made it at all events now for Vanderbank more amusing. "Ah not worse—better!"

She thought a moment. "Because in that case I mightn't have understood? But that I do understand is just what you've always meant."

"'Always,' my dear Nanda? I feel somehow," he rejoined very kindly, "as if you overwhelmed me!"

"You 'feel' as if I did—but the reality is just that I don't. The day I overwhelm you, Mr. Van—!" She let that pass, however; there was too much to say about it and there was something else much simpler. "Girls understand now. It has got to be faced, as Tishy says."

"Oh well," Vanderbank laughed, "we don't require Tishy to point that out to us. What are we all doing most of the time but trying to face it?"

"Doing? Aren't you doing rather something very different? You're just trying to dodge it. You're trying to make believe—not perhaps to yourselves but to US—that it isn't so."

"But surely you don't want us to be any worse!"

She shook her head with brisk gravity. "We don't care really what you are."

His amusement now dropped to her straighter. "Your 'we' is awfully beautiful. It's charming to hear you speak for the whole lovely lot. Only you speak, you know, as if you were just the class apart that you yet complain of our—by our scruples—implying you to be."

She considered this objection with her eyes on his face. "Well then we do care. Only—!"

"Only it's a big subject."

“Oh yes—no doubt; it’s a big subject.” She appeared to wish to meet him on everything reasonable. “Even Mr. Longdon admits that.”

Vanderbank wondered. “You mean you talk over with him—!”

“The subject of girls? Why we scarcely discuss anything else.”

“Oh no wonder then you’re not bored. But you mean,” he asked, “that he recognises the inevitable change—?”

“He can’t shut his eyes to the facts. He sees we’re quite a different thing.”

“I dare say”—her friend was fully appreciative. “Yet the old thing—what do YOU know of it?”

“I personally? Well, I’ve seen some change even in MY short life. And aren’t the old books full of us? Then Mr. Longdon himself has told me.”

Vanderbank smoked and smoked. “You’ve gone into it with him?”

“As far as a man and a woman can together.”

As he took her in at this with a turn of his eye he might have had in his ears the echo of all the times it had been dropped in Buckingham Crescent that Nanda was “wonderful.” She WAS indeed. “Oh he’s of course on certain sides shy.”

“Awfully—too beautifully. And then there’s Aggie,” the girl pursued. “I mean for the real old thing.”

“Yes, no doubt—if she BE the real old thing. But what the deuce really IS Aggie?”

“Well,” said Nanda with the frankest interest, “she’s a miracle. If one could be her exactly, absolutely, without the least little mite of change, one would probably be wise to close with it. Otherwise—except for anything BUT that—I’d rather brazen it out as myself.”

There fell between them on this a silence of some minutes, after which it would probably not have been possible for either to say if their eyes had met while it lasted. This was at any rate

not the case as Vanderbank at last remarked: “Your brass, my dear young lady, is pure gold!”

“Then it’s of me, I think, that Harold ought to borrow.”

“You mean therefore that mine isn’t?” Vanderbank went on.

“Well, you really haven’t any natural ‘cheek’—not like SOME of them. You’re in yourself as uneasy, if anything’s said and every one giggles or makes some face, as Mr. Longdon, and if Lord Petherton hadn’t once told me that a man hates almost as much to be called modest as a woman does, I’d say that very often in London now you must pass some bad moments.”

The present might precisely have been one of them, we should doubtless have gathered, had we seen fully recorded in Vanderbank’s face the degree to which this prompt response embarrassed or at least stupefied him. But he could always provisionally laugh. “I like your ‘in London now’!”

“It’s the tone and the current and the effect of all the others that push you along,” she went on as if she hadn’t heard him. “If such things are contagious, as every one says, you prove it perhaps as much as any one. But you don’t begin”—she continued blandly enough to work it out for him; “or you can’t at least originally have begun. Any one would know that now—from the terrific effect I see I produce on you—by talking this way. There it is—it’s all out before one knows it, isn’t it, and I can’t help it any more than you can, can I?” So she appeared to put it to him, with something in her lucidity that would have been infinitely touching; a strange grave calm consciousness of their common doom and of what in especial in it would be worst for herself. He sprang up indeed after an instant as if he had been infinitely touched; he turned away, taking just near her a few steps to and fro, gazed about the place again, but this time without the air of particularly seeing it, and then came back to her as if from a greater distance. An observer at all initiated would, at the juncture, fairly have hung on his lips, and there was in fact on Vanderbank’s part quite the look of the man—though it lasted but just while we seize it—in suspense about himself. The most initiated observer of all would have

been poor Mr. Longdon, in that case destined, however, to be also the most defeated, with the sign of his tension a smothered "Ah if he doesn't do it NOW!" Well, Vanderbank didn't do it "now," and the odd slow irrelevant sigh he gave out might have sufficed as the record of his recovery from a peril lasting just long enough to be measured. Had there been any measure of it meanwhile for Nanda? There was nothing at least to show either the presence or the relief of anxiety in the way in which, by a prompt transition, she left her last appeal to him simply to take care of itself. "You haven't denied that Harold does borrow."

He gave a sound as of cheer for this luckily firmer ground. "My dear child, I never lent the silly boy five pounds in my life. In fact I like the way you talk of that. I don't know quite for what you take me, but the number of persons to whom I HAVE lent five pounds—!"

"Is so awfully small"—she took him up on it—"as not to look so very well for you?" She held him an instant as with the fine intelligence of his meaning in this, and then, though not with sharpness, broke out: "Why are you trying to make out that you're nasty and stingy? Why do you misrepresent—?"

"My natural generosity? I don't misrepresent anything, but I take, I think, rather markedly good care of money." She had remained in her place and he was before her on the grass, his hands in his pockets and his manner perhaps a little awkward. "The way you young things talk of it!"

"Harold talks of it—but I don't think *I* do. I'm not a bit expensive—ask mother, or even ask father. I do with awfully little—for clothes and things, and I could easily do with still less. Harold's a born consumer, as Mitchy says; he says also he's one of those people who will never really want."

"Ah for that, Mitchy himself will never let him."

"Well then, with every one helping us all round, aren't we a lovely family? I don't speak of it to tell tales, but when you mention hearing from Harold all sorts of things immediately come over me. We seem to be all living more or less on other

people, all immensely 'beholden.' You can easily say of course that I'm worst of all. The children and their people, at Bognor, are in borrowed quarters—mother got them lent her—as to which, no doubt, I'm perfectly aware that I ought to be there sharing them, taking care of my little brother and sister, instead of sitting here at Mr. Longdon's expense to expose everything and criticise. Father and mother, in Scotland, are on a grand campaign. Well"—she pulled herself up—"I'm not in THAT at any rate. Say you've lent Harold only five shillings," she went on.

Vanderbank stood smiling. "Well, say I have. I never lend any one whatever more."

"It only adds to my conviction," Nanda explained, "that he writes to Mr. Longdon."

"But if Mr. Longdon doesn't say so—?" Vanderbank objected.

"Oh that proves nothing." She got up as she spoke. "Harold also works Granny." He only laughed out at first for this, while she went on: "You'll think I make myself out fearfully deep—I mean in the way of knowing everything without having to be told. That IS, as you say, mamma's great accomplishment, so it must be hereditary. Besides, there seem to me only too many things one IS told. Only Mr. Longdon has in fact said nothing."

She had looked about responsibly—not to leave in disorder the garden-nook they had occupied; picking up a newspaper and changing the place of a cushion. "I do think that with him you're remarkable," Vanderbank observed—"putting on one side all you seem to know and on the other all he holds his tongue about. What then DOES he say?" the young man asked after a slight pause and perhaps even with a slight irritation.

Nanda glanced round again—she was folding, rather carefully, her paper. Presently her glance met their friend, who, having come out of one of the long windows that opened to the lawn, had stopped there to watch them. "He says just now that luncheon's ready."

II

"I've made him," she said in the drawing-room to Mitchy, "make Mr. Van go with him."

Mr. Longdon, in the rain, which had come on since the morning, had betaken himself to church, and his other guest, with sufficiently marked good humour, had borne him company. The windows of the drawing-room looked at the wet garden, all vivid and rich in the summer shower, and Mitchy, after seeing Vanderbank turn up his trousers and fling back a last answer to the not quite sincere chaff his submission had engendered, adopted freely and familiarly the prospect not only of a grateful freshened lawn, but of a good hour in the very pick, as he called it, of his actual happy conditions. The favouring rain, the dear old place, the charming serious house, the large inimitable room, the absence of the others, the present vision of what his young friend had given him to count on—the sense of these delights was expressed in his fixed generous glare. He was at first too pleased even to sit down; he measured the great space from end to end, admiring again everything he had admired before and protesting afresh that no modern ingenuity—not even his own, to which he did justice—could create effects of such purity. The final touch in the picture before them was just the composer's ignorance. Mr. Longdon had not made his house, he had simply lived it, and the "taste" of the place—Mitchy in certain connexions abominated the word—was just nothing more than the beauty of his life. Everything on every side had dropped straight from heaven, with nowhere a bargaining thumb-mark, a single sign of the shop. All this would have been a wonderful theme for discourse in Buckingham Crescent—so happy an exercise for the votaries of that temple of analysis that he repeatedly spoke of their experience of it as crying aloud for Mrs. Brook. The questions it set in motion for the perceptive mind were exactly those that, as he said, most made them feel themselves. Vanderbank's plea for his morning had been a pile of letters to work off, and Mitchy—then coming down, as he announced from the first, ready for anything—had gone to church with Mr. Longdon and Nanda in the finest spirit of curiosity. He now—after the girl's

remark—turned away from his view of the rain, which he found different somehow from other rain, as everything else was different, and replied that he knew well enough what she could make Mr. Longdon do, but only wondered at Mr. Longdon's secret for acting on their friend. He was there before her with his hands in his pockets and appreciation winking from every yellow spot in his red necktie. "Afternoon service of a wet Sunday in a small country town is a large order. Does Van do everything the governor wants?"

"He may perhaps have had a suspicion of what I want," Nanda explained. "If I want particularly to talk to you—!"

"He has got out of the way to give me a chance? Well then he's as usual simply magnificent. How can I express the bliss of finding myself enclosed with you in this sweet old security, this really unimagined sanctity? Nothing's more charming than suddenly to come across something sharp and fresh after we've thought there was nothing more that could draw from us a groan. We've supposed we've had it all, have squeezed the last impression out of the last disappointment, penetrated to the last familiarity in the last surprise; then some fine day we find that we haven't done justice to life. There are little things that pop up and make us feel again. What MAY happen is after all incalculable. There's just a little chuck of the dice, and for three minutes we win. These, my dear young lady, are my three minutes. You wouldn't believe the amusement I get from them, and how can I possibly tell you? There's a faint divine old fragrance here in the room—or doesn't it perhaps reach you? I shan't have lived without it, but I see now I had been afraid I should. You, on your side, won't have lived without some touch of greatness. This moment's great and you've produced it. You were great when you felt all you COULD produce. Therefore," Mitchy went on, pausing once more, as he walked, before a picture, "I won't pull the whole thing down by the vulgarity of wishing I too only had a first-rate Cotman."

"Have you given up some VERY big thing to come?" Nanda replied to this.

“What in the world is very big, my child, but the beauty of this hour? I haven’t the least idea WHAT, when I got Mr. Longdon’s note, I gave up. Don’t ask me for an account of anything; everything went—became imperceptible. I WILL say that for myself: I shed my badness, I do forget people, with a facility that makes me, for bits, for little patches, so far as they’re concerned, cease to BE; so that my life is spotted all over with momentary states in which I’m as the dead of whom nothing’s said but good.” He had strolled toward her again while she smiled at him. “I’ve died for this, Nanda.”

“The only difficulty I see,” she presently replied, “is that you ought to marry a woman really clever and that I’m not quite sure what there may be of that in Aggie.”

“In Aggie?” her friend echoed very gently. “Is THAT what you’ve sent for me for—to talk about Aggie?”

“Didn’t it occur to you it might be?”

“That it couldn’t possibly, you mean, be anything else?” He looked about for the place in which it would express the deepest surrender to the scene to sit—then sank down with a beautiful prompt submission. “I’ve no idea of what occurred to me—nothing at least but the sense that I had occurred to YOU. The occurrence is clay in the hands of the potter. Do with me what you will.”

“You appreciate everything so wonderfully,” Nanda said, “that it oughtn’t to be hard for you to appreciate HER. I do dream so you may save her. That’s why I haven’t waited.”

“The only thing that remains to me in life,” he answered, “is a certain accessibility to the thought of what I may still do to figure a little in your eye; but that’s precisely a thought you may assist to become clearer. You may for instance give me some pledge or sign that if I do figure—prance and caracole and sufficiently kick up the dust—your eye won’t suffer itself to be distracted from me. I think there’s no adventure I’m not ready to undertake for you; yet my passion—chastened, through all this, purified, austere—is still enough of this world not wholly to have renounced the fancy of some small reward.”

“How small?” the girl asked.

She spoke as if feeling she must take from him in common kindness at least as much as she would make him take, and the serious anxious patience such a consciousness gave her tone was met by Mitchy with a charmed reasonableness that his habit of hyperbole did nothing to misrepresent. He glowed at her with the fullest recognition that there was something he was there to discuss with her, but with the assurance in every soft sound of him that no height to which she might lift the discussion would be too great for him to reach. His every cadence and every motion was an implication, as from one to the other, of the exquisite. Oh he could sustain it! “Well, I mean the establishment of something between us. I mean your arranging somehow that we shall be drawn more together—know together something nobody else knows. I should like so terrifically to have a RELATION that is a secret, with you.”

“Oh if that’s all you want you can be easily gratified. Rien de plus facile, as mamma says. I’m full of secrets—I think I’m really most secretive. I’ll share almost any one of them with you—if it’s only a good one.”

Mitchy debated. “You mean you’ll choose it yourself? You won’t let it be one of mine?”

Nanda wondered. “But what’s the difference?”

Her companion jumped up again and for a moment pervaded the place. “When you say such things as that, you’re of a beauty—! MAY it,” he asked as he stopped before her, “be one of mine—a perfectly awful one?”

She showed her clearest interest. “As I suppose the most awful secrets are the best—yes, certainly.”

“I’m hideously tempted.” But he hung fire; then dropping into his chair again: “It would be too bad. I’m afraid I can’t.”

“Then why won’t THIS do, just as it is?”

“‘This’?” He looked over the big bland room. “Which?”

“Why what you’re here for?”

"My dear child I'm here—most of all—to love you more than ever; and there's an absence of favouring mystery about THAT—!" She looked at him as if seeing what he meant and only asking to remedy it. "There's a certain amount of mystery we can now MAKE—that it strikes me in fact we MUST make. Dear Mitchy," she continued almost with eagerness, "I don't think we CAN really tell."

He had fallen back in his chair, not looking at her now, and with his hands, from his supported elbows, clasped to keep himself more quiet. "Are you still talking about Aggie?"

"Why I've scarcely begun!"

"Oh!" It was not irritation he appeared to express, but the slight strain of an effort to get into relation with the subject. Better to focus the image he closed his eyes a while.

"You speak of something that may draw us together, and I simply reply that if you don't feel how near together we are—in this I shouldn't imagine you ever would. You must have wonderful notions," she presently went on, "of the ideal state of union. I pack every one off for you—I banish everything that can interfere, and I don't in the least mind your knowing that I find the consequence delightful. YOU may talk, if you like, of what will have passed between us, but I shall never mention it to a soul; literally not to a living creature. What do you want more than that?" He opened his eyes in deference to the question, but replied only with a gaze as unassisted as if it had come through a hole in a curtain. "You say you're ready for an adventure, and it's just an adventure that I propose. If I can make you feel for yourself as I feel for you the beauty of your chance to go in and save her—!"

"Well, if you can—?" Mitchy at last broke in. "I don't think, you know," he said after a moment, "you'll find it easy to make your two ends meet."

She thought a little longer. "One of the ends is yours, so that you'll act WITH me. If I wind you up so that you go—!"

"You'll just happily sit and watch me spin? Thank you! THAT will be my reward?"

Nanda rose on this from her chair as with the impulse of protest. “Shan’t you care for my gratitude, my admiration?”

“Oh yes”—Mitchy seemed to muse. “I shall care for THEM. Yet I don’t quite see, you know, what you OWE to Aggie. It isn’t as if—!” But with this he faltered.

“As if she cared particularly for ME? Ah that has nothing to do with it; that’s a thing without which surely it’s but too possible to be exquisite. There are beautiful, quite beautiful people who don’t care for me. The thing that’s important to one is the thing one sees one’s self, and it’s quite enough if *I* see what can be made of that child. Marry her, Mitchy, and you’ll see who she’ll care for!”

Mitchy kept his position; he was for the moment—his image of shortly before reversed—the one who appeared to sit happily and watch. “It’s too awfully pleasant your asking of me anything whatever!”

“Well then, as I say, beautifully, grandly save her.”

“As you say, yes”—he sympathetically inclined his head. “But without making me feel exactly what you mean by it.”

“Keep her,” Nanda returned, “from becoming like the Duchess.”

“But she isn’t a bit like the Duchess in any of her elements. She’s a totally different thing.”

It was only for an instant, however, that this objection seemed to tell. “That’s exactly why she’ll be so perfect for you. You’ll get her away—take her out of her aunt’s life.”

Mitchy met it all now in a sort of spellbound stillness. “What do you know about her aunt’s life?”

“Oh I know everything!” She spoke with her first faint shade of impatience.

It produced for a little a hush between them, at the end of which her companion said with extraordinary gentleness and tenderness: “Dear old Nanda!” Her own silence appeared consciously to continue, and the suggestion of it might have been that for intelligent ears there was nothing to add to the

declaration she had just made and which Mitchy sat there taking in as with a new light. What he drew from it indeed he presently went on to show. “You’re too awfully interesting. Of course—you know a lot. How shouldn’t you—and why?”

“‘Why’? Oh that’s another affair! But you don’t imagine what I know; I’m sure it’s much more than you’ve a notion of. That’s the kind of thing now one IS—just except the little marvel of Aggie. What on earth,” the girl pursued, “do you take us for?”

“Oh it’s all right!” breathed Mitchy, divinely pacific.

“I’m sure I don’t know whether it is; I shouldn’t wonder if it were in fact all wrong. But what at least is certainly right is for one not to pretend anything else. There I am for you at any rate. Now the beauty of Aggie is that she knows nothing—but absolutely, utterly: not the least little tittle of anything.”

It was barely visible that Mitchy hesitated, and he spoke quite gravely. “Have you tried her?”

“Oh yes. And Tishy has.” His gravity had been less than Nanda’s. “Nothing, nothing.” The memory of some scene or some passage might have come back to her with a charm. “Ah say what you will—it IS the way we ought to be!”

Mitchy, after a minute of much intensity, had stopped watching her; changing his posture and with his elbows on his knees he dropped for a while his face into his hands. Then he jerked himself to his feet. “There’s something I wish awfully I could say to you. But I can’t.”

Nanda, after a slow headshake, covered him with one of the dimmest of her smiles. “You needn’t say it. I know perfectly which it is.” She held him an instant, after which she went on: “It’s simply that you wish me fully to understand that you’re one who, in perfect sincerity, doesn’t mind one straw how awful—!”

“Yes, how awful?” He had kindled, as he paused, with his new eagerness.

“Well, one’s knowledge may be. It doesn’t shock in you a single hereditary prejudice.”

“Oh ‘hereditary’—!” Mitchy ecstatically murmured.

"You even rather like me the better for it; so that one of the reasons why you couldn't have told me—though not of course, I know, the only one—is that you would have been literally almost ashamed. Because, you know," she went on, "it IS strange."

"My lack of hereditary—?"

"Yes, discomfort in presence of the fact I speak of. There's a kind of sense you don't possess."

His appreciation again fairly goggled at her. "Oh you do know everything!"

"You're so good that nothing shocks you," she lucidly persisted. "There's a kind of delicacy you haven't got."

He was more and more struck. "I've only that—as it were—of the skin and the fingers?" he appealed.

"Oh and that of the mind. And that of the soul. And some other kinds certainly. But not THE kind."

"Yes"—he wondered—"I suppose that's the only way one can name it." It appeared to rise there before him. "THE kind!"

"The kind that would make me painful to you. Or rather not me perhaps," she added as if to create between them the fullest possible light; "but my situation, my exposure—all the results of them I show. Doesn't one become a sort of a little drain-pipe with everything flowing through?"

"Why don't you call it more gracefully," Mitchy asked, freshly struck, "a little aeolian-harp set in the drawing-room window and vibrating in the breeze of conversation?"

"Oh because the harp gives out a sound, and WE—at least we try to—give out none."

"What you take, you mean, you keep?"

"Well, it sticks to us. And that's what you don't mind!"

Their eyes met long on it. "Yes—I see. I DON'T mind. I've the most extraordinary lacunae."

"Oh I don't know about others," Nanda replied; "I haven't noticed them. But you've that one, and it's enough."

He continued to face her with his queer mixture of assent and speculation. “Enough for what, my dear? To have made me impossible for you because the only man you could, as they say, have ‘respected’ would be a man who WOULD have minded?” Then as under the cool soft pressure of the question she looked at last away from him: “The man with ‘THE kind,’ as you call it, happens to be just the type you CAN love? But what’s the use,” he persisted as she answered nothing, “in loving a person with the prejudice—hereditary or other—to which you’re precisely obnoxious? Do you positively LIKE to love in vain?”

It was a question, the way she turned back to him seemed to say, that deserved a responsible answer. “Yes.”

But she had moved off after speaking, and Mitchy’s eyes followed her to different parts of the room as, with small pretexts of present attention to it, small bestowed touches for symmetry, she slowly measured it. “What’s extraordinary then is your idea of my finding any charm in Aggie’s ignorance.”

She immediately put down an old snuff-box. “Why—it’s the one sort of thing you don’t know. You can’t imagine,” she said as she returned to him, “the effect it will produce on you. You must get really near it and see it all come out to feel all its beauty. You’ll like it, Mitchy”—and Nanda’s gravity was wonderful—“better than anything you HAVE known.”

The clear sincerity of this, even had there been nothing else, imposed a consideration that Mitchy now flagrantly could give, and the deference of his suggestion of difficulty only grew more deep. “I’m to do then, with this happy condition of hers, what you say YOU’VE done—to ‘try’ it?” And then as her assent, so directly challenged, failed an instant: “But won’t my approach to it, however cautious, be just what will break it up and spoil it?”

Nanda thought. “Why so—if mine wasn’t?”

“Oh you’re not me!”

“But I’m just as bad.”

“Thank you, my dear!” Mitchy rang out.

"Without," Nanda pursued, "being as good." She had on this, in a different key, her own sudden explosion. "Don't you see, Mitchy dear—for the very heart of it all—how good I BELIEVE you?"

She had spoken as with a flare of impatience at some justice he failed to do her, and this brought him after a startled instant close enough to her to take up her hand. She let him have it, and in mute solemn reassurance he raised it to his lips, saying to her thus more things than he could say in any other way; which yet just after, when he had released it and a motionless pause had ensued, didn't prevent his adding three words. "Oh Nanda, Nanda!"

The tone of them made her again extraordinarily gentle. "Don't 'try' anything then. Take everything for granted."

He had turned away from her and walked mechanically, with his air of blind emotion, to the window, where for a minute he looked out. "It has stopped raining," he said at last; "it's going to brighten."

The place had three windows, and Nanda went to the next. "Not quite yet—but I think it will."

Mitchy soon faced back into the room, where after a brief hesitation he moved, as quietly, almost as cautiously, as if on tiptoe, to the seat occupied by his companion at the beginning of their talk. Here he sank down watching the girl, who stood a while longer with her eyes on the garden. "You want me, you say, to take her out of the Duchess's life; but where am I myself, if we come to that, but even more IN the Duchess's life than Aggie is? I'm in it by my contacts, my associations, my indifferences—all my acceptances, knowledges, amusements. I'm in it by my cynicisms—those that circumstances somehow from the first, when I began for myself to look at life and the world, committed me to and steeped me in; I'm in it by a kind of desperation that I shouldn't have felt perhaps if you had got hold of me sooner with just this touch with which you've got hold of me to-day; and I'm in it more than all—you'll yourself admit—by the very fact that her aunt desires, as you know,

much more even than you do, to bring the thing about. Then we SHOULD be—the Duchess and I—shoulder to shoulder!"

Nanda heard him motionless to the end, taking also another minute to turn over what he had said. "What is it you like so in Lord Petherton?" she asked as she came to him.

"My dear child, if you only could tell me! It would be, wouldn't it?—it must have been—the subject of some fairy-tale, if fairy-tales were made now, or better still of some Christmas pantomime: 'The Gnome and the Giant.'"

Nanda appeared to try—not with much success—to see it. "Do you find Lord Petherton a Gnome?"

Mitchy at first, for all reward, only glared at her. "Charming, Nanda—charming!"

"A man's giant enough for Lord Petherton," she went on, "when his fortune's gigantic. He preys upon you."

His hands in his pockets and his legs much apart, Mitchy sat there as in a posture adapted to her simplicity. "You're adorable. YOU don't. But it IS rather horrid, isn't it?" he presently went on.

Her momentary silence would have been by itself enough of an answer. "Nothing—of all you speak of," she nevertheless returned, "will matter then. She'll so simplify your life." He remained just as he was, only with his eyes on her; and meanwhile she had turned again to her window, through which a faint sun-streak began to glimmer and play. At sight of it she opened the casement to let in the warm freshness. "The rain HAS stopped."

"You say you want me to save her. But what you really mean," Mitchy resumed from the sofa, "isn't at all exactly that."

Nanda, without heeding the remark, took in the sunshine. "It will be charming now in the garden."

Her friend got up, found his wonderful crossbarred cap, after a glance, on a neighbouring chair, and with it came toward her. "Your hope is that—as I'm good enough to be worth it—she'll save ME."

Nanda looked at him now. “She will, Mitchy—she WILL!”

They stood a moment in the recovered brightness; after which he mechanically—as with the pressure of quite another consciousness—put on his cap. “Well then, shall that hope between us be the thing—?”

“The thing?”—she just wondered.

“Why that will have drawn us together—to hold us so, you know—this afternoon. I mean the secret we spoke of.”

She put out to him on this the hand he had taken a few minutes before, and he clasped it now only with the firmness it seemed to give and to ask for. “Oh it will do for that!” she said as they went out together.

III

It had been understood that he was to take his leave on the morrow, though Vanderbank was to stay another day. Mr. Longdon had for the Sunday dinner invited three or four of his neighbours to “meet” the two gentlemen from town, so that it was not till the company had departed, or in other words till near bedtime, that our four friends could again have become aware, as between themselves, of that directness of mutual relation which forms the subject of our picture. It had not, however, prevented Nanda’s slipping upstairs as soon as the doctor and his wife had gone, and the manner indeed in which, on the stroke of eleven, Mr. Longdon conformed to his tradition of appropriating a particular candle was as positive an expression of it as any other. Nothing in him was more amiable than the terms maintained between the rigour of his personal habits and his free imagination of the habits of others. He deprecated as regards the former, it might have been seen, most signs of likeness, and no one had ever dared to learn how he would have handled a show of imitation. “The way to flatter him,” Mitchy threw off five minutes later, “is not to make him think you resemble or agree with him, but to let him see how different you perceive he can bear to think you. I mean of course without hating you.”

“But what interest have YOU,” Vanderbank asked, “in the way to flatter him?”

“My dear fellow, more interest than you. I haven’t been here all day without arriving at conclusions on the credit he has opened to you—!”

“Do you mean the amount he’ll settle?”

“You have it in your power,” said Mitchy, “to make it anything you like.”

“And is he then—so bloated?”

Mitchy was on his feet in the apartment in which their host had left them, and he had at first for this question but an expressive motion of the shoulders in respect to everything in the room. “See, judge, guess, feel!”

But it was as if Vanderbank, before the fire, consciously controlled his own attention. “Oh I don’t care a hang!”

This passage took place in the library and as a consequence of their having confessed, as their friend faced them with his bedroom light, that a brief discreet vigil and a box of cigars would fix better than anything else the fine impression of the day. Mitchy might at that moment, on the evidence of the eyes Mr. Longdon turned to them and of which his innocent candle-flame betrayed the secret, have found matter for a measure of the almost extreme allowances he wanted them to want of him. They had only to see that the greater window was fast and to turn out the library lamp. It might really have amused them to stand a moment at the open door that, apart from this, was to testify to his conception of those who were not, in the smaller hours, as HE was. He had in fact by his retreat—and but too sensibly—left them there with a deal of midnight company. If one of these presences was the mystery he had himself mixed the manner of our young men showed a due expectation of the others. Mitchy, on hearing how little Vanderbank “cared,” only kept up a while longer that observant revolution in which he had spent much of his day, to which any fresh sense of any exhibition always promptly committed him, and which, had it not been controlled by infinite tact, might

have affected the nerves of those in whom enjoyment was less rotary. He was silent long enough to suggest his fearing that almost anything he might say would appear too allusive; then at last once more he took his risk. “Awfully jolly old place!”

“It is indeed,” Van only said; but his posture in the large chair he had pushed toward the open window was of itself almost an opinion. The August night was hot and the air that came in charged and sweet. Vanderbank smoked with his face to the dusky garden and the dim stars; at the end of a few moments more of which he glanced round. “Don’t you think it rather stuffy with that big lamp? As those candles on the chimney are going we might put it out.”

“Like this?” The amiable Mitchy had straightway obliged his companion and he as promptly took in the effect of the diminished light on the character of the room, which he commended as if the depth of shadow produced were all this companion had sought. He might freshly have brought home to Vanderbank that a man sensitive to so many different things, and thereby always sure of something or other, could never really be incommoded; though that personage presently indeed showed himself occupied with another thought.

“I think I ought to mention to you that I’ve told him how you and Mrs. Brook now both know. I did so this afternoon on our way back from church—I hadn’t done it before. He took me a walk round to show me more of the place, and that gave me my chance. But he doesn’t mind,” Vanderbank continued. “The only thing is that I’ve thought it may possibly make him speak to you, so that it’s better you should know he knows. But he told me definitely Nanda doesn’t.”

Mitchy took this in with an attention that spoke of his already recognising how the less tempered darkness favoured talk. “And is that all that passed between you?”

“Well, practically; except of course that I made him understand, I think, how it happened that I haven’t kept my own counsel.”

"Oh but you HAVE—didn't he at least feel?—or perhaps even have done better, when you've two such excellent persons to keep it FOR you. Can't he easily believe how we feel with you?"

Vanderbank appeared for a minute to leave this appeal unheeded; he continued to stare into the garden while he smoked and swung the long leg he had thrown over the arm of the chair. When he at last spoke, however, it was with some emphasis—perhaps even with some vulgarity. "Oh rot!"

Mitchy hovered without an arrest. "You mean he CAN'T feel?"

"I mean it isn't true. I've no illusions about you. I know how you're both affected, though I of course perfectly trust you."

Mitchy had a short silence. "Trust us not to speak?"

"Not to speak to Nanda herself—though of course too if you spoke to others," Vanderbank went on, "they'd immediately rush and tell her."

"I've spoken to no one," said Mitchy. "I'm sure of it. And neither has Mrs. Brook."

"I'm glad you're sure of that also," Mitchy returned, "for it's only doing her justice."

"Oh I'm quite confident of it," said Vanderbank. "And without asking her?"

"Perfectly."

"And you're equally sure, without asking, that *I* haven't betrayed you?" After which, while, as if to let the question lie there in its folly, Vanderbank said nothing, his friend pursued: "I came, I must tell you, terribly near it to-day."

"Why must you tell me? Your coming 'near' doesn't concern me, and I take it you don't suppose I'm watching or sounding you. Mrs. Brook will have come terribly near," Vanderbank continued as if to make the matter free; "but she won't have done it either. She'll have been distinctly tempted—!"

"But she won't have fallen?" Mitchy broke in. "Exactly—there we are. *I* was distinctly tempted and I didn't fall. I think your

certainty about Mrs. Brook," he added, "shows you do know her. She's incapable of anything deliberately nasty."

"Oh of anything nasty in any way," Vanderbank said musingly and kindly.

"Yes; one knows on the whole what she WON'T do." After which, for a period, Mitchy roamed and reflected. "But in spite of the assurance given you by Mr. Longdon—or perhaps indeed just because of your having taken it—I think I ought to mention to you my belief that Nanda does know of his offer to you. I mean by having guessed it."

"Oh!" said Vanderbank.

"There's in fact more still," his companion pursued—"that I feel I should like to mention to you."

"Oh!" Vanderbank at first only repeated. But after a moment he said: "My dear fellow, I'm much obliged."

"The thing I speak of is something I should at any rate have said, and I should have looked out for some chance if we had not had this one." Mitchy spoke as if his friend's last words were not of consequence, and he continued as Vanderbank got up and, moving rather aimlessly, came and stood with his back to the chimney. "My only hesitation would have been caused by its entailing our going down into things in a way that, face to face—given the private nature of the things—I dare say most men don't particularly enjoy. But if you don't mind—!"

"Oh I don't mind. In fact, as I tell you, I recognise an obligation to you." Vanderbank, with his shoulders against the high mantel, uttered this without a direct look; he smoked and smoked, then considered the tip of his cigar. "You feel convinced she knows?" he threw out.

"Well, it's my impression."

"Ah any impression of yours—of that sort—is sure to be right. If you think I ought to have it from you I'm really grateful. Is that—a—what you wanted to say to me?" Vanderbank after a slight pause demanded.

Mitchy, watching him more than he watched Mitchy, shook a mildly decisive head. "No."

Vanderbank, his eyes on his smoke-puffs, seemed to wonder. “What you wanted is—something else?”

“Something else.”

“Oh!” said Vanderbank for the third time.

The ejaculation had been vague, but the movement that followed it was definite; the young man, turning away, found himself again near the chair he had quitted, and resumed possession of it as a sign of being at his friend’s service. This friend, however, not only hung fire but finally went back to take a shot from a quarter they might have been supposed to have left. “It strikes me as odd his imagining—awfully acute as he is—that she has NOT guessed. One wouldn’t have thought he could live with her here in such an intimacy—seeing her every day and pretty much all day—and make such a mistake.”

Vanderbank, his great length all of a lounge again, turned it over. “And yet I do thoroughly feel the mistake’s not yours.”

Mitchy had a new serenity of affirmation. “Oh it’s not mine.”

“Perhaps then”—it occurred to his friend—“he doesn’t really believe it.”

“And only says so to make you feel more easy?”

“So that one may—in fairness to one’s self—keep one’s head, as it were, and decide quite on one’s own grounds.”

“Then you HAVE still to decide?”

Vanderbank took time to answer. “I’ve still to decide.” Mitchy became again on this, in the sociable dusk, a slow-circling vaguely-agitated element, and his companion continued: “Is your idea very generously and handsomely to help that by letting me know—?”

“That I do definitely renounce”—Mitchy took him up—“any pretension and any hope? Well, I’m ready with a proof of it. I’ve passed my word that I’ll apply elsewhere.”

Vanderbank turned more round to him. “Apply to the Duchess for her niece?”

“It’s practically settled.”

“But since when?”

Mitchy barely faltered. “Since this afternoon.”

“Ah then not with the Duchess herself.”

“With Nanda—whose plan from the first, you won’t have forgotten, the thing has so charmingly been.”

Vanderbank could show that his not having in the least forgotten was yet not a bar to his being now mystified. “But, my dear man, what can Nanda ‘settle’?”

“My fate,” Mitchy said, pausing well before him.

Vanderbank sat now a minute with raised eyes, catching the indistinctness of the other’s strange expression. “You’re both beyond me!” he exclaimed at last. “I don’t see what you in particular gain.”

“I didn’t either till she made it all out to me. One sees then, in such a matter, for one’s self. And as everything’s gain that isn’t loss, there was nothing I COULD lose. It gets me,” Mitchy further explained, “out of the way.”

“Out of the way of what?”

This, Mitchy frankly showed, was more difficult to say, but he in time brought it out. “Well, of appearing to suggest to you that my existence, in a prolonged state of singleness, may ever represent for her any real alternative.”

“But alternative to what?”

“Why to being YOUR wife, damn you!” Mitchy, on these words turned away again, and his companion, in the presence of his renewed dim gyrations, sat for a minute dumb. Before Van had spoken indeed he was back again. “Excuse my violence, but of course you really see.”

“I’m not pretending anything,” Vanderbank said—“but a man MUST understand. What I catch hold of is that you offer me—in the fact that you’re thus at any rate disposed of—a proof that I, by the same token, shan’t, if I hesitate to ‘go in,’ have a pretext for saying to myself that I MAY deprive her—!”

“Yes, precisely,” Mitchy now urbanely assented: “of something—in the shape of a man with MY amount of money—that she may live to regret and to languish for. My

amount of money, don't you see?" he very simply added, "is nothing to her."

"And you want me to be sure that—so far as I may ever have had a scruple—she has had her chance and got rid of it."

"Completely," Mitchy smiled.

"Because"—Vanderbank with the aid of his cigar thoughtfully pieced it out—"that may possibly bring me to the point."

"Possibly!" Mitchy laughed.

He had stood a moment longer, almost as if to see the possibility develop before his eyes, and had even started at the next sound of his friend's voice. What Vanderbank in fact brought out, however, only made him turn his back. "Do you like so very much little Aggie?"

"Well," said Mitchy, "Nanda does. And I like Nanda."

"You're too amazing," Vanderbank mused. His musing had presently the effect of making him rise; meditation indeed beset him after he was on his feet. "I can't help its coming over me then that on such an extraordinary system you must also rather like ME."

"What will you have, my dear Van?" Mitchy frankly asked. "It's the sort of thing you must be most used to. For at the present moment—look!—aren't we all at you at once?"

It was as if his dear Van had managed to appear to wonder. "'All'?"

"Nanda, Mrs. Brook, Mr. Longdon—!"

"And you. I see."

"Names of distinction. And all the others," Mitchy pursued, "that I don't count."

"Oh you're the best."

"I?"

"You're the best," Vanderbank simply repeated. "It's at all events most extraordinary," he declared. "But I make you out on the whole better than I do Mr. Longdon."

"Ah aren't we very much the same—simple lovers of life? That is of that finer essence of it which appeals to the consciousness—"

"The consciousness?"—his companion took up his hesitation.

"Well, enlarged and improved."

The words had made on Mitchy's lips an image by which his friend appeared for a moment held. "One doesn't really know quite what to say or to do."

"Oh you must take it all quietly. You're of a special class; one of those who, as we said the other day—don't you remember?—are a source of the sacred terror. People made in such a way must take the consequences; just as people must take them," Mitchy went on, "who are made as *I* am. So cheer up!"

Mitchy, uttering this incitement, had moved to the empty chair by the window, in which he presently was sunk; and it might have been in emulation of his previous strolling and straying that Vanderbank himself now began to revolve. The meditation he next threw out, however, showed a certain resistance to Mitchy's advice. "I'm glad at any rate I don't deprive her of a fortune."

"You don't deprive her of mine of course," Mitchy answered from the chair; "but isn't her enjoyment of Mr. Longdon's at least a good deal staked after all on your action?"

Vanderbank stopped short. "It's his idea to settle it ALL?"

Mitchy gave out his glare. "I thought you didn't 'care a hang.' I haven't been here so long," he went on as his companion at first retorted nothing, "without making up my mind for myself about his means. He IS distinctly bloated."

It sent Vanderbank off again. "Oh well, she'll no more get all in the one event than she'll get nothing in the other. She'll only get a sort of provision. But she'll get that whatever happens."

"Oh if you're sure—!" Mitchy simply commented.

"I'm not sure, confound it!" Then—for his voice had been irritated—Van spoke more quietly. "Only I see her here—though

on his wish of course—handling things quite as if they were her own and paying him a visit without, apparently, any calculable end. What's that on HIS part but a pledge?"

Oh Mitchy could show off-hand that he knew what it was. "It's a pledge, quite as much, to you. He shows you the whole thing. He likes you not a whit less than he likes her."

"Oh thunder!" Van impatiently sighed.

"It's as 'rum' as you please, but there it is," said the inexorable Mitchy.

"Then does he think I'll do it for THIS?"

"For 'this'?"

"For the place, the whole thing, as you call it, that he shows me."

Mitchy had a short silence that might have represented a change of colour. "It isn't good enough?" But he instantly took himself up. "Of course he wants—as I do—to treat you with tact!"

"Oh it's all right," Vanderbank immediately said. "Your 'tact'—yours and his—is marvellous, and Nanda's greatest of all."

Mitchy's momentary renewal of stillness was addressed, he somehow managed not obscurely to convey, to the last clause of his friend's speech. "If you're not sure," he presently resumed, "why can't you frankly ask him?"

Vanderbank again, as the phrase is, "mooned" about a little. "Because I don't know that it would do."

"What do you mean by 'do'?"

"Well, that it would be exactly—what do you call it?—'square.' Or even quite delicate or decent. To take from him, in the way of an assurance so handsomely offered, so much, and then to ask for more: I don't feel I can do it. Besides, I've my little conviction. To the question itself he might easily reply that it's none of my business."

"I see," Mitchy dropped. "Such pressure might suggest to him moreover that you're hesitating more than you perhaps really are."

"Oh as to THAT" said Vanderbank, "I think he practically knows how much."

"And how little?" He met this, however, with no more form than if it had been a poor joke, so that Mitchy also smoked for a moment in silence. "It's your coming down here, you mean, for these three or four days, that will have fixed it?"

The question this time was one to which the speaker might have expected an answer, but Vanderbank's only immediate answer was to walk and walk. "I want so awfully to be kind to her," he at last said.

"I should think so!" Then with irrelevance Mitchy harked back. "Shall *I* find out?"

But Vanderbank, with another thought, had lost the thread. "Find out what?"

"Why if she does get anything—!"

"If I'm not kind ENOUGH?"—Van had caught up again. "Dear no; I'd rather you shouldn't speak unless first spoken to."

"Well, HE may speak—since he knows we know."

"It isn't likely, for he can't make out why I told you."

"You didn't tell ME, you know," said Mitchy. "You told Mrs. Brook."

"Well, SHE told you, and her talking about it is the unpleasant idea. He can't get her down anyhow."

"Poor Mrs. Brook!" Mitchy meditated.

"Poor Mrs. Brook!" his companion echoed.

"But I thought you said," he went on, "that he doesn't mind."

"YOUR knowing? Well, I dare say he doesn't. But he doesn't want a lot of gossip and chatter."

"Oh!" said Mitchy with meekness.

"I may absolutely take it from you then," Vanderbank presently resumed, "that Nanda has her idea?"

"Oh she didn't tell me so. But it's none the less my belief."

"Well," Vanderbank at last threw off, "I feel it for myself. If only because she always knows everything," he pursued without looking at Mitchy. "She always knows everything, everything."

"Everything, everything." Mitchy got up.

"She told me so herself yesterday," said Van.

"And she told ME so to-day."

Vanderbank's hesitation might have shown he was struck with this. "Well, I don't think it's information that either of us required. But of course she—can't help it," he added. "Everything, literally everything, in London, in the world she lives in, is in the air she breathes—so that the longer SHE'S in it the more she'll know."

"The more she'll know, certainly," Mitchy acknowledged. "But she isn't in it, you see, down here."

"No. Only she appears to have come down with such accumulations. And she won't be here for ever," Vanderbank hastened to mention. "Certainly not if you marry her."

"But isn't that at the same time," Vanderbank asked, "just the difficulty?"

Mitchy looked vague. "The difficulty?"

"Why as a married woman she'll be steeped in it again."

"Surely"—oh Mitchy could be candid! "But the difference will be that for a married woman it won't matter. It only matters for girls," he plausibly continued—"and then only for those on whom no one takes pity."

"The trouble is," said Vanderbank—but quite as if uttering only a general truth—"that it's just a thing that may sometimes operate as a bar to pity. Isn't it for the non-marrying girls that it doesn't particularly matter? For the others it's such an odd preparation."

"Oh I don't mind it!" Mitchy declared.

Vanderbank visibly demurred. "Ah but your choice—!"

"Is such a different sort of thing?" Mitchy, for the half-hour, in the ambiguous dusk, had never looked more droll. "The young lady I named isn't my CHOICE."

“Well then, that’s only a sign the more that you do these things more easily.”

“Oh ‘easily’!” Mitchy murmured.

“We oughtn’t at any rate to keep it up,” said Vanderbank, who had looked at his watch. “Twelve twenty-five—good-night. Shall I blow out the candles?”

“Do, please. I’ll close the window”—and Mitchy went to it. “I’ll follow you—good-night.” The candles after a minute were out and his friend had gone, but Mitchy, left in darkness face to face with the vague quiet garden, still stood there.

BOOK EIGHTH. TISHY GRENDON

I

The footman, opening the door, mumbled his name without sincerity, and Vanderbank, passing in, found in fact—for he had caught the symptom—the chairs and tables, the lighted lamps and the flowers alone in possession. He looked at his watch, which exactly marked eight, then turned to speak again to the servant, who had, however, without another sound and as if blushing for the house, already closed him in. There was nothing indeed but Mrs. Grendon's want of promptness that failed of a welcome: her drawing-room, on the January night, showed its elegance through a suffusion of pink electricity which melted, at the end of the vista, into the faintly golden glow of a retreat still more sacred. Vanderbank walked after a moment into the second room, which also proved empty and which had its little globes of white fire—discreetly limited in number—coated with lemon-coloured silk. The walls, covered with delicate French mouldings, were so fair that they seemed vaguely silvered; the low French chimney had a French fire. There was a lemon-coloured stuff on the sofa and chairs, a wonderful polish on the floor that was largely exposed, and a copy of a French novel in blue paper on one of the spindle-legged tables. Vanderbank looked about him an instant as if generally struck, then gave himself to something that had particularly caught his eye. This was simply his own name written rather large on the cover of the French book and endowed, after he had taken the volume up, with the power to hold his attention the more closely the longer he looked at it. He uttered, for a private satisfaction, before letting the matter pass, a low confused sound; after which, flinging the book down with some emphasis in another place, he moved to the chimney-piece, where his eyes for a little intently fixed the small ashy wood-fire. When he raised them again it was, on the observation that the beautiful clock on the mantel was wrong, to consult once more his watch and then give a glance, in the

chimney-glass, at the state of his moustache, the ends of which he twisted for a moment with due care. While so engaged he became aware of something else and, quickly facing about, recognised in the doorway of the room the other figure the glass had just reflected.

"Oh YOU?" he said with a quick handshake. "Mrs. Grendon's down?" But he had already passed with Nanda, on their greeting, back into the first room, which contained only themselves, and she had mentioned that she believed Tishy to have said 8.15, which meant of course anything people liked.

"Oh then there'll be nobody till nine. I didn't, I suppose, sufficiently study my note; which didn't mention to me, by the way," Vanderbank added, "that you were to be here."

"Ah but why SHOULD it?" Nanda spoke again, however, before he could reply. "I dare say that when she wrote to you she didn't know."

"Know you'd come bang up to meet me?" Vanderbank laughed. "Jolly at any rate, thanks to my mistake, to have in this way a quiet moment with you. You came on ahead of your mother?"

"Oh no—I'm staying here."

"Oh!" said Vanderbank.

"Mr. Longdon came up with me—I came here, Friday last, straight."

"You parted at the door?" he asked with marked gaiety.

She thought a moment—she was more serious. "Yes—but only for a day or two. He's coming tonight."

"Good. How delightful!"

"He'll be glad to see you," Nanda said, looking at the flowers.

"Awfully kind of him when I've been such a brute."

"How—a brute?"

"Well, I mean not writing—nor going back."

"Oh I see," Nanda simply returned.

It was a simplicity that, clearly enough, made her friend a little awkward. “Has he—a—minded? Hut he can’t have complained!” he quickly added.

“Oh he never complains.”

“No, no—it isn’t in him. But it’s just that,” said Vanderbank, “that makes one feel so base. I’ve been ferociously busy.”

“He knows that—he likes it,” Nanda returned. “He delights in your work. And I’ve done what I can for him.”

“Ah,” said her companion, “you’ve evidently brought him round. I mean to this lady.”

“To Tishy? Oh of course I can’t leave her—with nobody.”

“No”—Vanderbank became jocose again—“that’s a London necessity. You can’t leave anybody with nobody—exposed to everybody.”

Mild as it was, however, Nanda missed the pleasantry. “Mr. Grendon’s not here.”

“Where is he then?”

“Yachting—but she doesn’t know.”

“Then she and you are just doing this together?”

“Well,” said Nanda, “she’s dreadfully frightened.”

“Oh she mustn’t allow herself,” he returned, “to be too much carried away by it. But we’re to have your mother?”

“Yes, and papa. It’s really for Mitchy and Aggie,” the girl went on—“before they go abroad.”

“Ah then I see what you’ve come up for! Tishy and I aren’t in it. It’s all for Mitchy.”

“If you mean there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for him you’re quite right. He has always been of a kindness to me—!”

“That culminated in marrying your friend?” Vanderbank asked. “It was charming certainly, and I don’t mean to diminish the merit of it. But Aggie herself, I gather, is of a charm now—!”

“Isn’t she?”—Nanda was eager. “Hasn’t she come out?”

“With a bound—into the arena. But when a young person’s out with Mitchy—!”

"Oh you mustn't say anything against that. I've been out with him myself."

"Ah but my dear child—!" Van frankly argued.

It was not, however, a thing to notice. "I knew it would be just so. It always is when they've been like that."

"Do you mean as she apparently WAS? But doesn't it make one wonder a little IF she was?"

"Oh she was—I know she was. And we're also to have Harold," Nanda continued—"another of Mitchy's beneficiaries. It WOULD be a banquet, wouldn't it? if we were to have them all."

Vanderbank hesitated, and the look he fixed on the door might have suggested a certain open attention to the arrival of their hostess or the announcement of other guests. "If you haven't got them all, the beneficiaries, you've got, in having me, I should suppose, about the biggest."

"Ah what has he done for you?" Nanda asked.

Again her friend hung fire. "Do you remember something you said to me down there in August?"

She looked vague but quite unembarrassed. "I remember but too well that I chattered."

"You declared to me that you knew everything."

"Oh yes—and I said so to Mitchy too."

"Well, my dear child, you don't."

"Because I don't know—?"

"Yes, what makes ME the victim of his insatiable benevolence."

"Ah well, if you've no doubt of it yourself that's all that's required. I'm quite GLAD to hear of something I don't know," Nanda pursued. "And we're to have Harold too," she repeated.

"As a beneficiary? Then we SHALL fill up! Harold will give us a stamp."

"Won't he? I hear of nothing but his success. Mother wrote me that people are frantic for him; and," said the girl after an instant, "do you know what Cousin Jane wrote me?"

"What WOULD she now? I'm trying to think."

Nanda relieved him of this effort. "Why that mother has transferred to him all the scruples she felt—'even to excess'—in MY time, about what we might pick up among you all that wouldn't be good for us."

"That's a neat one for ME!" Vanderbank declared. "And I like your talk about your antediluvian 'time.'"

"Oh it's all over."

"What exactly is it," Vanderbank presently demanded, "that you describe in that manner?"

"Well, my little hour. And the danger of picking up."

"There's none of it here?"

Nanda appeared frankly to judge. "No—because, really, Tishy, don't you see? is natural. We just talk."

Vanderbank showed his interest. "Whereas at your mother's—?"

"Well, you were all afraid."

Vanderbank laughed straight out. "Do you mind my telling her that?"

"Oh she knows it. I've heard her say herself you were."

"Ah *I* was," he concurred. "You know we've spoken of that before."

"I'm speaking now of all of you," said Nanda. "But it was she who was most so, for she tried—I know she did, she told me so—to control you. And it was when, you were most controlled—!"

Van's amusement took it up. "That we were most detrimental?"

"Yes, because of course what's so awfully unutterable is just what we most notice. Tishy knows that," Nanda wonderfully observed.

As the reflexion of her tone might have been caught by an observer in Vanderbank's face it was in all probability caught by his interlocutress, who superficially, however, need have recognised there—what was all she showed—but the right

manner of waiting for dinner. “The better way then is to dash right in? That’s what our friend here does?”

“Oh you know what she does!” the girl replied as with a sudden drop of interest in the question. She turned at the moment to the opening of the door.

It was Tishy who at last appeared, and her guest had his greeting ready. “We’re talking of the delicate matters as to which you think it’s better to dash right in; but I’m bound to say your inviting a hungry man to dinner doesn’t appear to be one of them.”

The sign of Tishy Grendon—as it had been often called in a society in which variety of reference had brought to high perfection, for usual safety, the sense of signs—was a retarded facial glimmer that, in respect to any subject, closed up the rear of the procession. It had been said of her indeed that when processions were at all rapid she was usually to be found, on a false impression of her whereabouts, mixed up with the next; so that now, for instance, by the time she had reached the point of saying to Vanderbank “Are you REALLY hungry?” Nanda had begun to appeal to him for some praise of their hostess’s appearance. This was of course with soft looks up and down at her clothes. “Isn’t she too nice? Did you ever see anything so lovely?”

“I’m so faint with inanition,” Van replied to Mrs. Grendon, “that—like the traveller in the desert, isn’t it?—I only make out, as an oasis or a mirage, a sweet green rustling blur. I don’t trust you.”

“I don’t trust YOU,” Nanda said on her friend’s behalf. “She isn’t ‘green’—men are amazing: they don’t know the dearest old blue that ever was seen.”

“IS it your ‘OLD blue’?” Vanderbank, monocular, very earnestly asked. “I can imagine it was ‘dear,’ but I should have thought—!”

“It was yellow”—Nanda helped him out—“if I hadn’t kindly told you.” Tishy’s figure showed the confidence of objects consecrated by publicity; bodily speaking a beautiful human

plant, it might have taken the last November gale to account for the completeness with which, in some quarters, she had shed her leaves. Her companions could only emphasise by the direction of their eyes the nature of the responsibility with which a spectator would have seen them saddled—a choice, as to consciousness, between the effect of her being and the effect of her not being dressed. “Oh I’m hideous—of course I know it,” said Tishy. “I’m only just clean. Here’s Nanda now, who’s beautiful,” she vaguely continued, “and Nanda—”

“Oh but, darling, Nanda’s clean too!” the young lady in question interrupted; on which her fellow guest could only laugh with her as in relief from the antithesis of which her presence of mind had averted the completion, little indeed as in Mrs. Grendon’s talk that element of style was usually involved.

“There’s nothing in such a matter,” Vanderbank observed as if it were the least he could decently say, “like challenging enquiry; and here’s Harold, precisely,” he went on in the next breath, “as clear and crisp and undefiled as a fresh five-pound note.”

“A fresh one?”—Harold had passed in a flash from his hostess. “A man who like me hasn’t seen one for six months could perfectly do, I assure you, with one that has lost its what-do-you-call it.” He kissed Nanda with a friendly peck, then, more completely aware, had a straighter apprehension for Tishy. “My dear child, YOU seem to have lost something, though I’ll say for you that one doesn’t miss it.”

Mrs. Grendon looked from him to Nanda. “Does he mean anything very nasty? I can only understand you when Nanda explains,” she returned to Harold. “In fact there’s scarcely anything I understand except when Nanda explains. It’s too dreadful her being away so much now with strange people, whom I’m sure she can’t begin to do for what she does for me; it makes me miss her all round. And the only thing I’ve come across that she CAN’T explain,” Tishy bunched straight at her friend, “is what on earth she’s doing there.”

"Why she's working Mr. Longdon, like a good fine girl," Harold said; "like a good true daughter and even, though she doesn't love me nearly so much as I love HER, I will say, like a good true sister. I'm bound to tell you, my dear Tishy," he went on, "that I think it awfully happy, with the trend of manners, for any really nice young thing to be a bit lost to sight. London, upon my honour, is quite too awful for girls, and any big house in the country is as much worse—with the promiscuities and opportunities and all that—as you know for yourselves. *I* know some places," Harold declared, "where, if I had any girls, I'd see 'em shot before I'd take 'em."

"Oh you know too much, my dear boy!" Vanderbank remarked with commiseration.

"Ah my brave old Van," the youth returned, "don't speak as if YOU had illusions. I know," he pursued to the ladies, "just where some of Van's must have perished, and some of the places I've in mind are just where he has left his tracks. A man must be wedded to sweet superstitions not nowadays to HAVE to open his eyes. Nanda love," he benevolently concluded, "stay where you are. So at least I shan't blush for you. That you've the good fortune to have reached your time of life with so little injury to your innocence makes you a case by yourself, of which we must recognise the claims. If Tishy can't make you gasp, that's nothing against you nor against HER—Tishy comes of one of the few innocent English families that are left. Yes, you may all cry 'Oho!'—but I defy you to name me say five, or at most seven, in which some awful thing or other hasn't happened. Of course ours is one, and Tishy's is one, and Van's is one, and Mr. Longdon's is one, and that makes you, bang off, four. So there you are!" Harold gaily wound up.

"I see now why he's the rage!" Vanderbank observed to Nanda.

But Mrs. Grendon expressed to their young friend a lingering wonder. "Do you mean you go in for the adoption—?"

"Oh Tishy!" Nanda mildly murmured.

Harold, however, had his own tact. “The dear man’s taking her quite over? Not altogether unreservedly. I’m with the governor: I think we ought to GET something. ‘Oh yes, dear man, but what do you GIVE us for her?’—that’s what *I* should say to him. I mean, don’t you know, that I don’t think she’s making quite the bargain she might. If he were to want ME I don’t say he mightn’t have me, but I should have it on my conscience to make it in one way or another a good thing for my parents. You ARE nice, old woman”—he turned to his sister—“and one can still feel for the flower of your youth something of the wonderful ‘reverence’ that we were all brought up on. For God’s sake therefore—all the more—don’t really close with him till you’ve had another word or two with me. I’ll be hanged”—he appealed to the company again—“if he shall have her for nothing!”

“See rather,” Vanderbank said to Mrs. Grendon, “how little it’s like your really losing her that she should be able this evening fairly to bring the dear man to you. At this rate we don’t lose her—we simply get him as well.”

“Ah but is it quite the dear man’s COMPANY we want?”—and Harold looked anxious and acute. “If that’s the best arrangement Nanda can make—!”

“If he hears us talking in this way, which strikes me as very horrible,” Nanda interposed very simply and gravely, “I don’t think we’re likely to get anything.”

“Oh Harold’s talk,” Vanderbank protested, “offers, I think, an extraordinary interest; only I’m bound to say it crushes me to the earth. I’ve to make at least, as I listen to him, a big effort to bear up. It doesn’t seem long ago,” he pursued to his young friend, “that I used to feel I was in it; but the way you bring home to me, dreadful youth, that I’m already NOT—!”

Harold looked earnest to understand. “The hungry generations tread you down—is that it?”

Vanderbank gave a pleasant tragic headshake. “We speak a different language.”

“Ah but I think I perfectly understand yours!”

"That's just my anguish—and your advantage. It's awfully curious," Vanderbank went on to Nanda, "but I feel as if I must figure to him, you know, very much as Mr. Longdon figures to me. Mr. Longdon doesn't somehow get into me. Yet I do, I think, into him. But we don't matter!"

"'We'?"—Nanda, with her eyes on him, echoed it.

"Mr. Longdon and I. It can't be helped, I suppose," he went on, for Tishy, with sociable sadness, "but it IS short innings."

Mrs. Grendon, who was clearly credulous, looked positively frightened. "Ah but, my dear, thank you! I haven't begun to LIVE."

"Well, *I* have—that's just where it is," said Harold. "Thank you all the more, old Van, for the tip."

There was an announcement just now at the door, and Tishy turned to meet the Duchess, with Harold, almost as if he had been master of the house, figuring but a step behind her. "Don't mind HER," Vanderbank immediately said to the companion with whom he was left, "but tell me, while I still have hold of you, who wrote my name on the French novel that I noticed a few minutes since in the other room?"

Nanda at first only wondered. "If it's there—didn't YOU?"

He just hesitated. "If it were here you'd see if it's my hand."

Nanda faltered, and for somewhat longer. "How should I see? What do I know of your hand?"

He looked at her hard. "You HAVE seen it."

"Oh—so little!" she replied with a faint smile.

"Do you mean I've not written to you for so long? Surely I did in—when was it?"

"Yes, when? But why SHOULD you?" she asked in quite a different tone.

He was not prepared on this with the right statement, and what he did after a moment bring out had for the occasion a little the sound of the wrong. "The beauty of YOU is that you're too good; which for me is but another way of saying you're too clever. You make no demands. You let things go. You don't

allow in particular for the human weakness that enjoys an occasional glimpse of the weakness of others."

She had deeply attended to him. "You mean perhaps one doesn't show enough what one wants?"

"I think that must be it. You're so fiendishly proud."

She appeared again to wonder. "Not too much so, at any rate, only to want from YOU—"

"Well, what?"

"Why, what's pleasant for yourself," she simply said.

"Oh dear, that's poor bliss!" he returned. "How does it come then," he next said, "that with this barrenness of our intercourse I know so well YOUR hand?"

A series of announcements had meanwhile been made, with guests arriving to match them, and Nanda's eyes at this moment engaged themselves with Mr. Longdon and her mother, who entered the room together. When she looked back to her companion she had had time to drop a consciousness of his question. "If I'm proud, to you, I'm not good," she said, "and if I'm good—always to you—I'm not proud. I know at all events perfectly how immensely you're occupied, what a quantity of work you get through and how every minute counts for you. Don't make it a crime to me that I'm reasonable."

"No, that would show, wouldn't it? that there isn't much else. But how it all comes back—!"

"Well, to what?" she asked.

"To the old story. You know how I'm occupied. You know how I work. You know how I manage my time."

"Oh I see," said Nanda. "It IS my knowing, after all, everything."

"Everything. The book I just mentioned is one that, months ago—-I remember now—I lent your mother."

"Oh a thing in a blue cover? I remember then too." Nanda's face cleared up. "I had forgotten it was lying about here, but I must have brought it—in fact I remember I did—for Tishy. And I wrote your name on it so that we might know—"

"That I hadn't lent it to either of you? It didn't occur to you to write your own?" Vanderbank went on.

"Well, but if it isn't mine? It ISN'T mine, I'm sure."

"Therefore also if it can't be Tishy's—"

"The thing's simple enough—it's mother's."

"'Simple'?" Vanderbank laughed. "I like you! And may I ask if you've read the remarkable work?"

"Oh yes." Then she wonderfully said: "For Tishy."

"To see if it would do?"

"I've often done that," the girl returned.

"And she takes your word?"

"Generally. I think I remember she did that time."

"And read the confounded thing?"

"Oh no!" said Nanda.

He looked at her a moment longer. "You're too particular!" he rather oddly sounded, turning away with it to meet Mr. Longdon.

II

When after dinner the company was restored to the upper rooms the Duchess was on her feet as soon as the door opened for the entrance of the gentlemen. Then it might have been seen that she had a purpose, for as soon as the elements had again, with a due amount of the usual shuffling and mismatching, been mixed, her case proved the first to have been settled. She had got Mr. Longdon beside her on a sofa that was just right for two. "I've seized you without a scruple," she frankly said, "for there are things I want to say to you as well as very particularly to ask. More than anything else of course I want again to thank you."

No collapse of Mr. Longdon's was ever incompatible with his sitting well forward. "'Again'?"

"Do you look so blank," she demanded, "because you've really forgotten the gratitude I expressed to you when you were so good as to bring Nanda up for Aggie's marriage?—or because you don't think it a matter I should trouble myself to return to?

How can I help it," she went on without waiting for his answer, "if I see your hand in everything that has happened since the so interesting talk I had with you last summer at Mertle? There have been times when I've really thought of writing to you; I've even had a bold bad idea of proposing myself to you for a Sunday. Then the crisis, my momentary alarm, has struck me as blowing over, and I've felt I could wait for some luck like this, which would sooner or later come." Her companion, however, appeared to leave the luck so on her hands that she could only snatch up, to cover its nudity, the next handsomest assumption. "I see you cleverly guess that what I've been worried about is the effect on Mrs. Brook of the loss of her dear Mitchy. If you've not at all events had your own impression of this effect, isn't that only because these last months you've seen so little of her? I'VE seen," said the Duchess, "enough and to spare." She waited as if for her vision, on this, to be flashed back at her, but the only result of her speech was that her friend looked hard at somebody else. It was just this symptom indeed that perhaps sufficed her, for in a minute she was again afloat. "Things have turned out so much as I desire them that I should really feel wicked not to have a humble heart. There's a quarter indeed," she added with a noble unction, "to which I don't fear to say for myself that no day and no night pass without my showing it. However, you English, I know, don't like one to speak of one's religion. I'm just as simply thankful for mine—I mean with as little sense of indecency or agony about it—as I am for my health or my carriage. My point is at any rate that I say in no cruel spirit of triumph, yet do none the less very distinctly say, that the person Mr. Mitchett's marriage has inevitably pleased least may be now rather to be feared." These words had the sound of a climax, and she had brought them out as if, with her duty done, to leave them; but something that took place, for her eye, in the face Mr. Longdon had half-averted gave her after an instant what he might have called her second wind. "Oh I know you think she always HAS been! But you've exaggerated—as to that; and I don't say that even at present it's anything we shan't get the better of. Only we must keep our heads. We must

remember that from her own point of view she has her grievance, and we must at least look as if we trusted her. That, you know, is what you've never quite done."

He gave out a murmur of discomfort which produced in him a change of position, and the sequel to the change was that he presently accepted from his cushioned angle of the sofa the definite support it could offer. If his eyes moreover had not met his companion's they had been brought by the hand he repeatedly and somewhat distressfully passed over them closer to the question of which of the alien objects presented to his choice it would cost him least to profess to handle. What he had already paid, a spectator would easily have gathered from the long, the suppressed wriggle that had ended in his falling back, was some sacrifice of his habit of not privately depreciating those to whom he was publicly civil. It was plain, however, that when he presently spoke his thought had taken a stretch. "I'm sure I've fully intended to be everything that's proper. But I don't think Mr. Vanderbank cares for her."

It kindled in the Duchess an immediate light. "Vous avez bien de l'esprit. You put one at one's ease. I've been vaguely groping while you're already there. It's really only for Nanda he cares?"

"Yes—really."

The Duchess debated. "And yet exactly how much?"

"I haven't asked him."

She had another, a briefer pause. "Don't you think it about time you SHOULD?" Once more she waited, then seemed to feel her opportunity wouldn't. "We've worked a bit together, but you don't take me into your confidence. I dare say you don't believe I'm quite straight. Don't you really see how I MUST be?" She had a pleading note which made him at last more consentingly face her. "Don't you see," she went on with the advantage of it, "that, having got all I want for myself, I haven't a motive in the world for spoiling the fun of another? I don't want in the least, I assure you, to spoil even Mrs. Brook's; for how will she get a bit less out of him—I mean than she does now—if what you desire SHOULD take place? Honestly, my

dear man, that's quite what *I* desire, and I only want, over and above, to help you. What I feel for Nanda, believe me, is pure pity. I won't say I'm frantically grateful to her, because in the long run—one way or another—she'll have found her account. It nevertheless worries me to see her; and all the more because of this very certitude, which you've so kindly just settled for me, that our young man hasn't really with her mother—"

Whatever the certitude Mr. Longdon had kindly settled, it was in another interest that he at this moment broke in. "Is he YOUR young man too?"

She was not too much amused to cast about her.

"Aren't such marked ornaments of life a little the property of all who admire and enjoy them?"

"You 'enjoy' him?" Mr. Longdon asked in the same straightforward way.

"Immensely."

His silence for a little seemed the sign of a plan. "What is it he hasn't done with Mrs. Brook?"

"Well, the thing that WOULD be the complication. He hasn't gone beyond a certain point. You may ask how one knows such matters, but I'm afraid I've not quite a receipt for it. A woman knows, but she can't tell. They haven't done, as it's called, anything wrong."

Mr. Longdon frowned. "It would be extremely horrid if they had."

"Ah but, for you and me who know life, it isn't THAT that—if other things had made for it—would have prevented! As it happens, however, we've got off easily. She doesn't speak to him—!"

She had forms he could only take up. "'Speak' to him—?"

"Why as much as she would have liked to be able to believe."

"Then where's the danger of which you appear to wish to warn me?"

"Just in her feeling in the case as most women would feel. You see she did what she could for her daughter. She did, I'm

bound to say, as that sort of thing goes among you people, a good deal. She treasured up, she nursed along Mitchy, whom she would also, though of course not so much, have liked herself. Nanda could have kept him on with a word, becoming thereby so much the less accessible for YOUR plan. That would have thoroughly obliged her mother, but your little English girls, in these altered times—oh I know how you feel them!—don't stand on such trifles; and—even if you think it odd of me—I can't defend myself, though I've so directly profited, against a certain compassion also for Mrs. Brook's upset. As a good-natured woman I feel in short for both of them. I deplore all round what's after all a rather sad relation. Only, as I tell you, Nanda's the one, I naturally say to myself, for me now most to think of; if I don't assume too much, that is, that you don't suffer by my freedom."

Mr. Longdon put by with a mere drop of his eyes the question of his suffering: there was so clearly for him an issue more relevant. "What do you know of my 'plan'?"

"Why, my dear man, haven't I told you that ever since Mertle I've made out your hand? What on earth for other people can your action look like but an adoption?"

"Of—a—HIM?"

"You're delightful. Of—a—HER! If it does come to the same thing for you, so much the better. That at any rate is what we're all taking it for, and Mrs. Brook herself en tete. She sees—through your generosity—Nanda's life more or less, at the worst, arranged for, and that's just what gives her a good conscience."

If Mr. Longdon breathed rather hard it seemed to show at least that he followed. "What does she want of a good conscience?"

From under her high tiara an instant she almost looked down at him. "Ah you do hate her!"

He coloured, but held his ground. "Don't you tell me yourself she's to be feared?"

"Yes, and watched. But—if possible—with amusement."

“Amusement?” Mr. Longdon faintly gasped.

“Look at her now,” his friend went on with an indication that was indeed easy to embrace. Separated from them by the width of the room, Mrs. Brook was, though placed in profile, fully presented; the satisfaction with which she had lately sunk upon a light gilt chair marked itself as superficial and was moreover visibly not confirmed by the fact that Vanderbank’s high-perched head, arrested before her in a general survey of opportunity, kept her eyes too far above the level of talk. Their companions were dispersed, some in the other room, and for the occupants of the Duchess’s sofa they made, as a couple in communion, a picture, framed and detached, vaguely reduplicated in the high polish of the French floor. “She IS tremendously pretty.” The Duchess appeared to drop this as a plea for indulgence and to be impelled in fact by the interlocutor’s silence to carry it further. “I’ve never at all thought, you know, that Nanda touches her.”

Mr. Longdon demurred. “Do you mean for beauty?”

His friend, for his simplicity, discriminated. “Ah they’ve neither of them ‘beauty.’ That’s not a word to make free with. But the mother has grace.”

“And the daughter hasn’t

“Not a line. You answer me of course, when I say THAT, you answer me with your adored Lady Julia, and will want to know what then becomes of the lucky resemblance. I quite grant you that Lady Julia must have had the thing we speak of. But that dear sweet blessed thing is very much the same lost secret as the dear sweet blessed OTHER thing that went away with it—the decent leisure that, for the most part, we’ve also seen the last of. It’s the thing at any rate that poor Nanda and all her kind have most effectually got rid of. Oh if you’d trust me a little more you’d see that I’m quite at one with you on all the changes for the worse. I bear up, but I’m old enough to have known. All the same Mrs. Brook has something—say what you like—when she bends that little brown head. Dieu sait comme elle se coiffe, but what she gets out of it! Only look.”

Mr. Longdon conveyed in an indescribable manner that he had retired to a great distance; yet even from this position he must have launched a glance that arrived at a middle way. "They both know you're watching them."

"And don't they know YOU are? Poor Mr. Van has a consciousness!"

"So should I if two terrible women—"

"Were admiring you both at once?" The Duchess folded the big feathered fan that had partly protected their vision. "Well, SHE, poor dear, can't help it. She wants him herself."

At the drop of the Duchess's fan he restored his nippers. "And he doesn't—not a bit—want HER!"

"There it is. She has put down her money, as it were, without a return. She has given Mitchy up and got nothing instead."

There was delicacy, yet there was distinctness, in Mr. Longdon's reserve. "Do you call ME nothing?"

The Duchess, at this, fairly swelled with her happy stare. "Then it IS an adoption?" She forbore to press, however; she only went on: "It isn't a question, my dear man, of what *I* call it. YOU don't make love to her."

"Dear me," said Mr. Longdon, "what would she have had?"

"That could be more charming, you mean, than your famous 'loyalty'? Oh, caro mio, she wants it straighter! But I shock you," his companion quickly added.

The manner in which he firmly rose was scarce a denial; yet he stood for a moment in place. "What after all can she do?"

"She can KEEP Mr. Van."

Mr. Longdon wondered. "Where?"

"I mean till it's too late. She can work on him."

"But how?"

Covertly again the Duchess had followed the effect of her friend's perceived movement on Mrs. Brook, who also got up. She gave a rap with her fan on his leg. "Sit down—you'll see."

III

He mechanically obeyed her although it happened to lend him the air of taking Mrs. Brook's approach for a signal to resume his seat. She came over to them, Vanderbank followed, and it was without again moving, with a vague upward gape in fact from his place, that Mr. Longdon received as she stood before him a challenge of a sort to flash a point into what the Duchess had just said. "Why do you hate me so?"

Vanderbank, who, beside Mrs. Brook, looked at him with attention, might have suspected him of turning a trifle pale; though even Vanderbank, with reasons of his own for an observation of the sharpest, could scarce have read into the matter the particular dim vision that would have accounted for it—the flicker of fear of what Mrs. Brook, whether as daughter or as mother, was at last so strangely and differently to show herself.

"I should warn you, sir," the young man threw off, "how little we consider that—in Buckingham Crescent certainly—a fair question. It isn't playing the game—it's hitting below the belt. We hate and we love—the latter especially; but to tell each other why is to break that little tacit rule of finding out for ourselves which is the delight of our lives and the source of our triumphs. You can say, you know, if you like, but you're not obliged."

Mr. Longdon transferred to him something of the same colder apprehension, looking at him manifestly harder than ever before and finding in his eyes also no doubt a consciousness more charged. He presently got up, but, without answering Vanderbank, fixed again Mrs. Brook, to whom he echoed without expression: "Hate you?"

The next moment, while he remained in presence with Vanderbank, Mrs. Brook was pointing out her meaning to him from the cushioned corner he had quitted. "Why, when you come back to town you come straight, as it were, here."

"Ah what's that," the Duchess asked in his interest, "but to follow Nanda as closely as possible, or at any rate to keep well with her?"

Mrs. Brook, however, had no ear for this plea. “And when I, coming here too and thinking only of my chance to ‘meet’ you, do my very sweetest to catch your eye, you’re entirely given up—!”

“To trying of course,” the Duchess broke in afresh, “to keep well with ME!”

Mrs. Brook now had a smile for her. “Ah that takes precautions then that I shall perhaps fail of if I too much interrupt your conversation.”

“Isn’t she nice to me,” the Duchess asked of Mr. Longdon, “when I was in the very act of praising her to the skies?”

Their interlocutor’s reply was not too rapid to anticipate Mrs. Brook herself. “My dear Jane, that only proves his having reached some extravagance in the other sense that you had in mere decency to match. The truth is probably in the ‘mean’—isn’t that what they call it?—between you. Don’t YOU now take him away,” she went on to Vanderbank, who had glanced about for some better accommodation.

He immediately pushed forward the nearest chair, which happened to be by the Duchess’s side of the sofa. “Will you sit here, sir?”

“If you’ll stay to protect me.”

“That was really what I brought him over to you for,” Mrs. Brook said while Mr. Longdon took his place and Vanderbank looked out for another seat. “But I didn’t know,” she observed with her sweet free curiosity, “that he called you ‘sir.’” She often made discoveries that were fairly childlike. “He has done it twice.”

“Isn’t that only your inevitable English surprise,” the Duchess demanded, “at the civility quite the commonest in other societies?—so that one has to come here to find it regarded, in the way of ceremony, as the very end of the world!”

“Oh,” Mr. Longdon remarked, “it’s a word I rather like myself even to employ to others.”

“I always ask here,” the Duchess continued to him, “what word they’ve got instead. And do you know what they tell me?”

Mrs. Brook wondered, then again, before he was ready, charmingly suggested: “Our pretty manner?” Quickly too she appealed to Mr. Longdon. “Is THAT what you miss from me?”

He wondered, however, more than Mrs. Brook. “Your ‘pretty manner’?”

“Well, these grand old forms that the Duchess is such a mistress of.” Mrs. Brook had with this one of her eagerest visions. “Did mamma say ‘sir’ to you? Ought *I*? Do you really get it, in private, out of Nanda? SHE has such depths of discretion,” she explained to the Duchess and to Vanderbank, who had come back with his chair, “that it’s just the kind of racy anecdote she never in the world gives me.”

Mr. Longdon looked across at Van, placed now, after a moment’s talk with Tishy in sight of them all, by Mrs. Brook’s arm of the sofa. “You haven’t protected—you’ve only exposed me.”

“Oh there’s no joy without danger”—Mrs. Brook took it up with spirit. “Perhaps one should even say there’s no danger without joy.”

Vanderbank’s eyes had followed Mrs. Grendon after his brief passage with her, terminated by some need of her listless presence on the other side of the room. “What do you say then, on that theory, to the extraordinary gloom of our hostess? Her safety, by such a rule, must be deep.”

The Duchess was this time the first to know what they said. “The expression of Tishy’s face comes precisely from our comparing it so unfavourably with that of her poor sister Carrie, who, though she isn’t here to-night with the Cashmores—amazing enough even as coming WITHOUT that!—has so often shown us that an ame en peine, constantly tottering, but, as Nanda guarantees us, usually recovering, may look after all as beatific as a Dutch doll.”

Mrs. Brook’s eyes had, on Tishy’s passing away, taken the same course as Vanderbank’s, whom she had visibly not neglected moreover while the pair stood there. “I give you Carrie, as you know, and I throw Mr. Cashmore in; but I’m lost

in admiration to-night, as I always have been, of the way Tishy makes her ugliness serve. I should call it, if the word weren't so for ladies'-maids, the most 'elegant' thing I know."

"My dear child," the Duchess objected, "what you describe as making her ugliness serve is what I should describe as concealing none of her beauty. There's nothing the matter surely with 'elegant' as applied to Tishy save that as commonly used it refers rather to a charm that's artificial than to a state of pure nature. There should be for elegance a basis of clothing. Nanda rather stints her."

Mrs. Brook, perhaps more than usually thoughtful, just discriminated. "There IS, I think, one little place. I'll speak to her."

"To Tishy?" Vanderbank asked.

"Oh THAT would do no good. To Nanda. All the same," she continued, "it's an awfully superficial thing of you not to see that her dreariness—on which moreover I've set you right before—is a mere facial accident and doesn't correspond or, as they say, 'rhyme' to anything within her that might make it a little interesting. What I like it for is just that it's so funny in itself. Her low spirits are nothing more than her features. Her gloom, as you call it, is merely her broken nose."

"HAS she a broken nose?" Mr. Longdon demanded with an accent that for some reason touched in the others the spring of laughter.

"Has Nanda never mentioned it?" Mrs. Brook profited by this gaiety to ask.

"That's the discretion you just spoke of," said the Duchess. "Only I should have expected from the cause you refer to rather the comic effect."

"Mrs. Grendon's broken nose, sir," Vanderbank explained to Mr. Longdon, "is only the kinder way taken by these ladies to speak of Mrs. Grendon's broken heart. You must know all about that."

"Oh yes—ALL." Mr. Longdon spoke very simply, with the consequence this time, on the part of his companions, of a

silence of some minutes, which he himself had at last to break. "Mr. Grendon doesn't like her." The addition of these words apparently made the difference—as if they constituted a fresh link with the irresistible comedy of things. That he was unexpectedly diverting was, however, no check to Mr. Longdon's delivering his full thought. "Very horrid of two sisters to be both, in their marriages, so wretched."

"Ah but Tishy, I maintain," Mrs. Brook returned, "ISN'T wretched at all. If I were satisfied that she's really so I'd never let Nanda come to her."

"That's the most extraordinary doctrine, love," the Duchess interposed. "When you're satisfied a woman's 'really' poor you never give her a crust?"

"Do you call Nanda a crust, Duchess?" Vanderbank amusedly asked.

"She's all at any rate, apparently, just now, that poor Tishy has to live on."

"You're severe then," the young man said, "on our dinner of to-night."

"Oh Jane," Mrs. Brook declared, "is never severe: she's only uncontrollably witty. It's only Tishy moreover who gives out that her husband doesn't like her. HE, poor man, doesn't say anything of the sort."

"Yes, but, after all, you know"—Vanderbank just put it to her—"where the deuce, all the while, IS he?"

"Heaven forbid," the Duchess remarked, "that we should too rashly ascertain."

"There it is—exactly," Mr. Longdon subjoined.

He had once more his success of hilarity, though not indeed to the injury of the Duchess's next word. "It's Nanda, you know, who speaks, and loud enough, for Harry Grendon's dislikes."

"That's easy for her," Mrs. Brook declared, "when she herself isn't one of them."

"She isn't surely one of anybody's," Mr. Longdon gravely observed.

Mrs. Brook gazed across at him. “You ARE too dear! But I’ve none the less a crow to pick with you.”

Mr. Longdon returned her look, but returned it somehow to Van. “You frighten me, you know, out of my wits.”

“*I* do?” said Vanderbank.

Mr. Longdon just hesitated. “Yes.”

“It must be the sacred terror,” Mrs. Brook suggested to Van, “that Mitchy so often speaks of. I’M not trying with you,” she went on to Mr. Longdon, “for anything of that kind, but only for the short half-hour in private that I think you won’t for the world grant me. Nothing will induce you to find yourself alone with me.”

“Why what on earth,” Vanderbank asked, “do you suspect him of supposing you want to do?”

“Oh it isn’t THAT,” Mrs. Brook sadly said.

“It isn’t what?” laughed the Duchess.

“That he fears I may want in any way to—what do you call it?—make up to him.” She spoke as if she only wished it had been. “He has a deeper thought.”

“Well then what in goodness is it?” the Duchess pressed.

Mr. Longdon had said nothing more, but Mrs. Brook preferred none the less to treat the question as between themselves. She WAS, as the others said, wonderful. “You can’t help thinking me”—she spoke to him straight—“rather tortuous.” The pause she thus momentarily produced was so intense as to give a sharpness that was almost vulgar to the little “Oh!” by which it was presently broken and the source of which neither of her three companions could afterwards in the least have named. Neither would have endeavoured to fix an infelicity of which each doubtless had been but too capable. “It’s only as a mother,” she added, “that I want my chance.”

But the Duchess was at this again in the breach. “Take it, for mercy’s sake then, my dear, over Harold, who’s an example to Nanda herself in the way that, behind the piano there, he’s keeping it up with Lady Fanny.”

If this had been a herring that, in the interest of peace, the Duchess had wished to draw across the scent, it could scarce have been more effective. Mrs. Brook, whose position had made just the difference that she lost the view of the other side of the piano, took a slight but immediate stretch. “IS Harold with Lady Fanny?”

“You ask it, my dear child,” said the Duchess, “as if it were too grand to be believed. It’s the note of eagerness,” she went on for Mr. Longdon’s benefit—“it’s almost the note of hope: one of those that ces messieurs, that we all in fact delight in and find so matchless. She desires for Harold the highest advantages.”

“Well then,” declared Vanderbank, who had achieved a glimpse, “he’s clearly having them. It brings home to one his success.”

“His success is true,” Mrs. Brook insisted. “How he does it I don’t know.”

“Oh DON’T you?” trumpeted the Duchess.

“He’s amazing,” Mrs. Brook pursued. “I watch—I hold my breath. But I’m bound to say also I rather admire. He somehow amuses them.”

“She’s as pleased as Punch,” said the Duchess.

“Those great calm women—they like slighter creatures.”

“The great calm whales,” the Duchess laughed, “swallow the little fishes.”

“Oh my dear,” Mrs. Brook returned, “Harold can be tasted, if you like—”

“If *I* like?” the Duchess parenthetically jeered. “Thank you, love!”

“But he can’t, I think, be eaten. It all works out,” Mrs. Brook expounded, “to the highest end. If Lady Fanny’s amused she’ll be quiet.”

“Bless me,” cried the Duchess, “of all the immoral speeches—! I put it to you, Longdon. Does she mean”—she appealed to their friend—“that if she commits murder she won’t commit anything else?”

“Oh it won’t be murder,” said Mrs. Brook. “I mean that if Harold, in one way and another, keeps her along, she won’t get off.”

“Off where?” Mr. Longdon risked.

Vanderbank immediately informed him. “To one of the smaller Italian towns. Don’t you know?”

“Oh yes. Like—who is it? I forget.”

“Anna Karenine? You know about Anna?”

“Nanda,” said the Duchess, “has told him. But I thought,” she went on to Mrs. Brook, “that Lady Fanny, by this time, MUST have gone.”

“Petherton then,” Mrs. Brook returned, “doesn’t keep you au courant?”

The Duchess blandly wondered. “I seem to remember he had positively said so. And that she had come back.”

“Because this looks so like a fresh start? No. WE know. You assume besides,” Mrs. Brook asked, “that Mr. Cashmore would have received her again?”

The Duchess fixed a little that gentleman and his actual companion. “What will you have? He mightn’t have noticed.”

“Oh you’re out of step, Duchess,” Vanderbank said. “We used all to march abreast, but we’re falling to pieces. It’s all, saving your presence, Mitchy’s marriage.”

“Ah,” Mrs. Brook concurred, “how thoroughly I feel that! Oh I knew. The spell’s broken; the harp has lost a string. We’re not the same thing. HE’S not the same thing.”

“Frankly, my dear,” the Duchess answered, “I don’t think that you personally are either.”

“Oh as for that—which is what matters least—we shall perhaps see.” With which Mrs. Brook turned again to Mr. Longdon. “I haven’t explained to you what I meant just now. We want Nanda.”

Mr. Longdon stared. “At home again?”

“In her little old nook. You must give her back.”

“Do you mean altogether?”

“Ah that will be for you in a manner to arrange. But you’ve had her practically these five months, and with no desire to be unreasonable we yet have our natural feelings.”

This interchange, to which circumstances somehow gave a high effect of suddenness and strangeness, was listened to by the others in a quick silence that was like the sense of a blast of cold air, though with the difference between the spectators that Vanderbank attached his eyes hard to Mrs. Brook and that the Duchess looked as straight at Mr. Longdon, to whom clearly she wished to convey that if he had wondered a short time before how Mrs. Brook would do it he must now be quite at his ease. He indulged in fact, after this lady’s last words, in a pause that might have signified some of the fulness of a new light. He only said very quietly: “I thought you liked it.”

At this his neighbour broke in. “The care you take of the child? They DO!” The Duchess, as she spoke, became aware of the nearer presence of Edward Brookenham, who within a minute had come in from the other room; and her decision of character leaped forth in her quick signal to him. “Edward will tell you.” He was already before their semicircle. “DO you, dear,” she appealed, “want Nanda back from Mr. Longdon?”

Edward plainly could be trusted to feel in his quiet way that the oracle must be a match for the priestess. “‘Want’ her, Jane? We wouldn’t TAKE her.” And as if knowing quite what he was about he looked at his wife only after he had spoken.

IV

His reply had complete success, to which there could scarce have afterwards been a positive denial that some sound of amusement even from Mr. Longdon himself had in its degree contributed. Certain it was that Mrs. Brook found, as she exclaimed that her husband was always so awfully civil, just the right note of resigned understanding; whereupon he for a minute presented to them blankly enough his fine dead face. “‘Civil’ is just what I was afraid I wasn’t. I mean, you know,” he continued to Mr. Longdon, “that you really mustn’t look to us to let you off—!”

“From a week or a day”—Mr. Longdon took him up—“of the time to which you consider I’ve pledged myself? My dear sir, please don’t imagine it’s for ME the Duchess appeals.”

“It’s from your wife, you delicious dull man,” that lady elucidated. “If you wished to be stiff with our friend here you’ve really been so with HER; which comes, no doubt, from the absence between you of proper preconcerted action. You spoke without your cue.”

“Oh!” said Edward Brookenham.

“That’s it, Jane”—Mrs. Brook continued to take it beautifully. “We dressed to-day in a hurry and hadn’t time for our usual rehearsal. Edward, when we dine out, generally brings three pocket-handkerchiefs and six jokes. I leave the management of the handkerchiefs to his own taste, but we mostly try together in advance to arrange a career for the other things. It’s some charming light thing of my own that’s supposed to give him the sign.”

“Only sometimes he confounds”—Vanderbank helped her out—“your light and your heavy!” He had got up to make room for his host of so many occasions and, having forced him into the empty chair, now moved vaguely off to the quarter of the room occupied by Nanda and Mr. Cashmore.

“That’s very well,” the Duchess resumed, “but it doesn’t at all clear you, cara mia, of the misdemeanour of setting up as a felt domestic need something of which Edward proves deeply unconscious. He has put his finger on Nanda’s true interest. He doesn’t care a bit how it would LOOK for you to want her.”

“Don’t you mean rather, Jane, how it looks for us NOT to want her?” Mrs. Brook amended with a detachment now complete. “Of course, dear old friend,” she continued to Mr. Longdon, “she quite puts me with my back to the wall when she helps you to see—what you otherwise mightn’t guess—that Edward and I work it out between us to show off as tender parents and yet to get from you everything you’ll give. I do the sentimental and he the practical; so that we, after one fashion and another, deck ourselves in the glory of our sacrifice without

forfeiting the 'keep' of our daughter. This must appeal to you as another useful illustration of what London manners have come to; unless indeed," Mrs. Brook prattled on, "it only strikes you still more—and to a degree that blinds you to its other possible bearings—as the last proof that I'm too tortuous for you to know what I'd be at!"

Mr. Longdon faced her, across his interval, with his original terror represented now only by such a lingering flush as might have formed a natural tribute to a brilliant scene. "I haven't the glimmering of an idea of what you'd be at. But please understand," he added, "that I don't at all refuse you the private half-hour you referred to a while since."

"Are you really willing to put the child up for the rest of the year?" Edward placidly demanded, speaking as if quite unaware that anything else had taken place.

His wife fixed her eyes on him. "The ingenuity of your companions, love, plays in the air like the lightning, but flashes round your head only, by good fortune, to leave it unscathed. Still, you have after all your own strange wit, and I'm not sure that any of ours ever compares with it. Only, confronted also with ours, how can poor Mr. Longdon really choose which of the two he'll meet?"

Poor Mr. Longdon now looked hard at Edward. "Oh Mr. Brookenham's, I feel, any day. It's even with YOU, I confess," he said to him, "that I'd rather have that private half-hour."

"Done!" Mrs. Brook declared. "I'll send him to you. But we HAVE, you know, as Van says, gone to pieces," she went on, twisting her pretty head and tossing it back over her shoulder to an auditor of whose approach to her from behind, though it was impossible she should have seen him, she had visibly within a minute become aware. "It's your marriage, Mitchy, that has darkened our old bright air, changed us more than we even yet know, and most grossly and horribly, my dear man, changed YOU. You steal up in a way that gives one the creeps, whereas in the good time that's gone you always burst in with music and song. Go round where I can see you: I mayn't love you now, but

at least, I suppose, I may look at you. Direct your energies," she pursued while Mitchy obeyed her, "as much as possible, please, against our uncanny chill. Pile on the fire and close up the ranks; this WAS our best hour, you know—and all the more that Tishy, I see, is getting rid of her superfluities. Here comes back old Van," she wound up, "vanquished, I judge, in the attempt to divert Nanda from her prey. Won't Nanda sit with poor US?" she asked of Vanderbank, who now, meeting Mitchy in range of the others, remained standing with him and as at her commands.

"I didn't of course ask her," the young man replied.

"Then what did you do?"

"I only took a little walk."

Mrs. Brook, on this, was woeful at Mitchy. "See then what we've come to. When did we ever 'walk' in YOUR time save as a distinct part of the effect of our good things? Please return to Nanda," she said to Vanderbank, "and tell her I particularly wish her to come in for this delightful evening's end."

"She's joining us of herself now," the Duchess noted, "and so's Mr. Cashmore and so's Tishy—VOYEZ!—who has kept on—(bless her little bare back!)—no one she oughtn't to keep. As nobody else will now arrive it would be quite cosey if she locked the door."

"But what on earth, my dear Jane," Mrs. Brook plaintively wondered, "are you proposing we should do?"

Mrs. Brook, in her apprehension, had looked expressively at their friends, but the eye of the Duchess wandered no further than Harold and Lady Fanny. "It would perhaps serve to keep that pair a little longer from escaping together."

Mrs. Brook took a pause no greater. "But wouldn't it be, as regards another pair, locking the stable-door after—what do you call it? Don't Petherton and Aggie appear already to have escaped together? Mitchy, man, where in the world's your wife?"

"I quite grant you," said the Duchess gaily, "that my niece is wherever Petherton is. This I'm sure of, for THERE'S a

friendship, if you please, that has not been interrupted. Petherton's not gone, is he?" she asked in her turn of Mitchy.

But again before he could speak it was taken up. "Mitchy's silent, Mitchy's altered, Mitchy's queer!" Mrs. Brook proclaimed, while the new recruits to the circle, Tishy and Nanda and Mr. Cashmore, Lady Fanny and Harold too after a minute and on perceiving the movement of the others, ended by enlarging it, with mutual accommodation and aid, to a pleasant talkative ring in which the subject of their companion's demonstration, on a low ottoman and glaring in his odd way in almost all directions at once, formed the conspicuous attractive centre. Tishy was nearest Mr. Longdon, and Nanda, still flanked by Mr. Cashmore, between that gentleman and his wife, who had Harold on her other side. Edward Brookenham was neighboured by his son and by Vanderbank, who might easily have felt himself, in spite of their separation and given, as it happened, their places in the group, rather publicly confronted with Mr. Longdon. "Is his wife in the other room?" Mrs. Brook now put to Tishy.

Tishy, after a stare about, recovered the acuter consciousness to account for this guest. "Oh yes—she's playing with him."

"But with whom, dear?"

"Why, with Petherton. I thought you knew."

"Knew they're playing—-?" Mrs. Brook was almost Socratic.

"The Missus is regularly wound up," her husband meanwhile, without resonance, observed to Vanderbank.

"Brilliant indeed!" Vanderbank replied.

"But she's rather naughty, you know," Edward after a pause continued.

"Oh fiendish!" his interlocutor said with a short smothered laugh that might have represented for a spectator a sudden start at such a flash of analysis from such a quarter.

When Vanderbank's attention at any rate was free again their hostess, assisted to the transition, was describing the play, as she had called it, of the absentees. "She has hidden a book and he's trying to find it."

“Hide and seek? Why, isn’t it innocent, Mitch!” Mrs. Brook exclaimed.

Mitchy, speaking for the first time, faced her with extravagant gloom. “Do you really think so?”

“That’s HER innocence!” the Duchess laughed to him.

“And don’t you suppose he has found it YET?” Mrs. Brook pursued earnestly to Tishy. “Isn’t it something we might ALL play at if—?” On which however, abruptly checking herself, she changed her note. “Nanda love, please go and invite them to join us.”

Mitchy, at this, on his ottoman, wheeled straight round to the girl, who looked at him before speaking. “I’ll go if Mitchy tells me.”

“But if he does fear,” said her mother, “that there may be something in it—?”

Mitchy jerked back to Mrs. Brook. “Well, you see, I don’t want to give way to my fear. Suppose there SHOULD be something! Let me not know.”

She dealt with him tenderly. “I see. You couldn’t—so soon—bear it.”

“Ah but, savez-vous,” the Duchess interposed with some majesty, “you’re horrid!”

“Let them alone,” Mitchy continued. “We don’t want at all events a general romp.”

“Oh I thought just that,” said Mrs. Brook, “was what the Duchess wished the door locked for! Perhaps moreover”—she returned to Tishy—“he hasn’t yet found the book.”

“He can’t,” Tishy said with simplicity.

“But why in the world—?”

“You see she’s sitting on it”—Tishy felt, it was plain, the responsibility of explanation. “So that unless he pulls her off—”

“He can’t compass his desperate end? Ah I hope he won’t pull her off!” Mrs. Brook wonderfully murmured. It was said in a manner that stirred the circle, and unanimous laughter seemed already to have crowned her invocation, lately uttered, to the

social spirit. “But what in the world,” she pursued, “is the book selected for such a position? I hope it’s not a very big one.”

“Oh aren’t the books that are sat upon,” Mr. Cashmore freely speculated, “as a matter of course the bad ones?”

“Not a bit as a matter of course,” Harold as freely replied to him. “They sit, all round, nowadays—I mean in the papers and places—on some awfully good stuff. Why I myself read books that I couldn’t—upon my honour I wouldn’t risk it!—read out to you here.”

“What a pity,” his father dropped with the special shade of dryness that was all Edward’s own, “what a pity you haven’t got one of your favourites to try on us!”

Harold looked about as if it might have been after all a happy thought. “Well, Nanda’s the only girl.”

“And one’s sister doesn’t count,” said the Duchess.

“It’s just because the thing’s bad,” Tishy resumed for Mrs. Brook’s more particular benefit, “that Lord Petherton’s trying to wrest it.”

Mrs. Brook’s pale interest deepened. “Then it’s a real hand-to-hand struggle?”

“He says she shan’t read it—she says she will.”

“Ah that’s because—isn’t it, Jane?” Mrs. Brook appealed—“he so long overlooked and advised her in those matters. Doesn’t he feel by this time—so awfully clever as he is—the extraordinary way she has come out?”

“‘By this time’?” Harold echoed. “Dearest mummy, you’re too sweet. It’s only about ten weeks—isn’t it, Mitch? You don’t mind my saying that, I hope,” he solicitously added.

Mitchy had his back to him and, bending it a little, sat with head dropped and knees pressing his hands together. “I don’t mind any one’s saying anything.”

“Lord, are you already past that?” Harold sociably laughed.

“He used to vibrate to everything. My dear man, what IS the matter?” Mrs. Brook demanded. “Does it all move too fast for you?”

"Mercy on us, what ARE you talking about? That's what *I* want to know!" Mr. Cashmore vivaciously declared.

"Well, she HAS gone at a pace—if Mitchy doesn't mind," Harold interposed in the tone of tact and taste. "But then don't they always—I mean when they're like Aggie and they once get loose—go at a pace? That's what *I* want to know. I don't suppose mother did, nor Tishy, nor the Duchess," he communicated to the rest; "but mother and Tishy and the Duchess, it strikes me, must either have been of the school that knew, don't you know? a deuce of a deal before, or of the type that takes it all more quietly after."

"I think a woman can only speak for herself. I took it all quietly enough both before and after," said Mrs. Brook. Then she addressed to Mr. Cashmore with a small formal nod one of her lovely wan smiles. "What I'm talking about, s'il vous plait, is marriage."

"I wonder if you know," the Duchess broke out on this, "how silly you all sound! When did it ever, in any society that could call itself decently 'good,' NOT make a difference that an innocent young creature, a flower tended and guarded, should find from one day to the other her whole consciousness changed? People pull long faces and look wonderful looks and punch each other, in your English fashion, in the sides, and say to each other in corners that my poor darling has 'come out.' Je crois bien, she has come out! I married her—I don't mind saying it now—exactly that she SHOULD come out, and I should be mightily ashamed of every one concerned if she hadn't. I didn't marry her, I give you to believe, that she should stay 'in,' and if any of you think to frighten Mitchy with it I imagine you'll do so as little as you frighten ME. If it has taken her a very short time—as Harold so vividly puts it—to which of you did I ever pretend, I should like to know, that it would take her a very long one? I dare say there are girls it would have taken longer, just as there are certainly others who wouldn't have required so much as an hour. It surely isn't news to you that if some young persons among us all are very stupid and others very wise, MY dear child was never either, but only

perfectly bred and deliciously clever. Ah THAT—rather! If she's so clever that you don't know what to do with her it's scarcely HER fault. But add to it that Mitchy's very kind, and you have the whole thing. What more do you want?"

Mrs. Brook, who looked immensely struck, replied with the promptest sympathy, yet as if there might have been an alternative. "I don't think"—and her eyes appealed to the others—"that we want ANY more, do we? than the whole thing."

"Gracious, I should hope not!" her husband remarked as privately as before to Vanderbank. "Jane—for a mixed company—does go into it."

Vanderbank, for a minute and with a special short arrest, took in the circle. "Should you call us 'mixed'? There's only ONE girl."

Edward Brookenham glanced at his daughter. "Yes, but I wish there were more."

"DO you?" And Vanderbank's laugh at this odd view covered, for a little, the rest of the talk. But when he again began to follow no victory had yet been snatched.

It was Mrs. Brook naturally who rattled the standard. "When you say, dearest, that we don't know what to 'do' with Aggie's cleverness, do you quite allow for the way we bow down before it and worship it? I don't quite see what else we—in here—can do with it, even though we HAVE gathered that, just over there, Petherton's finding for it a different application. We can only each in our way do our best. Don't therefore succumb, Jane, to the delusive harm of a grievance. There would be nothing in it. You haven't got one. The beauty of the life that so many of us have so long led together"—and she showed that it was for Mr. Longdon she more particularly brought this out—"is precisely that nobody has ever had one. Nobody has dreamed of it—it would have been such a rough false note, a note of violence out of all keeping. Did YOU ever hear of one, Van? Did you, my poor Mitchy? But you see for yourselves," she wound up with a sigh and before either could answer, "how inferior we've

become when we have even in our defence to assert such things."

Mitchy, who for a while past had sat gazing at the floor, now raised his good natural goggles and stretched his closed mouth to its widest. "Oh I think we're pretty good still!" he then replied.

Mrs. Brook indeed appeared, after a pause and addressing herself again to Tishy, to give a reluctant illustration of it, coming back as from an excursion of the shortest to the question momentarily dropped. "I'm bound to say—all the more you know—that I don't quite see what Aggie mayn't now read." Suddenly, however, her look at their informant took on an anxiety. "Is the book you speak of something VERY awful?"

Mrs. Grendon, with so much these past minutes to have made her so, was at last visibly more present. "That's what Lord Petherton says of it. From what he knows of the author."

"So that he wants to keep her—?"

"Well, from trying it first. I think he wants to see if it's good for her."

"That's one of the most charming soins, I think," the Duchess said, "that a gentleman may render a young woman to whom he desires to be useful. I won't say that Petherton always knows how good a book may be, but I'd trust him any day to say how bad."

Mr. Longdon, who had sat throughout silent and still, quitted his seat at this and evidently in so doing gave Mrs. Brook as much occasion as she required. She also got up and her movement brought to her view at the door of the further room something that drew from her a quick exclamation. "He can tell us now then—for here they come!" Lord Petherton, arriving with animation and followed so swiftly by his young companion that she presented herself as pursuing him, shook triumphantly over his head a small volume in blue paper. There was a general movement at the sight of them, and by the time they had rejoined their friends the company, pushing back seats and causing a variety of mute expression smoothly to circulate, was

pretty well on its feet. “See—he HAS pulled her off!” said Mrs. Brook. “Little Aggie, to whom plenty of pearls were singularly becoming, met it as pleasant sympathy. Yes, and it was a REAL pull. But of course,” she continued with the prettiest humour and as if Mrs. Brook would quite understand, “from the moment one has a person’s nails, and almost his teeth, in one’s flesh—!”

Mrs. Brook’s sympathy passed, however, with no great ease from Aggie’s pearls to her other charms; fixing the former indeed so markedly that Harold had a quick word about it for Lady Fanny. “When poor mummy thinks, you know, that Nanda might have had them—!”

Lady Fanny’s attention, for that matter, had resisted them as little. “Well, I dare say that if I had wanted *I* might!”

“Lord—COULD you have stood him?” the young man returned. “But I believe women can stand anything!” he profoundly concluded. His mother meanwhile, recovering herself, had begun to ejaculate on the prints in Aggie’s arms, and he was then diverted from the sense of what he “personally,” as he would have said, couldn’t have stood, by a glance at Lord Petherton’s trophy, for which he made a prompt grab. “The bone of contention?” Lord Petherton had let it go and Harold remained arrested by the cover. “Why blest if it hasn’t Van’s name!”

“Van’s?”—his mother was near enough to effect her own snatch, after which she swiftly faced the proprietor of the volume. “Dear man, it’s the last thing you lent me! But I don’t think,” she added, turning to Tishy, “that I ever passed such a production on to YOU.”

“It was just seeing Mr. Van’s hand,” Aggie conscientiously explained, “that made me think one was free—!”

“But it isn’t Mr. Van’s hand!”—Mrs. Brook quite smiled at the error. She thrust the book straight at Mr. Longdon. “IS that Mr. Van’s hand?”

Holding the disputed object, which he had put on his nippers to glance at, he presently, without speaking, looked over these

aids straight at Nanda, who looked as straight back at him. “It was I who wrote Mr. Van’s name.” The girl’s eyes were on Mr. Longdon, but her words as for the company. “I brought the book here from Buckingham Crescent and left it by accident in the other room.”

“By accident, my dear,” her mother replied, “I do quite hope. But what on earth did you bring it for? It’s too hideous.”

Nanda seemed to wonder. “Is it?” she murmured.

“Then you haven’t read it?”

She just hesitated. “One hardly knows now, I think, what is and what isn’t.”

“She brought it only for ME to read,” Tishy gravely interposed.

Mrs. Brook looked strange. “Nanda RECOMMENDED it?”

“Oh no—the contrary.” Tishy, as if scared by so much publicity, floundered a little. “She only told me—”

“The awful subject?” Mrs. Brook wailed.

There was so deepening an echo of the drollery of this last passage that it was a minute before Vanderbank could be heard saying: “The responsibility’s wholly mine for setting the beastly thing in motion. Still,” he added good-humouredly and as to minimise if not the cause at least the consequence, “I think I agree with Nanda that it’s no worse than anything else.”

Mrs. Brook had recovered the volume from Mr. Longdon’s relaxed hand and now, without another glance at it, held it behind her with an unusual air of firmness. “Oh how can you say that, my dear man, of anything so revolting?”

The discussion kept them for the instant well face to face. “Then did YOU read it?”

She debated, jerking the book into the nearest empty chair, where Mr. Cashmore quickly pounced on it. “Wasn’t it for that you brought it me?” she demanded. Yet before he could answer she again challenged her child. “Have you read this work, Nanda?”

“Yes mamma.”

“Oh I say!” cried Mr. Cashmore, hilarious and turning the leaves.

Mr. Longdon had by this time ceremoniously approached Tishy. “Good-night.”

BOOK NINTH. VANDERBANK

I

"I think you had better wait," Mrs. Brook said, "till I see if he has gone;" and on the arrival the next moment of the servants with the tea she was able to put her question. "Is Mr. Cashmore still with Miss Brookenham?"

"No, ma'am," the footman replied. "I let Mr. Cashmore out five minutes ago."

Vanderbank showed for the next short time by his behaviour what he felt at not yet being free to act on this; moving pointlessly about the room while the servants arranged the tea-table and taking no trouble to make, for appearance, any other talk. Mrs. Brook, on her side, took so little that the silence—which their temporary companions had all the effect of keeping up by conscious dawdling—became precisely one of those precious lights for the circle belowstairs which people fondly fancy they have not kindled when they have not spoken. But Vanderbank spoke again as soon as the door was closed. "Does he run in and out that way without even speaking to YOU?"

Mrs. Brook turned away from the fire that, late in May, was the only charm of the crude cold afternoon. "One would like to draw the curtains, wouldn't one? and gossip in the glow of the hearth."

"Oh 'gossip'!" Vanderbank wearily said as he came to her pretty table.

In the act of serving him she checked herself. "You wouldn't rather have it with HER?"

He balanced a moment. "Does she have a tea of her own?"

"Do you mean to say you don't know?"—Mrs. Brook asked it with surprise. "Such ignorance of what I do for her does tell, I think, the tale of how you've lately treated us."

"In not coming for so long?"

"For more weeks, for more months than I can count. Scarcely since—when was it?—the end of January, that night of Tishy's dinner."

"Yes, that awful night."

"Awful, you call it?"

"Awful."

"Well, the time without you," Mrs. Brook returned, "has been so bad that I'm afraid I've lost the impression of anything before." Then she offered the tea to his choice. "WILL you have it upstairs?"

He received the cup. "Yes, and here too." After which he said nothing again till, first pouring in milk to cool it, he had drunk his tea down. "That's not literally true, you know. I HAVE been in."

"Yes, but always with other people—you managed it somehow; the wrong ones. It hasn't counted."

"Ah in one way and another I think everything counts. And you forget I've dined."

"Oh—for once!"

"The once you asked me. So don't spoil the beauty of your own behaviour by mistimed reflexions. You've been, as usual, superior."

"Ah but there has been no beauty in it. There has been nothing," Mrs. Brook went on, "but bare bleak recognition, the curse of my hideous intelligence. We've fallen to pieces, and at least I'm not such a fool as not to have felt it in time. From the moment one did feel it why should one insist on vain forms? If YOU felt it, and were so ready to drop them, my part was what it has always been—to accept the inevitable. We shall never grow together again. The smash was too great."

Vanderbank for a little said nothing; then at last: "You ought to know how great!"

Whatever had happened her lovely look here survived it. "I?"

"The smash," he replied, "was indeed as complete, I think, as your intention. Each of the 'pieces' testifies to your success. Five minutes did it."

She appeared to wonder where he was going. "But surely not MY minutes. Where have you discovered that I made Mitchy's marriage?"

"Mitchy's marriage has nothing to do with it."

"I see." She had the old interest at least still at their service. "You think we might have survived that." A new thought of it seemed to glimmer. "I'm bound to say Mitchy's marriage promises elements."

"You did it that night at Mrs. Grendon's." He spoke as if he had not heard her. "It was a wonderful performance. You pulled us down—just closing with each of the great columns in its turn—as Samson pulled down the temple. I was at the time more or less bruised and buried and didn't in the agitation and confusion fully understand what had happened. But I understand now."

"Are you very sure?" Mrs. Brook earnestly asked.

"Well, I'm stupid compared with you, but you see I've taken my time. I've puzzled it out. I've lain awake on it: all the more that I've had to do it all myself—with the Mitchys in Italy and Greece. I've missed his aid."

"You'll have it now," Mrs. Brook kindly said. "They're coming back."

"And when do they arrive?"

"Any day, I believe."

"Has he written you?"

"No," said Mrs. Brook—"there it is. That's just the way we've fallen to pieces. But you'll of course have heard something."

"Never a word."

"Ah then it's complete."

Vanderbank thought a moment. "Not quite, is it?—I mean it won't be altogether unless he hasn't written to Nanda."

"Then HAS he?"—she was keen again.

"Oh I'm assuming. Don't YOU know?"

"How should I?"

This too he turned over. "Just as a consequence of your having, at Tishy's, so abruptly and wonderfully tackled the question that a few days later, as I afterwards gathered, was to be crowned with a measure of success not yet exhausted. Why, in other words—if it was to know so little about her and to get no nearer to her—did you bring about Nanda's return?"

There was a clear reason, her face said, if she could only remember it. "Why did I—?" Then as catching a light: "Fancy your asking me—at this time of day!"

"Ah you HAVE noticed that I haven't asked before? However," Van promptly added, "I know well enough what you notice. Nanda hasn't mentioned to you whether or no she has heard?"

"Absolutely not. But you don't suppose, I take it, that it was to pry into her affairs I called her in."

Vanderbank, on this, lighted for the first time with a laugh. "'Called her in'? How I like your expressions!"

"I do then, in spite of all," she eagerly asked, "remind you a little of the bon temps? Ah," she sighed, "I don't say anything good now. But of course I see Jane—though not so often either. It's from Jane I've heard of what she calls her 'young things.' It seems so odd to think of Mitchy as a young thing. He's as old as all time, and his wife, who the other day was about six, is now practically about forty. And I also saw Petherton," Mrs. Brook added, "on his return."

"His return from where?"

"Why he was with them at Corfu, Malta, Cyprus—I don't know where; yachting, spending Mitchy's money, 'larking,' he called it—I don't know what. He was with them for weeks."

"Till Jane, you mean, called him in?"

"I think it must have been that."

"Well, that's better," said Van, "than if Mitchy had had to call him out."

"Oh Mitchy—!" Mrs. Brook comprehensively sounded.

Her visitor quite assented. "Isn't he amazing?"

"Unique."

He had a short pause. "But what's she up to?"

It was apparently for Mrs. Brook a question of such variety of application that she brought out experimentally: "Jane?"

"Dear no. I think we've fathomed 'Jane,' haven't we?"

"Well," mused Mrs. Brook, "I'm by no means sure I have. Just of late I've had a new sense!"

"Yes, of what now?" Van amusedly put it as she held the note.

"Oh of depths below depths. But poor Jane—of course after all she's human. She's beside herself with one thing and another, but she can't in any consistency show it. She took her stand so on having with Petherton's aid formed Aggie for a femme charmante—"

"That it's too late to cry out that Petherton's aid can now be dispensed with? Do you mean then that he IS such a brute that after all Mitchy has done for him—?" Vanderbank, at the rising image, pulled up in easy disgust.

"I think him quite capable of considering with a magnificent insolence of selfishness that what Mitchy has MOST done will have been to make Aggie accessible in a way that—for decency and delicacy of course, things on which Petherton highly prides himself—she could naturally not be as a girl. Her marriage has simplified it."

Vanderbank took it all in. "'Accessible' is good!"

"Then—which was what I intended just now—Aggie has already become so—?"

Mrs. Brook, however, could as yet in fairness only wonder. "That's just what I'm dying to see."

Her companion smiled at it. "'Even in our ashes live their wonted fires'! But what do you make, in such a box, of poor Mitchy himself? His marriage can scarcely to such an extent have simplified HIM."

It was something, none the less, that Mrs. Brook had to weigh. “I don’t know. I give it up. The thing was of a strangeness!”

Her friend also paused, and it was as if for a little, on either side of a gate on which they might have had their elbows, they remained looking at each other over it and over what was unsaid between them. “It WAS ‘rum’!” he at last merely dropped.

It was scarce for Mrs. Brook, all the same—she seemed to feel after a moment—to surround the matter with an excess of silence.

“He did what a man does—especially in that business—when he doesn’t do what he wants.”

“Do you mean what somebody else wanted?”

“Well, what he himself DIDN’T. And if he’s unhappy,” she went on, “he’ll know whom to pitch into.”

“Ah,” said Vanderbank, “even if he is he won’t be the man to what you might call ‘vent’ it on her. He’ll seek compensations elsewhere and won’t mind any ridicule—!”

“Whom are you speaking of as ‘her’?” Mrs. Brook asked as on feeling that something in her face had made him stop. “I wasn’t referring,” she explained, “to his wife.”

“Oh!” said Vanderbank.

“Aggie doesn’t matter,” she went on.

“Oh!” he repeated. “You meant the Duchess?” he then threw off.

“Don’t be silly!” she rejoined. “He MAY not become unhappy—God grant NOT!” she developed. “But if he does he’ll take it out of Nanda.”

Van appeared to challenge this. “‘Take it out’ of her?”

“Well, want to know, as some American asked me the other day of somebody, what she’s ‘going to do’ about it.”

Vanderbank, who had remained on his feet, stood still at this for a longer time than at anything yet. “But what CAN she ‘do’—?”

"That's again just what I'm curious to see." Mrs. Brook then spoke with a glance at the clock. "But if you don't go up to her—!"

"My notion of seeing her alone may be defeated by her coming down on learning that I'm here?" He had taken out his watch. "I'll go in a moment. But, as a light on that danger, would YOU, in the circumstances, come down?"

Mrs. Brook, however, could for light only look darkness. "Oh you don't love ME!"

Vanderbank, still with his watch, stared then as an alternative at the fire. "You haven't yet told me you know, if Mr. Cashmore now comes EVERY day."

"My dear man, how can I say? You've just your occasion to find out."

"From HER, you mean?"

Mrs. Brook hesitated. "Unless you prefer the footman. Must I again remind you that, with her own sitting-room and one of the men, in addition to her maid, wholly at her orders, her independence is ideal?"

Vanderbank, who appeared to have been timing himself, put up his watch. "I'm bound to say then that with separations so established I understand less than ever your unforgettable explosion."

"Ah you come back to that?" she wearily asked. "And you find it, with all you've to think about, unforgettable?"

"Oh but there was a wild light in your eye—!"

"Well," Mrs. Brook said, "you see it now quite gone out." She had spoken more sadly than sharply, but her impatience had the next moment a flicker. "I called Nanda in because I wanted to."

"Precisely; but what I don't make out, you see, is what you've since gained by it."

"You mean she only hates me the more?"

Van's impatience, in the movement with which he turned from her, had a flare still sharper. "You know I'm incapable of meaning anything of the sort."

She waited a minute while his back was presented. "I sometimes think in effect that you're incapable of anything straightforward."

Vanderbank's movement had not been to the door, but he almost reached it after giving her, on this, a hard look. He then stopped short, however, to stare an instant still more fixedly into the hat he held in his hand; the consequence of which in turn was that he the next minute stood again before her chair. "Don't you call it straightforward of me just not to have come for so long?"

She had again to take time to say. "Is that an allusion to what—by the loss of your beautiful presence—I've failed to 'gain'? I dare say at any rate"—she gave him no time to reply—"that you feel you're quite as straightforward as I and that we're neither of us creatures of mere rash impulse. There was a time in fact, wasn't there? when we rather enjoyed each other's dim depths. If I wanted to fawn on you," she went on, "I might say that, with such a comrade in obliquity to wind and double about with, I'd risk losing myself in the mine. But why retort or recriminate? Let us not, for God's sake, be vulgar—we haven't yet, bad as it is, come to THAT. I CAN be, no doubt—I some day MUST be: I feel it looming at me out of the awful future as an inevitable fate. But let it be for when I'm old and horrible; not an hour before. I do want to live a little even yet. So you ought to let me off easily—even as I let you."

"Oh I know," said Vanderbank handsomely, "that there are things you don't put to me! You show a tact!"

"There it is. And I like much better," Mrs. Brook went on, "our speaking of it as delicacy than as duplicity. If you understand, it's so much saved."

"What I always understand more than anything else," he returned, "is the general truth that you're prodigious."

It was perhaps a little as relapse from tension that she had nothing against that. “As for instance when it WOULD be so easy—!”

“Yes, to take up what lies there, you yet so splendidly abstain.”

“You literally press upon me my opportunity? It’s YOU who are splendid!” she rather strangely laughed.

“Don’t you at least want to say,” he went on with a slight flush, “what you MOST obviously and naturally might?”

Appealed to on the question of underlying desire, Mrs. Brook went through the decent form of appearing to try to give it the benefit of any doubt. “Don’t I want, you mean, to find out before you go up what YOU want? Shall you be too disappointed,” she asked, “if I say that, since I shall probably learn, as we used to be told as children, ‘all in good time,’ I can wait till the light comes out of itself?”

Vanderbank still lingered. “You ARE deep!”

“You’ve only to be deeper.”

“That’s easy to say. I’m afraid at any rate you won’t think I am,” he pursued after a pause, “if I ask you what in the world—since Harold does keep Lady Fanny so quiet—Cashmore still requires Nanda’s direction for.”

“Ah find out!” said Mrs. Brook.

“Isn’t Mrs. Donner quite shelved?”

“Find out,” she repeated.

Vanderbank had reached the door and had his hand on the latch, but there was still something else. “You scarce suppose, I imagine, that she has come to like him ‘for himself?”

“Find out!” And Mrs. Brook, who was now on her feet, turned away. He watched her a moment more, then checked himself and left her.

II

She remained alone ten minutes, at the end of which her reflexions would have been seen to be deep—were interrupted by the entrance of her husband. The interruption was indeed

not so great as if the couple had not met, as they almost invariably met, in silence: she took at all events, to begin with, no more account of his presence than to hand him a cup of tea accompanied with nothing but cream and sugar. Her having no word for him, however, committed her no more to implying that he had come in only for his refreshment than it would have committed her to say: “Here it is, Edward dear—just as you like it; so take it and sit down and be quiet.” No spectator worth his salt could have seen them more than a little together without feeling how everything that, under his eyes or not, she either did or omitted, rested on a profound acquaintance with his ways. They formed, Edward’s ways, a chapter by themselves, of which Mrs. Brook was completely mistress and in respect to which the only drawback was that a part of her credit was by the nature of the case predestined to remain obscure. So many of them were so queer that no one but she COULD know them, and know thereby into what crannies her reckoning had to penetrate. It was one of them for instance that if he was often most silent when most primed with matter, so when he had nothing to say he was always silent too—a peculiarity misleading, until mastered, for a lady who could have allowed in the latter case for almost any variety of remark. “What do you think,” he said at last, “of his turning up to-day?”

“Of old Van’s?”

“Oh has HE turned up?”

“Half an hour ago, and asking almost in his first breath for Nanda. I sent him up to her and he’s with her now.” If Edward had his ways she had also some of her own; one of which, in talk with him, if talk it could be called, was never to produce anything till the need was marked. She had thus a card or two always in reserve, for it was her theory that she never knew what might happen. It nevertheless did occur that he sometimes went, as she would have called it, one better.

“He’s not with her now. I’ve just been with her.”

“Then he didn’t go up?” Mrs. Brook was immensely interested. “He left me, you know, to do so.”

"Know—how should I know? I left her five minutes ago."

"Then he went out without seeing her." Mrs. Brook took it in. "He changed his mind out there on the stairs."

"Well," said Edward, "it won't be the first mind that has been changed there. It's about the only thing a man can change."

"Do you refer particularly to MY stairs?" she asked with her whimsical woe. But meanwhile she had taken it in. "Then whom were you speaking of?"

"Mr. Longdon's coming to tea with her. She has had a note."

"But when did he come to town?"

"Last night, I believe. The note, an hour or two ago, announced him—brought by hand and hoping she'd be at home."

Mrs. Brook thought again. "I'm glad she is. He's too sweet. By hand!—it must have been so he sent them to mamma. He wouldn't for the world wire."

"Oh Nanda has often wired to HIM," her father returned.

"Then she ought to be ashamed of herself. But how," said Mrs. Brook, "do you know?"

"Oh I know when we're in a thing like this."

"Yet you complain of her want of intimacy with you! It turns out that you're as thick as thieves."

Edward looked at this charge as he looked at all old friends, without a sign—to call a sign—of recognition. "I don't know of whose want of intimacy with me I've ever complained. There isn't much more of it, that I can see, that any of them could put on. What do you suppose I'd have them do? If I on my side don't get very far I may have alluded to THAT."

"Oh but you do," Mrs. Brook declared. "You think you don't, but you get very far indeed. You're always, as I said just now, bringing out something that you've got somewhere."

"Yes, and seeing you flare up at it. What I bring out is only what they tell me."

This limitation offered, however, for Mrs. Brook no difficulty. “Ah but it seems to me that with the things people nowadays tell one—! What more do you want?”

“Well”—and Edward from his chair regarded the fire a while—“the difference must be in what they tell YOU.”

“Things that are better?”

“Yes—worse. I dare say,” he went on, “what I give them—”

“Isn’t as bad as what I do? Oh we must each do our best. But when I hear from you,” Mrs. Brook pursued, “that Nanda had ever permitted herself anything so dreadful as to wire to him, it comes over me afresh that *I* would have been the perfect one to deal with him if his detestation of me hadn’t prevented.” She was by this time also—but on her feet—before the fire, into which, like her husband, she gazed. “*I* would never have wired. I’d have gone in for little delicacies and odd things she has never thought of.”

“Oh she doesn’t go in for what you do,” Edward assented.

“She’s as bleak as a chimney-top when the fire’s out, and if it hadn’t been after all for mamma—!” And she lost herself again in the reasons of things.

Her husband’s silence seemed to mark for an instant a deference to her allusion, but there was a limit even to this combination. “You make your mother, I think, keep it up pretty well. But if she HADN’T as you say, done so—?”

“Why we shouldn’t have been anywhere.”

“Well, where are we now? That’s what *I* want to know.”

Following her own train she had at first no heed for his question. “Without his hatred he would have liked me.” But she came back with a sigh to the actual. “No matter. We must deal with what we’ve got.”

“What HAVE we got?” Edward continued.

Again with no ear for his question his wife turned away, only however, after taking a few vague steps, to approach him with new decision. “If Mr. Longdon’s due will you do me a favour? Will you go back to Nanda—before he arrives—and let her

know, though not of course as from ME, that Van has been here half an hour, has had it put well before him that she's up there and at liberty, and has left the house without seeing her?"

Edward Brookenham made no motion. "You don't like better to do it yourself?"

"If I liked better," said Mrs. Brook, "I'd have already done it. The way to make it not come from me is surely not for me to give it to her. Besides, I want to be here to receive him first."

"Then can't she know it afterwards?"

"After Mr. Longdon has gone? The whole point is that she should know it in time to let HIM know it."

Edward still communed with the fire. "And what's the point of THAT?" Her impatience, which visibly increased, carried her away again, and by the time she reached the window he had launched another question. "Are you in such a hurry she should know that Van doesn't want her?"

"What do you call a hurry when I've waited nearly a year? Nanda may know or not as she likes—may know whenever: if she doesn't know pretty well by this time she's too stupid for it to matter. My only pressure's for Mr. Longdon. She'll have it there for him when he arrives."

"You mean she'll make haste to tell him?"

Mrs. Brook raised her eyes a moment to some upper immensity. "She'll mention it."

Her husband on the other hand, his legs outstretched, looked straight at the toes of his boots. "Are you very sure?" Then as he remained without an answer: "Why should she if he hasn't told HER?"

"Of the way I so long ago let you know that he had put the matter to Van? It's not out between them in words, no doubt; but I fancy that for things to pass they've not to dot their i's quite so much, my dear, as we two. Without a syllable said to her she's yet aware in every fibre of her little being of what has taken place."

Edward gave a still longer space to taking this in. “Poor little thing!”

“Does she strike you as so poor,” Mrs. Brook asked, “with so awfully much done for her?”

“Done by whom?”

It was as if she had not heard the question that she spoke again. “She has got what every woman, young or old, wants.”

“Really?”

Edward’s tone was of wonder, but she simply went on: “She has got a man of her own.”

“Well, but if he’s the wrong one?”

“Do you call Mr. Longdon so very wrong? I wish,” she declared with a strange sigh, “that *I* had had a Mr. Longdon!”

“I wish very much you had. I wouldn’t have taken it like Van.”

“Oh it took Van,” Mrs. Brook replied, “to put THEM where they are.”

“But where ARE they? That’s exactly it. In these three months, for instance,” Edward demanded, “how has their connexion profited?”

Mrs. Brook turned it over. “Profited which?”

“Well, one cares most for one’s child.”

“Then she has become for him what we’ve most hoped her to be—an object of compassion still more marked.”

“Is that what you’ve hoped her to be?” Mrs. Brook was obviously so lucid for herself that her renewed expression of impatience had plenty of point. “How can you ask after seeing what I did—”

“That night at Mrs. Grendon’s? Well, it’s the first time I HAVE asked it.”

Mrs. Brook had a silence more pregnant. “It’s for being with US that he pities her.”

Edward thought. “With me too?”

“Not so much—but still you help.”

“I thought you thought I didn’t—that night.”

“At Tishy’s? Oh you didn’t matter,” said Mrs. Brook. “Everything, every one helps. Harold distinctly”—she seemed to figure it all out—“and even the poor children, I dare say, a little. Oh but every one”—she warmed to the vision—“it’s perfect. Jane immensely, par example. Almost all the others who come to the house. Cashmore, Carrie, Tishy, Fanny—bless their hearts all!—each in their degree.”

Edward Brookenham had under the influence of this demonstration gradually risen from his seat, and as his wife approached that part of her process which might be expected to furnish the proof he placed himself before her with his back to the fire. “And Mitchy, I suppose?”

But he was out. “No. Mitchy’s different.”

He wondered. “Different?”

“Not a help. Quite a drawback.” Then as his face told how these WERE involutions, “You needn’t understand, but you can believe me,” she added. “The one who does most is of course Van himself.” It was a statement by which his failure to apprehend was not diminished, and she completed her operation. “By not liking her.”

Edward’s gloom, on this, was not quite blankness, yet it was dense. “Do you like his not liking her?”

“Dear no. No better than HE does.”

“And he doesn’t—?”

“Oh he hates it.”

“Of course I haven’t asked him,” Edward appeared to say more to himself than to his wife.

“And of course I haven’t,” she returned—not at all in this case, plainly, for herself. “But I know it. He’d like her if he could, but he can’t. That,” Mrs. Brook wound up, “is what makes it sure.”

There was at last in Edward’s gravity a positive pathos. “Sure he won’t propose?”

“Sure Mr. Longdon won’t now throw her over.”

“Of course if it IS sure—”

"Well?"

"Why, it is. But of course if it isn't—"

"Well?"

"Why, she won't have anything. Anything but US," he continued to reflect. "Unless, you know, you're working it on a certainty—!"

"That's just what I AM working it on. I did nothing till I knew I was safe."

"'Safe'?" he ambiguously echoed while on this their eyes met longer.

"Safe. I knew he'd stick."

"But how did you know Van wouldn't?"

"No matter 'how'—but better still. He hasn't stuck." She said it very simply, but she turned away from him.

His eyes for a little followed her. "We don't KNOW, after all, the old boy's means."

"I don't know what you mean by 'we' don't. Nanda does."

"But where's the support if she doesn't tell us?"

Mrs. Brook, who had faced about, again turned from him. "I hope you don't forget," she remarked with superiority, "that we don't ask her."

"YOU don't?" Edward gloomed.

"Never. But I trust her."

"Yes," he mused afresh, "one must trust one's child. Does Van?" he then enquired.

"Does he trust her?"

"Does he know anything of the general figure?"

She hesitated. "Everything. It's high."

"He has told you so?"

Mrs. Brook, supremely impatient now, seemed to demur even to the question. "We ask HIM even less."

"Then how do we know?"

She was weary of explaining. "Because that's just why he hates it."

There was no end however, apparently, to what Edward could take. “But hates what?”

“Why, not liking her.”

Edward kept his back to the fire and his dead eyes on the cornice and the ceiling. “I shouldn’t think it would be so difficult.”

“Well, you see it isn’t. Mr. Longdon can manage it.”

“I don’t see what the devil’s the matter with her,” he coldly continued.

“Ah that may not prevent—! It’s fortunately the source at any rate of half Mr. Longdon’s interest.”

“But what the hell IS it?” he drearily demanded.

She faltered a little, but she brought it out. “It’s ME.”

“And what’s the matter with ‘you’?”

She made, at this, a movement that drew his eyes to her own, and for a moment she dimly smiled at him. “That’s the nicest thing you ever said to me. But ever, EVER, you know.”

“Is it?” She had her hand on his sleeve, and he looked almost awkward.

“Quite the very nicest. Consider that fact well and even if you only said it by accident don’t be funny—as you know you sometimes CAN be—and take it back. It’s all right. It’s charming, isn’t it? when our troubles bring us more together. Now go up to her.”

Edward kept a queer face, into which this succession of remarks introduced no light, but he finally moved, and it was only when he had almost reached the door that he stopped again. “Of course you know he has sent her no end of books.”

“Mr. Longdon—of late? Oh yes, a deluge, so that her room looks like a bookseller’s back shop; and all, in the loveliest bindings, the most standard English works. I not only know it, naturally, but I know—what you don’t—why.”

“‘Why’?” Edward echoed. “Why but that—unless he should send her money—it’s about the only kindness he can show her at a distance?”

Mrs. Brook hesitated; then with a little suppressed sigh: "That's it!"

But it still held him. "And perhaps he does send her money."

"No. Not now."

Edward lingered. "Then is he taking it out—?"

"In books only?" It was wonderful—with its effect on him now visible—how she possessed her subject. "Yes, that's his delicacy—for the present."

"And you're not afraid for the future—?"

"Of his considering that the books will have worked it off? No. They're thrown in."

Just perceptibly cheered he reached the door, where, however, he had another pause. "You don't think I had better see Van?"

She stared. "What for?"

"Why, to ask what the devil he means."

"If you should do anything so hideously vulgar," she instantly replied, "I'd leave your house the next hour. Do you expect," she asked, "to be able to force your child down his throat?"

He was clearly not prepared with an account of his expectations, but he had a general memory that imposed itself. "Then why in the world did he make up to us?"

"He didn't. We made up to HIM."

"But why in the world—?"

"Well," said Mrs. Brook, really to finish, "we were in love with him."

"Oh!" Edward jerked. He had by this time opened the door, and the sound was partly the effect of the disclosure of a servant preceding a visitor. His greeting of the visitor before edging past and away was, however, of the briefest; it might have implied that they had met but yesterday. "How d'ye do, Mitchy?—At home? Oh rather!"

III

Very different was Mrs. Brook's welcome of the restored wanderer to whom, in a brief space, she addressed every

expression of surprise and delight, though marking indeed at last, as a qualification of these things, her regret that he declined to partake of her tea or to allow her to make him what she called "snug for a talk" in his customary corner of her sofa. He pleaded frankly agitation and embarrassment, reminded her even that he was awfully shy and that after separations, complications, whatever might at any time happen, he was conscious of the dust that had settled on intercourse and that he couldn't blow away in a single breath. She was only, according to her nature, to indulge him if, while he walked about and changed his place, he came to the surface but in patches and pieces. There was so much he wanted to know that—well, as they had arrived only the night before, she could judge. There was knowledge, it became clear, that Mrs. Brook almost equally craved, so that it even looked at first as if, on either side, confidence might be choked by curiosity. This disaster was finally barred by the fact that the spirit of enquiry found for Mitchy material that was comparatively plastic. That was after all apparent enough when at the end of a few vain passes he brought out sociably: "Well, has he done it?"

Still indeed there was something in Mrs. Brook's face that seemed to reply "Oh come—don't rush it, you know!" and something in the movement with which she turned away that described the state of their question as by no means so simple as that. On his refusal of tea she had rung for the removal of the table, and the bell was at this moment answered by the two men. Little ensued then, for some minutes, while the servants were present; she spoke only as the butler was about to close the door. "If Mr. Longdon presently comes show him into Mr. Brookenham's room if Mr. Brookenham isn't there. If he is show him into the dining-room and in either case let me immediately know."

The man waited expressionless. "And in case of his asking for Miss Brookenham—?"

"He won't!" she replied with a sharpness before which her interlocutor retired. "He will!" she then added in quite another

tone to Mitchy. “That is, you know, he perfectly MAY. But oh the subtlety of servants!” she sighed.

Mitchy was now all there. “Mr. Longdon’s in town then?”

“For the first time since you went away. He’s to call this afternoon.”

“And you want to see him alone?”

Mrs. Brook thought. “I don’t think I want to see him at all.”

“Then your keeping him below—?”

“Is so that he shan’t burst in till I know. It’s YOU, my dear, I want to see.”

Mitchy glared about. “Well, don’t take it ill if, in return for that, I say I myself want to see every one. I could have done even just now with a little more of Edward.”

Mrs. Brook, in her own manner and with a slow headshake, looked lovely. “*I* couldn’t.” Then she puzzled it out with a pause. “It even does come over me that if you don’t mind—!”

“What, my dear woman,” said Mitchy encouragingly, “did I EVER mind? I assure you,” he laughed, “I haven’t come back to begin!”

At this, suddenly dropping everything else, she laid her hand on him. “Mitchy love, ARE you happy?”

So for a moment they stood confronted. “Not perhaps as YOU would have tried to make me.”

“Well, you’ve still GOT me, you know.”

“Oh,” said Mitchy, “I’ve got a great deal. How, if I really look at it, can a man of my peculiar nature—it IS, you know, awfully peculiar—NOT be happy? Think, if one is driven to it for instance, of the breadth of my sympathies.”

Mrs. Brook, as a result of thinking, appeared for a little to demur. “Yes—but one mustn’t be too much driven to it. It’s by one’s sympathies that one suffers. If you should do that I couldn’t bear it.”

She clearly evoked for Mitchy a definite image. “It WOULD be funny, wouldn’t it? But you wouldn’t have to. I’d go off and do it alone somewhere—in a dark room, I think, or on a desert

island; at any rate where nobody should see. Where's the harm moreover," he went on, "of any suffering that doesn't bore one, as I'm sure, however much its outer aspect might amuse some others, mine wouldn't bore me? What I should do in my desert island or my dark room, I feel, would be just to dance about with the thrill of it—which is exactly the exhibition of ludicrous gambols that I would fain have arranged to spare you. I assure you, dear Mrs. Brook," he wound up, "that I'm not in the least bored now. Everything's so interesting."

"You're beautiful!" she vaguely interposed.

But he pursued without heeding: "Was perhaps what you had in your head that *I* should see him—?"

She came back but slowly, however, to the moment. "Mr. Longdon? Well, yes. You know he can't bear ME—"

"Yes, yes"—Mitchy was almost eager.

It had already sent her off again. "You're too lovely. You HAVE come back the same. It seemed to me," she after an instant explained, "that I wanted him to be seen—"

"Without inconvenience, as it were, either to himself or to you? Then," said Mitchy, who visibly felt that he had taken her up successfully, "it strikes me that I'm absolutely your man. It's delicious to come back to a use."

But she was much more dim about it. "Oh what you've come back to—!"

"It's just what I'm trying to get at. Van is still then where I left him?"

She was just silent. "Did you really believe he would move?"

Mitchy took a few turns, speaking almost with his back presented. "Well, with all the reasons—!" After which, while she watched him, he was before her again with a question. "It's utterly off?"

"When was it ever really on?"

"Oh I know your view, and that, I think," said Mitchy, "is the most extraordinary part of it. I can tell you it would have put ME on."

“My view?” Mrs. Brook thought. “Have you forgotten that I had for you too a view that didn’t?”

“Ah but we didn’t differ, you and I. It wasn’t a defiance and a prophecy. You wanted ME.”

“I did indeed!” Mrs. Brook said simply.

“And you didn’t want him. For HER, I mean. So you risked showing it.”

She looked surprised. “DID I?”

Again they were face to face. “Your candour’s divine!”

She wondered. “Do you mean it was even then?”

Mitchy smiled at her till he was red. “It’s exquisite now.”

“Well,” she presently returned, “I knew my Van!”

“*I* thought I knew ‘yours’ too,” Mitchy said. Their eyes met a minute and he added: “But I didn’t.” Then he exclaimed: “How you’ve worked it!”

She looked barely conscious. “‘Worked it’?” After which, with a slightly sharper note: “How do you know—while you’ve been amusing yourself in places that I’d give my head to see again but never shall—what I’ve been doing?”

“Well, I saw, you know, that night at Tishy’s, just before we left England, your wonderful start. I got a look at your attitude, as it were, and your system.”

Her eyes were now far away, and she spoke after an instant without moving them. “And didn’t I by the same token get a look at yours?”

“Mine?” Mitchy thought, but seemed to doubt. “My dear child, I hadn’t any then.”

“You mean that it has formed itself—your system—since?”

He shook his head with decision. “I assure you I’m quite at sea. I’ve never had, and I have as little as ever now, anything but my general philosophy, which I won’t attempt at present to go into and of which moreover I think you’ve had first and last your glimpses. What I made out in you that night was a perfect policy.”

Mrs. Brook had another of her infantine stares. “Every one that night seems to have made out something! All I can say is at any rate,” she went on, “that in that case you were all far deeper than I was.”

“It was just a blind instinct, without a programme or a scheme? Perhaps then, since it has so perfectly succeeded, the name doesn’t matter. I’m lost, as I tell you,” Mitchy declared, “in admiration of its success.”

She looked, as before, so young, yet so grave. “What do you call its success?”

“Let me ask you rather—mayn’t I?—what YOU call its failure.”

Mrs. Brook, who had been standing for some minutes, seated herself at this as if to respond to his idea. But the next moment she had fallen back into thought. “Have you often heard from him?”

“Never once.”

“And have you written?”

“Not a word either. I left it, you see,” Mitchy smiled, “all, to YOU.” After which he continued: “Has he been with you much?”

She just hesitated. “As little as possible. But as it happens he was here just now.”

Her visitor fairly flushed. “And I’ve only missed him?”

Her pause again was of the briefest. “You wouldn’t if he HAD gone up.”

“‘Gone up’?”

“To Nanda, who has now her own sitting-room, as you know; for whom he immediately asked and for whose benefit, whatever you may think, I was at the end of a quarter of an hour, I assure you, perfectly ready to release him. He changed his mind, however, and went away without seeing her.”

Mitchy showed the deepest interest. “And what made him change his mind?”

“Well, I’m thinking it out.”

He appeared to watch this labour. “But with no light yet?”

"When it comes I'll tell you."

He hung fire once more but an instant. "You didn't yourself work the thing again?"

She rose at this in strange sincerity. "I think, you know, you go very far."

"Why, didn't we just now settle," he promptly replied, "that it's all instinctive and unconscious? If it was so that night at Tishy's—!"

"Ah, voyons, voyons," she broke in, "what did I do even then?" He laughed out at something in her tone. "You'd like it again all pictured—?"

"I'm not afraid."

"Why, you just simply—publicly—took her back."

"And where was the monstrosity of that?"

"In the one little right place. In your removal of every doubt—"

"Well, of what?" He had appeared not quite to know how to put it. But he saw at last. "Why, of what we may still hope to do for her. Thanks to your care there were specimens." Then as she had the look of trying vainly to focus a few, "I can't recover them one by one," he pursued, "but the whole thing was quite lurid enough to do us all credit."

She met him after a little, but at such an odd point. "Pardon me if I scarcely see how much of the credit was yours. For the first time since I've known you, you went in for decency."

Mitchy's surprise showed as real. "It struck you as decency—?"

Since he wished she thought it over. "Oh your behaviour—!"

"My behaviour was—my condition. Do you call THAT decent? No, you're quite out." He spoke, in his good nature, with an approach to reproof. "How can I ever—?"

But it had already brought her quite round, and to a firmer earth that she clearly preferred to tread. "Are things really bad with you, Mitch?"

"Well, I'll tell you how they are. But not now."

"Some other time?—on your honour?"

"You shall have it all. Don't be afraid."

She dimly smiled. "It will be like old times."

He rather demurred. "For you perhaps. But not for me."

In spite of what he said it did hold her, and her hand again almost caressed him. "But—till you do tell me—is it very very dreadful?"

"That's just perhaps what I may have to get you to decide."

"Then shall I help you?" she eagerly asked.

"I think it will be quite in your line."

At the thought of her line—it sounded somehow so general—she released him a little with a sigh, yet still looking round, as it were, for possibilities. "Jane, you know, is in a state."

"Yes, Jane's in a state. That's a comfort!"

She continued in a manner to cling to him. "But is it your only one?"

He was very kind and patient. "Not perhaps quite."

"I'M a little of one?"

"My dear child, as you see."

Yes, she saw, but was still on the wing. "And shall you have recourse—?"

"To what?" he asked as she appeared to falter.

"I don't mean to anything violent. But shall you tell Nanda?"

Mitchy wondered. "Tell her—?"

"Well, everything. I think, you know," Mrs. Brook musingly observed, "that it would really serve her right."

Mitchy's silence, which lasted a minute, seemed to take the idea, but not perhaps quite to know what to do with it. "Ah I'm afraid I shall never really serve her right!"

Just as he spoke the butler reappeared; at sight of whom Mrs. Brook immediately guessed. "Mr. Longdon?"

"In Mr. Brookenham's room, ma'am. Mr. Brookenham has gone out."

"And where has he gone?"

"I think, ma'am, only for some evening papers."

She had an intense look for Mitchy; then she said to the man: "Ask him to wait three minutes—I'll ring;" turning again to her visitor as soon as they were alone. "You don't know how I'm trusting you!"

"Trusting me?"

"Why, if he comes up to you."

Mitchy thought. "Hadn't I better go down?"

"No—you may have Edward back. If you see him you must see him here. If I don't myself it's for a reason."

Mitchy again just sounded her. "His not, as you a while ago hinted—?"

"Yes, caring for what I say." She had a pause, but she brought it out. "He doesn't believe a word—!"

"Of what you tell him?" Mitchy was splendid. "I see. And you want something said to him."

"Yes, that he'll take from YOU. Only it's for you," Mrs. Brook went on, "really and honestly, and as I trust you, to give it. But the comfort of you is that you'll do so if you promise."

Mitchy was infinitely struck. "But I haven't promised, eh? Of course I can't till I know what it is."

"It's to put before him—!"

"Oh I see: the situation."

"What has happened here to-day. Van's marked retreat and how, with the time that has passed, it makes us at last know where we are. You of course for yourself," Mrs. Brook wound up, "see that."

"Where we are?" Mitchy took a turn and came back. "But what then did Van come for? If you speak of a retreat there must have been an advance."

"Oh," said Mrs. Brook, "he simply wanted not to look too brutal. After so much absence he COULD come."

"Well, if he established that he isn't brutal, where was the retreat?"

"In his not going up to Nanda. He came—frankly—to do that, but made up his mind on second thoughts that he couldn't risk even being civil to her."

Mitchy had visibly warmed to his work. "Well, and what made the difference?"

She wondered. "What difference?"

"Why, of the effect, as you say, of his second thoughts. Thoughts of what?"

"Oh," said Mrs. Brook suddenly and as if it were quite simple—"I know THAT! Suspicions."

"And of whom?"

"Why, of YOU, you goose. Of your not having done—"

"Well, what?" he persisted as she paused.

"How shall I say it? The best thing for yourself. And of Nanda's feeling that. Don't you see?"

In the effort of seeing, or perhaps indeed in the full act of it, poor Mitchy glared as never before. "Do you mean Van's JEALOUS of me?"

Pressed as she was, there was something in his face that momentarily hushed her. "There it is!" she achieved however at last.

"Of ME?" Mitchy went on.

What was in his face so suddenly and strangely—was the look of rising tears—at sight of which, as from a compunction as prompt, she showed a lovely flush. "There it is, there it is," she repeated. "You ask me for a reason, and it's the only one I see. Of course if you don't care," she added, "he needn't come up. He can go straight to Nanda."

Mitchy had turned away again as with the impulse of hiding the tears that had risen and that had not wholly disappeared even by the time he faced about. "Did Nanda know he was to come?"

"Mr. Longdon?"

"No, no. Was she expecting Van—?"

“My dear man,” Mrs. Brook mildly wailed, “when can she have NOT been?”

Mitchy looked hard for an instant at the floor. “I mean does she know he has been and gone?”

Mrs. Brook, from where she stood and through the window, looked rather at the sky. “Her father will have told her.”

“Her father?” Mitchy frankly wondered. “Is HE in it?”

Mrs. Brook had at this a longer pause. “You assume, I suppose, Mitchy dear,” she then quavered “that I put him up—!”

“Put Edward up?” he broke in.

“No—that of course. Put Van up to ideas—!”

He caught it again. “About ME—what you call his suspicions?” He seemed to weigh the charge, but it ended, while he passed his hand hard over his eyes, in weariness and in the nearest approach to coldness he had ever shown Mrs. Brook. “It doesn’t matter. It’s every one’s fate to be in one way or another the subject of ideas. Do then,” he continued, “let Mr. Longdon come up.”

She instantly rang the bell. “Then I’ll go to Nanda. But don’t look frightened,” she added as she came back, “as to what we may—Edward or I—do next. It’s only to tell her that he’ll be with her.”

“Good. I’ll tell Tatton,” Mitchy replied.

Still, however, she lingered. “Shall you ever care for me more?”

He had almost the air, as he waited for her to go, of the master of the house, for she had made herself before him, as he stood with his back to the fire, as humble as a tolerated visitor. “Oh just as much. Where’s the difference? Aren’t our ties in fact rather multiplied?”

“That’s the way *I* want to feel it. And from the moment you recognise with me—”

“Yes?”

“Well, that he never, you know, really WOULD—”

He took her mercifully up. “There’s no harm done?” Mitchy thought of it.

It made her still hover. “Nanda will be rich. Toward that you CAN help, and it’s really, I may now tell you, what it came into my head you should see our friend here FOR.”

He maintained his waiting attitude. “Thanks, thanks.”

“You’re our guardian angel!” she exclaimed.

At this he laughed out. “Wait till you see what Mr. Longdon does!”

But she took no notice. “I want you to see before I go that I’ve done nothing for myself. Van, after all—!” she mused.

“Well?”

“Only hates me. It isn’t as with you,” she said. “I’ve really lost him.”

Mitchy for an instant, with the eyes that had shown his tears, glared away into space. “He can’t very positively, you know, now like ANY of us. He misses a fortune.”

“There it is!” Mrs. Brook once more observed. Then she had a comparative brightness. “I’m so glad YOU don’t!” He gave another laugh, but she was already facing Mr. Tatton, who had again answered the bell. “Show Mr. Longdon up.”

“I’m to tell him then it’s at your request?” Mitchy asked when the butler had gone.

“That you receive him? Oh yes. He’ll be the last to quarrel with that. But there’s one more thing.”

It was something over which of a sudden she had one of her returns of anxiety. “I’ve been trying for months and months to remember to find out from you—”

“Well, what?” he enquired, as she looked odd.

“Why if Harold ever gave back to you, as he swore to me on his honour he would, that five-pound note—!”

“But which, dear lady?” The sense of other incongruities than those they had been dealing with seemed to arrive now for Mitchy’s aid.

"The one that, ages ago, one day when you and Van were here, we had the joke about. You produced it, in sport, as a 'fine' for something, and put it on that table; after which, before I knew what you were about, before I could run after you, you had gone off and ridiculously left it. Of course the next minute—and again before I could turn round—Harold had pounced on it, and I tried in vain to recover it from him. But all I could get him to do—"

"Was to promise to restore it straight to its owner?" Mitchy had listened so much less in surprise than in amusement that he had apparently after a moment re-established the scene. "Oh I recollect—he did settle with me. THAT'S all right."

She fixed him from the door of the next room. "You got every penny?"

"Every penny. But fancy your bringing it up!"

"Ah I always do, you know—SOME day."

"Yes, you're of a rigour—! But be at peace. Harold's quite square," he went on, "and I quite meant to have asked you about him."

Mrs. Brook, promptly, was all for this. "Oh it's all right."

Mitchy came nearer. "Lady Fanny—?"

"Yes—HAS stayed for him."

"Ah," said Mitchy, "I knew you'd do it! But hush—they're coming!" On which, while she whisked away, he went back to the fire.

IV

Ten minutes of talk with Mr. Longdon by Mrs. Brookenham's hearth elapsed for him without his arriving at the right moment to take up the business so richly put before him in his previous interview. No less time indeed could have sufficed to bring him into closer relation with this affair, and nothing at first could have been more marked than the earnestness of his care not to show impatience of appeals that were, for a person of his old friend's general style, simple recognitions and decencies. There was a limit to the mere allusiveness with which, in Mr.

Longdon's school of manners, a foreign tour might be treated, and Mitchy, no doubt, plentifully showed that none of his frequent returns had encountered a curiosity at once so explicit and so discreet. To belong to a circle in which most of the members might be at any moment on the other side of the globe was inevitably to fall into the habit of few questions, as well as into that of making up for their fewness by their freedom. This interlocutor in short, while Mrs. Brook's representative privately thought over all he had in hand, went at some length and very charmingly—since it was but a tribute to common courtesy—into the Virgilian associations of the Bay of Naples. Finally, however, he started, his eye having turned to the clock. "I'm afraid that, though our hostess doesn't appear, I mustn't forget myself. I too came back but yesterday and I've an engagement—for which I'm already late—with Miss Brookenham, who has been so good as to ask me to tea."

The divided mind, the express civility, the decent "Miss Brookenham," the escape from their hostess—these were all things Mitchy could quickly take in, and they gave him in a moment his light for not missing his occasion. "I see, I see—I shall make you keep Nanda waiting. But there's something I shall ask you to take from me quite as a sufficient basis for that: which is simply that after all, you know—for I think you do know, don't you?—I'm nearly as much attached to her as you are."

Mr. Longdon had looked suddenly apprehensive and even a trifle embarrassed, but he spoke with due presence of mind. "Of course I understand that perfectly. If you hadn't liked her so much—"

"Well?" said Mitchy as he checked himself.

"I would never, last year, have gone to stay with you."

"Thank you!" Mitchy laughed.

"Though I like you also—and extremely," Mr. Longdon gravely pursued, "for yourself."

Mitchy made a sign of acknowledgement. "You like me better for HER than you do for anybody else BUT myself."

“You put it, I think, correctly. Of course I’ve not seen so much of Nanda—if between my age and hers, that is, any real contact is possible—without knowing that she now regards you as one of the very best of her friends, treating you, I find myself suspecting, with a degree of confidence—”

Mitchy gave a laugh of interruption. “That she doesn’t show even to you?”

Mr. Longdon’s poised glasses faced him. “Even! I don’t mind, as the opportunity has come up, telling you frankly—and as from my time of life to your own—all the comfort I take in the sense that in any case of need or trouble she might look to you for whatever advice or support the crisis should demand.”

“She has told you she feels I’d be there?” Mitchy after an instant asked.

“I’m not sure,” his friend replied, “that I ought quite to mention anything she has ‘told’ me. I speak of what I’ve made out myself.”

“Then I thank you more than I can say for your penetration. Her mother, I should let you know,” Mitchy continued, “is with her just now.”

Mr. Longdon took off his glasses with a jerk. “Has anything happened to her?”

“To account for the fact I refer to?” Mitchy said in amusement at his start. “She’s not ill, that I know of, thank goodness, and she hasn’t broken her leg. But something, none the less, has happened to her—that I think I may say. To tell you all in a word, it’s the reason, such as it is, of my being here to meet you. Mrs. Brook asked me to wait. She’ll see you herself some other time.”

Mr. Longdon wondered. “And Nanda too?”

“Oh that must be between yourselves. Only, while I keep you here—”

“She understands my delay?”

Mitchy thought. “Mrs. Brook must have explained.” Then as his companion took this in silence, “But you don’t like it?” he asked.

“It only comes to me that Mrs. Brook’s explanations—!”

“Are often so odd? Oh yes; but Nanda, you know, allows for that oddity. And Mrs. Brook, by the same token,” Mitchy developed, “knows herself—no one better—what may frequently be thought of it. That’s precisely the reason of her desire that you should have on this occasion explanations from a source that she’s so good as to pronounce, for the immediate purpose, superior. As for Nanda,” he wound up, “to be aware that we’re here together won’t strike her as so bad a sign.”

“No,” Mr. Longdon attentively assented; “she’ll hardly fear we’re plotting her ruin. But what then has happened to her?”

“Well,” said Mitchy, “it’s you, I think, who will have to give it a name. I know you know what I’ve known.”

Mr. Longdon, his nippers again in place, hesitated. “Yes, I know.”

“And you’ve accepted it.”

“How could I help it? To reckon with such cleverness—!”

“Was beyond you? Ah it wasn’t my cleverness,” Mitchy said. “There’s a greater than mine. There’s a greater even than Van’s. That’s the whole point,” he went on while his friend looked at him hard. “You don’t even like it just a little?”

Mr. Longdon wondered. “The existence of such an element—?”

“No; the existence simply of my knowledge of your idea.”

“I suppose I’m bound to keep in mind in fairness the existence of my own knowledge of yours.”

But Mitchy gave that the go-by. “Oh I’ve so many ‘ideas’! I’m always getting hold of some new one and for the most part trying it—generally to let it go as a failure. Yes, I had one six months ago. I tried that. I’m trying it still.”

“Then I hope,” said Mr. Longdon with a gaiety slightly strained, “that, contrary to your usual rule, it’s a success.”

It was a gaiety, for that matter, that Mitchy's could match. "It does promise well! But I've another idea even now, and it's just what I'm again trying."

"On me?" Mr. Longdon still somewhat extravagantly smiled.

Mitchy thought. "Well, on two or three persons, of whom you ARE the first for me to tackle. But what I must begin with is having from you that you recognise she trusts us."

Mitchy's idea after an instant had visibly gone further. "Both of them—the two women up there at present so strangely together. Mrs. Brook must too; immensely. But for that you won't care."

Mr. Longdon had relapsed into an anxiety more natural than his expression of a moment before. "It's about time! But if Nanda didn't trust us," he went on, "her case would indeed be a sorry one. She has nobody else to trust."

"Yes." Mitchy's concurrence was grave. "Only you and me."

"Only you and me."

The eyes of the two men met over it in a pause terminated at last by Mitchy's saying: "We must make it all up to her."

"Is that your idea?"

"Ah," said Mitchy gently, "don't laugh at it."

His friend's grey gloom again covered him. "But what CAN—?" Then as Mitchy showed a face that seemed to wince with a silent "What COULD?" the old man completed his objection. "Think of the magnitude of the loss."

"Oh I don't for a moment suggest," Mitchy hastened to reply, "that it isn't immense."

"She does care for him, you know," said Mr. Longdon.

Mitchy, at this, gave a wide, prolonged glare. "'Know'—?" he ever so delicately murmured.

His irony had quite touched. "But of course you know! You know everything—Nanda and you."

There was a tone in it that moved a spring, and Mitchy laughed out. "I like your putting me with her! But we're all together. With Nanda," he next added, "it IS deep."

His companion took it from him. “Deep.”

“And yet somehow it isn’t abject.”

The old man wondered. “‘Abject’?”

“I mean it isn’t pitiful. In its way,” Mitchy developed, “it’s happy.”

This too, though rather ruefully, Mr. Longdon could take from him. “Yes—in its way.”

“Any passion so great, so complete,” Mitchy went on, “is—satisfied or unsatisfied—a life.” Mr. Longdon looked so interested that his fellow visitor, evidently stirred by what was now an appeal and a dependence, grew still more bland, or at least more assured, for affirmation. “She’s not TOO sorry for herself.”

“Ah she’s so proud!”

“Yes, but that’s a help.”

“Oh—not for US!”

It arrested Mitchy, but his ingenuity could only rebound. “In ONE way: that of reducing us to feel that the desire to ‘make up’ to her is—well, mainly for OUR relief. If she ‘trusts’ us, as I said just now, it isn’t for THAT she does so.” As his friend appeared to wait then to hear, it was presently with positive joy that he showed he could meet the last difficulty. “What she trusts us to do”—oh Mitchy had worked it out!—“is to let HIM off.”

“Let him off?” It still left Mr. Longdon dim.

“Easily. That’s all.”

“But what would letting him off hard be? It seems to me he’s—on any terms—already beyond us. He IS off.”

Mr. Longdon had given it a sound that suddenly made Mitchy appear to collapse under a sharper sense of the matter. “He IS off,” he moodily echoed.

His companion, again a little bewildered, watched him; then with impatience: “Do, please, tell me what has happened.”

He quickly pulled himself round. “Well, he was, after a long absence, here a while since as if expressly to see her. But after spending half an hour he went away without it.”

Mr. Longdon's watch continued. "He spent the half-hour with her mother instead?"

"Oh 'instead'—it was hardly that. He at all events dropped his idea."

"And what had it been, his idea?"

"You speak as if he had as many as I!" Mitchy replied. "In a manner indeed he has," he continued as if for himself. "But they're of a different kind," he said to Mr. Longdon.

"What had it been, his idea?" the old man, however, simply repeated.

Mitchy's confession at this seemed to explain his previous evasion. "We shall never know."

Mr. Longdon hesitated. "He won't tell YOU?"

"Me?" Mitchy had a pause. "Less than any one."

Many things they had not spoken had already passed between them, and something evidently, to the sense of each, passed during the moment that followed this. "While you were abroad," Mr. Longdon presently asked, "did you hear from him?"

"Never. And I wrote nothing."

"Like me," said Mr. Longdon. "I've neither written nor heard."

"Ah but with you it will be different." Mr. Longdon, as if with the outbreak of an agitation hitherto controlled, had turned abruptly away and, with the usual swing of his glass, begun almost wildly to wander. "You WILL hear."

"I shall be curious."

"Oh but what Nanda wants, you know, is that you shouldn't be too much so."

Mr. Longdon thoughtfully rambled. "Too much—?"

"To let him off, as we were saying, easily."

The elder man for a while said nothing more, but he at last came back. "She'd like me actually to give him something?"

"I dare say!"

"Money?"

Mitchy smiled. “A handsome present.” They were face to face again with more mute interchange. “She doesn’t want HIM to have lost—!” Mr. Longdon, however, on this, once more broke off while Mitchy’s eyes followed him. “Doesn’t it give a sort of measure of what she may feel—?”

He had paused, working it out again with the effect of his friend’s returning afresh to be fed with his light. “Doesn’t what give it?”

“Why the fact that we still like him.”

Mr. Longdon stared. “Do YOU still like him?”

“If I didn’t how should I mind—?” But on the utterance of it Mitchy fairly pulled up.

His companion, after another look, laid a mild hand on his shoulder. “What is it you mind?”

“From HIM? Oh nothing!” He could trust himself again. “There are people like that—great cases of privilege.”

“He IS one!” Mr. Longdon mused.

“There it is. They go through life somehow guaranteed. They can’t help pleasing.”

“Ah,” Mr. Longdon murmured, “if it hadn’t been for that—!”

“They hold, they keep every one,” Mitchy went on. “It’s the sacred terror.”

The companions for a little seemed to stand together in this element; after which the elder turned once more away and appeared to continue to walk in it. “Poor Nanda!” then, in a far-off sigh, came across from him to Mitchy. Mitchy on this turned vaguely round to the fire, into which he remained gazing till he heard again Mr. Longdon’s voice. “I knew it of course after all. It was what I came up to town for. That night, before you went abroad, at Mrs. Grendon’s—”

“Yes?”—Mitchy was with him again.

“Well, made me see the future. It was then already too late.”

Mitchy assented with emphasis. “Too late. She was spoiled for him.”

If Mr. Longdon had to take it he took it at least quietly, only saying after a time: “And her mother ISN’T?”

“Oh yes. Quite.”

“And does Mrs. Brook know it?”

“Yes, but doesn’t mind. She resembles you and me. She ‘still likes’ him.”

“But what good will that do her?”

Mitchy sketched a shrug. “What good does it do US?”

Mr. Longdon thought. “We can at least respect ourselves.”

“CAN we?” Mitchy smiled.

“And HE can respect us,” his friend, as if not hearing him, went on.

Mitchy seemed almost to demur. “He must think we’re ‘rum.’”

“Well, Mrs. Brook’s worse than rum. He can’t respect HER.”

“Oh that will be perhaps,” Mitchy laughed, “what she’ll get just most out of!” It was the first time of Mr. Longdon’s showing that even after a minute he had not understood him; so that as quickly as possible he passed to another point. “If you do anything may I be in it?”

“But what can I do? If it’s over it’s over.”

“For HIM, yes. But not for her or for you or for me.”

“Oh I’m not for long!” the old man wearily said, turning the next moment to the door, at which one of the footmen had appeared.

“Mrs. Brookenham’s compliments, please sir,” this messenger articulated, “and Miss Brookenham is now alone.”

“Thanks—I’ll come up.”

The servant withdrew, and the eyes of the two visitors again met for a minute, after which Mitchy looked about for his hat. “Good-bye. I’ll go.”

Mr. Longdon watched him while, having found his hat, he looked about for his stick. “You want to be in EVERYTHING?”

Mitchy, without answering, smoothed his hat down; then he replied: “You say you’re not for long, but you won’t abandon her.”

“Oh I mean I shan’t last for ever.”

“Well, since you so expressed it yourself, that’s what I mean too. I assure you *I* shan’t desert her. And if I can help you—!”

“Help me?” Mr. Longdon interrupted, looking at him hard.

It made him a little awkward. “Help you to help her, you know—!”

“You’re very wonderful,” Mr. Longdon presently returned. “A year and a half ago you wanted to help me to help Mr. Vanderbank.”

“Well,” said Mitchy, “you can’t quite say I haven’t.”

“But your ideas of help are of a splendour—!”

“Oh I’ve told you about my ideas.” Mitchy was almost apologetic. Mr. Longdon had a pause. “I suppose I’m not indiscreet then in recognising your marriage as one of them. And that, with a responsibility so great already assumed, you appear fairly eager for another—!”

“Makes me out a kind of monster of benevolence?” Mitchy looked at it with a flushed face. “The two responsibilities are very much one and the same. My marriage has brought me, as it were, only nearer to Nanda. My wife and she, don’t you see? are particular friends.”

Mr. Longdon, on his side, turned a trifle pale; he looked rather hard at the floor. “I see—I see.” Then he raised his eyes. “But—to an old fellow like me—it’s all so strange.”

“It IS strange.” Mitchy spoke very kindly. “But it’s all right.”

Mr. Longdon gave a headshake that was both sad and sharp. “It’s all wrong. But YOU’RE all right!” he added in a different tone as he walked hastily away.

BOOK TENTH. NANDA

I

Nanda Brookenham, for a fortnight after Mr. Longdon's return, had found much to think of; but the bustle of business became, visibly for us, particularly great with her on a certain Friday afternoon in June. She was in unusual possession of that chamber of comfort in which so much of her life had lately been passed, the redecorated and rededicated room upstairs in which she had enjoyed a due measure both of solitude and of society. Passing the objects about her in review she gave especial attention to her rather marked wealth of books; changed repeatedly, for five minutes, the position of various volumes, transferred to tables those that were on shelves and rearranged shelves with an eye to the effect of backs. She was flagrantly engaged throughout indeed in the study of effect, which moreover, had the law of an extreme freshness not inveterately prevailed there, might have been observed to be traceable in the very detail of her own appearance. "Company" in short was in the air and expectation in the picture. The flowers on the little tables bloomed with a consciousness sharply taken up by the glitter of nick-nacks and reproduced in turn in the light exuberance of cushions on sofas and the measured drop of blinds in windows. The numerous photographed friends in particular were highly prepared, with small intense faces, each, that happened in every case to be turned to the door. The pair of eyes most dilated perhaps was that of old Van, present under a polished glass and in a frame of gilt-edged morocco that spoke out, across the room, of Piccadilly and Christmas, and visibly widening his gaze at the opening of the door, at the announcement of a name by a footman and at the entrance of a gentleman remarkably like him save as the resemblance was on the gentleman's part flattered. Vanderbank had not been in the room ten seconds before he showed ever so markedly that he had arrived to be kind. Kindness therefore becomes for us, by a quick turn of the glass that reflects the whole scene, the high

pitch of the concert—a kindness that almost immediately filled the place, to the exclusion of everything else, with a familiar friendly voice, a brightness of good looks and good intentions, a constant though perhaps sometimes misapplied laugh, a superabundance almost of interest, inattention and movement.

The first thing the young man said was that he was tremendously glad she had written. “I think it was most particularly nice of you.” And this thought precisely seemed, as he spoke, a flower of the general bloom—as if the niceness he had brought in was so great that it straightway converted everything to its image. “The only thing that upset me a little,” he went on, “was your saying that before writing it you had so hesitated and waited. I hope very much, you know, that you’ll never do anything of that kind again. If you’ve ever the slightest desire to see me—for no matter what reason, if there’s ever the smallest thing of any sort that I can do for you, I promise you I shan’t easily forgive you if you stand on ceremony. It seems to me that when people have known each other as long as you and I there’s one comfort at least they may treat themselves to. I mean of course,” Van developed, “that of being easy and frank and natural. There are such a lot of relations in which one isn’t, in which it doesn’t pay, in which ‘ease’ in fact would be the greatest of troubles and ‘nature’ the greatest of falsities. However,” he continued while he suddenly got up to change the place in which he had put his hat, “I don’t really know why I’m preaching at such a rate, for I’ve a perfect consciousness of not myself requiring it. One does half the time preach more or less for one’s self, eh? I’m not mistaken at all events, I think, about the right thing with YOU. And a hint’s enough for you, I’m sure, on the right thing with me.” He had been looking all round while he talked and had twice shifted his seat; so that it was quite in consonance with his general admiring notice that the next impression he broke out with should have achieved some air of relevance. “What extraordinarily lovely flowers you have and how charming you’ve made everything! You’re always doing something—women are always changing the position of their furniture. If one happens to come in in the dark, no matter

how well one knows the place, one sits down on a hat or a puppy-dog. But of course you'll say one doesn't come in in the dark, or at least, if one does, deserves what one gets. Only you know the way some women keep their rooms. I'm bound to say YOU don't, do you?—you don't go in for flower-pots in the windows and half a dozen blinds. Why SHOULD you? You HAVE got a lot to show!" He rose with this for the third time, as the better to command the scene. "What I mean is that sofa—which by the way is awfully good: you do, my dear Nanda, go it! It certainly was HERE the last time, wasn't it? and this thing was there. The last time—I mean the last time I was up here—was fearfully long ago: when, by the way, WAS it? But you see I HAVE been and that I remember it. And you've a lot more things now. You're laying up treasure. Really the increase of luxury—! What an awfully jolly lot of books—have you read them all? Where did you learn so much about bindings?"

He continued to talk; he took things up and put them down; Nanda sat in her place, where her stillness, fixed and colourless, contrasted with his rather flushed freedom, and appeared only to wait, half in surprise, half in surrender, for the flow of his suggestiveness to run its course, so that, having herself provoked the occasion, she might do a little more to meet it. It was by no means, however, that his presence in any degree ceased to prevail; for there were minutes during which her face, the only thing in her that moved, turning with his turns and following his glances, actually had a look inconsistent with anything but submission to almost any accident. It might have expressed a desire for his talk to last and last, an acceptance of any treatment of the hour or any version, or want of version, of her act that would best suit his ease, even in fact a resigned prevision of the occurrence of something that would leave her, quenched and blank, with the appearance of having made him come simply that she might look at him. She might indeed well have been aware of an inability to look at him little enough to make it flagrant that she had appealed to him for something quite different. Keeping the situation meanwhile thus in his hands he recognised over the chimney a new alteration. "There

used to be a big print—wasn't there? a thing of the fifties—we had lots of them at home; some place or other 'in the olden time.' And now there's that lovely French glass. So you see." He spoke as if she had in some way gainsaid him, whereas he had not left her time even to answer a question. But he broke out anew on the beauty of her flowers. "You have awfully good ones—where do you get them? Flowers and pictures and—what are the other things people have when they're happy and superior?—books and birds. You ought to have a bird or two, though I dare say you think that by the noise I make I'm as good myself as a dozen. Isn't there some girl in some story—it isn't Scott; what is it?—who had domestic difficulties and a cage in her window and whom one associates with chickweed and virtue? It isn't Esmeralda—Esmeralda had a poodle, hadn't she?—or have I got my heroines mixed? You're up here yourself like a heroine; you're perched in your tower or what do you call it?—your bower. You quite hang over the place, you know—the great wicked city, the wonderful London sky and the monuments looming through: or am I again only muddling up my Zola? You must have the sunsets—haven't you? No—what am I talking about? Of course you look north. Well, they strike me as about the only thing you haven't. At the same time it's not only because I envy you that I feel humiliated. I ought to have sent you some flowers." He smote himself with horror, throwing back his head with a sudden thought. "Why in goodness when I got your note didn't I for once in my life do something really graceful? I simply liked it and answered it. Here I am. But I've brought nothing. I haven't even brought a box of sweets. I'm not a man of the world."

"Most of the flowers here," Nanda at last said, "come from Mr. Longdon. Don't you remember his garden?"

Vanderbank, in quick response, called it up. "Dear yes—wasn't it charming? And that morning you and I spent there"—he was so careful to be easy about it—"talking under the trees."

"You had gone out to be quiet and read—!"

"And you came out to look after me. Well, I remember," Van went on, "that we had some good talk."

The talk, Nanda's face implied, had become dim to her; but there were other things. "You know he's a great gardener—I mean really one of the greatest. His garden's like a dinner in a house where the person—the person of the house—thoroughly knows and cares."

"I see. And he sends you dishes from the table."

"Often—every week. It comes to the same thing—now that he's in town his gardener does it."

"Charming of them both!" Vanderbank exclaimed. "But his gardener—that extraordinarily tall fellow with the long red beard—was almost as nice as himself. I had talks with HIM too and remember every word he said. I remember he told me you asked questions that showed 'a deal of study.' But I thought I had never seen all round such a charming lot of people—I mean as those down there that our friend has got about him. It's an awfully good note for a man, pleasant servants, I always think, don't you? Mr. Longdon's—and quite without their saying anything; just from the sort of type and manner they had—struck me as a kind of chorus of praise. The same with Mitchy's at Mertle, I remember," Van rambled on. "Mitchy's the sort of chap who might have awful ones, but I recollect telling him that one quite felt as if it were with THEM one had come to stay. Good note, good note," he cheerfully repeated. "I'm bound to say, you know," he continued in this key, "that you've a jolly sense for getting in with people who make you comfortable. Then, by the way, he's still in town?"

Nanda waited. "Do you mean Mr. Mitchy?"

"Oh HE is, I know—I met them two nights ago; and by the way again—don't let me forget—I want to speak to you about his wife. But I've not seen, do you know? Mr. Longdon—which is really too awful. Twice, thrice I think, have I at moments like this one snatched myself from pressure; but there's no finding the old demon at any earthly hour. When do YOU go—or does he only come here? Of course I see you've got the place

arranged for him. When I asked at his hotel at what hour he ever IS in, blest if the fellow didn't say 'very often, sir, about ten!' And when I said 'Ten P. M.?' he quite laughed at my innocence over a person of such habits. What ARE his habits then now, and what are you putting him up to? Seriously," Vanderbank pursued, "I AM awfully sorry and I wonder if, the first time you've a chance, you'd kindly tell him you've heard me say so and that I mean yet to run him to earth. The same really with the dear Mitchys. I didn't somehow, the other night, in such a lot of people, get at them. But I sat opposite to Aggie all through dinner, and that puts me in mind. I should like volumes from you about Aggie, please. It's too revolting of me not to go to see her. But every one knows I'm busy. We're up to our necks!"

"I can't tell you," said Nanda, "how kind I think it of you to have found, with all you have to do, a moment for THIS. But please, without delay, let me tell you—!"

Practically, however, he would let her tell him nothing; his almost aggressive friendly optimism clung so to references of short range. "Don't mention it, please. It's too charming of you to squeeze me in. To see YOU moreover does me good. Quite distinct good. And your writing me touched me—oh but really. There were all sorts of old things in it." Then he broke out once more on her books, one of which for some minutes past he had held in his hand. "I see you go in for sets—and, my dear child, upon my word, I see, BIG sets. What's this?—'Vol. 23: The British Poets.' Vol. 23 is delightful—do tell me about Vol. 23. Are you doing much in the British Poets? But when the deuce, you wonderful being, do you find time to read? *I* don't find any—it's too hideous. One relapses in London into such illiteracy and barbarism. I have to keep up a false glitter to hide in conversation my rapidly increasing ignorance: I should be so ashamed after all to see other people NOT shocked by it. But teach me, teach me!" he gaily went on.

"The British Poets," Nanda immediately answered, "were given me by Mr. Longdon, who has given me all the good books I have except a few—those in that top row—that have been

given me at different times by Mr. Mitchy. Mr. Mitchy has sent me flowers too, as well as Mr. Longdon. And they're both—since we've spoken of my seeing them—coming by appointment this afternoon; not together, but Mr. Mitchy at 5.30 and Mr. Longdon at 6.30."

She had spoken as with conscious promptitude, making up for what she had not yet succeeded in saying by a quick, complete statement of her case. She was evidently also going on with more, but her actual visitor had already taken her up with a laugh. "You ARE making a day of it and you run us like railway-trains!" He looked at his watch. "Have *I* then time?"

"It seems to me I should say 'Have *I*?' But it's not half-past four," Nanda went on, "and though I've something very particular of course to say to you it won't take long. They don't bring tea till five, and you must surely stay till that. I had already written to you when they each, for the same reason, proposed this afternoon. They go out of town to-morrow for Sunday."

"Oh I see—and they have to see you first. What an influence you exert, you know, on people's behaviour!"

She continued as literal as her friend was facetious. "Well, it just happened so, and it didn't matter, since, on my asking you, don't you know? to choose your time, you had taken, as suiting you best, this comparatively early hour."

"Oh perfectly." But he again had his watch out. "I've a job, perversely—that was my reason—on the other side of the world; which, by the way, I'm afraid, won't permit me to wait for tea. My tea doesn't matter." The watch went back to his pocket. "I'm sorry to say I must be off before five. It has been delightful at all events to see you again."

He was on his feet as he spoke, and though he had been half the time on his feet his last words gave the effect of his moving almost immediately to the door. It appeared to come out with them rather clearer than before that he was embarrassed enough really to need help, and it was doubtless the measure she after an instant took of this that enabled Nanda, with a

quietness all her own, to draw to herself a little more of the situation. The quietness was plainly determined for her by a quick vision of its being the best assistance she could show. Had he an inward terror that explained his superficial nervousness, the incoherence of a loquacity designed, it would seem, to check in each direction her advance? He only fed it in that case by allowing his precautionary benevolence to put him in so much deeper. Where indeed could he have supposed she wanted to come out, and what that she could ever do for him would really be so beautiful as this present chance to smooth his confusion and add as much as possible to that refined satisfaction with himself which would proceed from his having dealt with a difficult hour in a gallant and delicate way? To force upon him an awkwardness was like forcing a disfigurement or a hurt, so that at the end of a minute, during which the expression of her face became a kind of uplifted view of her opportunity, she arrived at the appearance of having changed places with him and of their being together precisely in order that he—not she—should be let down easily.

II

"But surely you're not going already?" she asked. "Why in the world then do you suppose I appealed to you?"

"Bless me, no; I've lots of time." He dropped, laughing for very eagerness, straight into another chair. "You're too awfully interesting. Is it really an 'appeal'?" Putting the question indeed he could scarce even yet allow her a chance to answer it. "It's only that you make me a little nervous with your account of all the people who are going to tumble in. And there's one thing more," he quickly went on; "I just want to make the point in case we should be interrupted. The whole fun is in seeing you this way alone."

"Is THAT the point?" Nanda, as he took breath, gravely asked.

"That's a part of it—I feel it, I assure you, to be charming. But what I meant—if you'd only give me time, you know, to put in a word—is what for that matter I've already told you: that it

almost spoils my pleasure for you to keep reminding me that a bit of luck like this—luck for ME: I see you coming!—is after all for you but a question of business. Hang business! Good—don't stab me with that paper-knife. I listen. What IS the great affair?" Then as it looked for an instant as if the words she had prepared were just, in the supreme pinch of her need, falling apart, he once more tried his advantage. "Oh if there's any difficulty about it let it go—we'll take it for granted. There's one thing at any rate—do let me say this—that I SHOULD like you to keep before me: I want before I go to make you light up for me the question of little Aggie. Oh there are other questions too as to which I regard you as a perfect fountain of curious knowledge! However, we'll take them one by one—the next some other time. You always seem to me to hold the strings of such a lot of queer little dramas. Have something on the shelf for me when we meet again. THE thing just now is the outlook for Mitchy's affair. One cares enough for old Mitch to fancy one may feel safer for a lead or two. In fact I want regularly to turn you on."

"Ah but the thing I happen to have taken it into my head to say to you," Nanda now securely enough replied, "hasn't the least bit to do, I assure you, either with Aggie or with 'old Mitch.' If you don't want to hear it—want some way of getting off—please believe THEY won't help you a bit." It was quite in fact that she felt herself at last to have found the right tone. Nothing less than a conviction of this could have made her after an instant add: "What in the world, Mr. Van, are you afraid of?"

Well, that it WAS the right tone a single little minute was sufficient to prove—a minute, I must yet haste to say, big enough in spite of its smallness to contain the longest look on any occasion exchanged between these friends. It was one of those looks—not so frequent, it must be admitted, as the muse of history, dealing at best in short cuts, is often by the conditions of her trade reduced to representing them—which after they have come and gone are felt not only to have changed relations but absolutely to have cleared the air. It certainly

helped Vanderbank to find his answer. “I’m only afraid, I think, of your conscience.”

He had been indeed for the space more helped than she. “My conscience?”

“Think it over—quite at your leisure—and some day you’ll understand. There’s no hurry,” he continued—“no hurry. And when you do understand, it needn’t make your existence a burden to you to fancy you must tell me.” Oh he was so kind—kinder than ever now. “The thing is, you see, that *I* haven’t a conscience. I only want my fun.”

They had on this a second look, also decidedly comfortable, though discounted, as the phrase is, by the other, which had really in its way exhausted the possibilities of looks. “Oh I want MY fun too,” said Nanda, “and little as it may strike you in some ways as looking like it, just this, I beg you to believe, is the real thing. What’s at the bottom of it,” she went on, “is a talk I had not long ago with mother.”

“Oh yes,” Van returned with brightly blushing interest. “The fun,” he laughed, “that’s to be got out of ‘mother’!”

“Oh I’m not thinking so much of that. I’m thinking of any that she herself may be still in a position to pick up. Mine now, don’t you see? is in making out how I can manage for this. Of course it’s rather difficult,” the girl pursued, “for me to tell you exactly what I mean.”

“Oh but it isn’t a bit difficult for me to understand you!” Vanderbank spoke, in his geniality, as if this were in fact the veriest trifle. “You’ve got your mother on your mind. That’s very much what I mean by your conscience.”

Nanda had a fresh hesitation, but evidently unaccompanied at present by any pain. “Don’t you still LIKE mamma?” she at any rate quite successfully brought out. “I must tell you,” she quickly subjoined, “that though I’ve mentioned my talk with her as having finally led to my writing to you, it isn’t in the least that she then suggested my putting you the question. I put it,” she explained, “quite off my own bat.”

The explanation, as an effect immediately produced, did proportionately much for the visitor, who sat back in his chair with a pleased—a distinctly exhilarated—sense both of what he himself and what Nanda had done. “You’re an adorable family!”

“Well then if mother’s adorable why give her up? This I don’t mind admitting she did, the day I speak of, let me see that she feels you’ve done; but without suggesting either—not a scrap, please believe—that I should make you any sort of scene about it. Of course in the first place she knows perfectly that anything like a scene would be no use. You couldn’t make out even if you wanted,” Nanda went on, “that THIS is one. She won’t hear us—will she?—smashing the furniture. I didn’t think for a while that I could do anything at all, and I worried myself with that idea half to death. Then suddenly it came to me that I could do just what I’m doing now. You said a while ago that we must never be—you and I—anything but frank and natural. That’s what I said to myself also—why not? Here I am for you therefore as natural as a cold in your head. I just ask you—I even press you. It’s because, as she said, you’ve practically ceased coming. Of course I know everything changes. It’s the law—what is it?—‘the great law’ of something or other. All sorts of things happen—things come to an end. She has more or less—by his marriage—lost Mitchy. I don’t want her to lose everything. Do stick to her. What I really wanted to say to you—to bring it straight out—is that I don’t believe you thoroughly know how awfully she likes you. I hope my saying such a thing doesn’t affect you as ‘immodest.’ One never knows—but I don’t much care if it does. I suppose it WOULD be immodest if I were to say that I verily believe she’s in love with you. Not, for that matter, that father would mind—he wouldn’t mind, as he says, a tuppenny rap. So”—she extraordinarily kept it up—“you’re welcome to any good the information may have for you: though that, I dare say, does sound hideous. No matter—if I produce any effect on you. That’s the only thing I want. When I think of her downstairs there so often nowadays practically alone I feel as if I could scarcely bear it. She’s so fearfully young.”

This time at least her speech, while she went from point to point, completely hushed him, though after a full glimpse of the direction it was taking he ceased to meet her eyes and only sat staring hard at the pattern of the rug. Even when at last he spoke it was without looking up. “You’re indeed, as she herself used to say, the modern daughter! It takes that type to wish to make a career for her parents.”

“Oh,” said Nanda very simply, “it isn’t a ‘career’ exactly, is it—keeping hold of an old friend? but it may console a little, mayn’t it, for the absence of one? At all events I didn’t want not to have spoken before it’s too late. Of course I don’t know what’s the matter between you, or if anything’s really the matter at all. I don’t care at any rate WHAT is—it can’t be anything very bad. Make it up, make it up—forget it. I don’t pretend that’s a career for YOU any more than for her; but there it is. I know how I sound—most patronising and pushing; but nothing venture nothing have. You CAN’T know how much you are to her. You’re more to her, I verily believe, than any one EVER was. I hate to have the appearance of plotting anything about her behind her back; so I’ll just say it once for all. She said once, in speaking of it to a person who repeated it to me, that you had done more for her than any one, because it was you who had really brought her out. It WAS. You did. I saw it at the time myself. I was very small, but I COULD see it. You’ll say I must have been a most uncanny little wretch, and I dare say I was and am keeping now the pleasant promise. That doesn’t prevent one’s feeling that when a person has brought a person out—”

“A person should take the consequences,” Vanderbank broke in, “and see a person through?” He could meet her now perfectly and proceeded admirably to do it. “There’s an immense deal in that, I admit—I admit. I’m bound to say I don’t know quite what I did—one does those things, no doubt, with a fine unconsciousness: I should have thought indeed it was the other way round. But I assure you I accept all consequences and all responsibilities. If you don’t know what’s the matter between us I’m sure *I* don’t either. It can’t be much—we’ll look into it. I don’t mean you and I—YOU mustn’t be any more worried; but

she and her so unwittingly faithless one. I HAVEN'T been as often, I know"—Van pleasantly kept his course. "But there's a tide in the affairs of men—and of women too, and of girls and of every one. You know what I mean—you know it for yourself. The great thing is that—bless both your hearts!—one doesn't, one simply CAN'T if one would, give your mother up. It's absurd to talk about it. Nobody ever did such a thing in his life. There she is, like the moon or the Marble Arch. I don't say, mind you," he candidly explained, "that every one LIKES her equally: that's another affair. But no one who ever HAS liked her can afford ever again for any long period to do without her. There are too many stupid people—there's too much dull company. That, in London, is to be had by the ton; your mother's intelligence, on the other hand, will always have its price. One can talk with her for a change. She's fine, fine, fine. So, my dear child, be quiet. She's a fixed star."

"Oh I know she is," Nanda said. "It's YOU—"

"Who may be only the flashing meteor?" He sat and smiled at her. "I promise you then that your words have stayed me in my course. You've made me stand as still as Joshua made the sun." With which he got straight up. "'Young,' you say she is?"—for as if to make up for it he all the more sociably continued. "It's not like anything else. She's youth. She's MY youth—she WAS mine. And if you ever have a chance," he wound up, "do put in for me that if she wants REALLY to know she's booked for my old age. She's clever enough, you know"—and Vanderbank, laughing, went over for his hat—"to understand what you tell her."

Nanda took this in with due attention; she was also now on her feet. "And then she's so lovely."

"Awfully pretty!"

"I don't say it, as they say, you know," the girl continued, "BECAUSE she's mother, but I often think when we're out that wherever she is—!"

"There's no one that all round really touches her?" Vanderbank took it up with zeal. "Oh so every one thinks, and in fact one's appreciation of the charming things in that way so

intensely her own can scarcely breathe on them all lightly enough. And then, hang it, she has perceptions—which are not things that run about the streets. She has surprises." He almost broke down for vividness. "She has little ways."

"Well, I'm glad you do like her," Nanda gravely replied.

At this again he fairly faced her, his momentary silence making it still more direct. "I like, you know, about as well as I ever liked anything, this wonderful idea of yours of putting in a plea for her solitude and her youth. Don't think I do it injustice if I say—which is saying much—that it's quite as charming as it's amusing. And now good-bye."

He had put out his hand, but Nanda hesitated. "You won't wait for tea?"

"My dear child, I can't." He seemed to feel, however, that something more must be said. "We shall meet again. But it's getting on, isn't it, toward the general scatter?"

"Yes, and I hope that this year," she answered, "you'll have a good holiday."

"Oh we shall meet before that. I shall do what I can, but upon my word I feel, you know," he laughed, "that such a tuning-up as YOU'VE given me will last me a long time. It's like the high Alps." Then with his hand out again he added: "Have you any plans yourself?"

So many, it might have seemed, that she had no time to take for thinking of them. "I dare say I shall be away a good deal."

He candidly wondered. "With Mr. Longdon?"

"Yes—with him most."

He had another pause. "Really for a long time?"

"A long long one, I hope."

"Your mother's willing again?"

"Oh perfectly. And you see that's why."

"Why?" She had said nothing more, and he failed to understand.

"Why you mustn't too much leave her alone. DON'T!" Nanda brought out.

"I won't. But," he presently added, "there are one or two things."

"Well, what are they?"

He produced in some seriousness the first. "Won't she after all see the Mitchys?"

"Not so much either. That of course is now very different."

Vanderbank demurred. "But not for YOU, I gather—is it? Don't you expect to see them?"

"Oh yes—I hope they'll come down."

He moved away a little—not straight to the door. "To Beccles? Funny place for them, a little though, isn't it?"

He had put the question as if for amusement, but Nanda took it literally. "Ah not when they're invited so very very charmingly. Not when he wants them so."

"Mr. Longdon? Then that keeps up?"

"'That'?"—she was at a loss.

"I mean his intimacy—with Mitchy."

"So far as it IS an intimacy."

"But didn't you, by the way"—and he looked again at his watch—"tell me they're just about to turn up together?"

"Oh not so very particularly together."

"Mitchy first alone?" Vanderbank asked.

She had a smile that was dim, that was slightly strange. "Unless you'll stay for company."

"Thanks—impossible. And then Mr. Longdon alone?"

"Unless Mitchy stays."

He had another pause. "You haven't after all told me about the 'evolution'—or the evolutions—of his wife."

"How can I if you don't give me time?"

"I see—of course not." He seemed to feel for an instant the return of his curiosity. "Yet it won't do, will it? to have her out before HIM? No, I must go." He came back to her and at present she gave him a hand. "But if you do see Mr. Longdon

alone will you do me a service? I mean indeed not simply today, but with all other good chances?"

She waited. "Any service whatever. But which first?"

"Well," he returned in a moment, "let us call it a bargain. I look after your mother—"

"And I—?" She had had to wait again.

"Look after my good name. I mean for common decency to HIM. He has been of a kindness to me that, when I think of my failure to return it, makes me blush from head to foot. I've odiously neglected him—by a complication of accidents. There are things I ought to have done that I haven't. There's one in particular—but it doesn't matter. And I haven't even explained about THAT. I've been a brute and I didn't mean it and I couldn't help it. But there it is. Say a good word for me. Make out somehow or other that I'm NOT a beast. In short," the young man said, quite flushed once more with the intensity of his thought, "let us have it that you may quite trust ME if you'll let me a little—just for my character as a gentleman—trust YOU."

"Ah you may trust me," Nanda replied with her handshake.

"Good-bye then!" he called from the door.

"Good-bye," she said after he had closed it.

III

It was half-past five when Mitchy turned up; and her relapse had in the mean time known no arrest but the arrival of tea, which, however, she had left unnoticed. He expressed on entering the fear that he failed of exactitude, to which she replied by the assurance that he was on the contrary remarkably near it and by the mention of all the aid to patience she had drawn from the pleasure of half an hour with Mr. Van—an allusion that of course immediately provoked on Mitchy's part the liveliest interest.

"He HAS risked it at last then? How tremendously exciting! And your mother?" he went on; after which, as she said nothing: "Did SHE see him, I mean, and is he perhaps with her now?"

"No; she won't have come in—unless you asked."

"I didn't ask. I asked only for you."

Nanda thought an instant. "But you'll still sometimes come to see her, won't you? I mean you won't ever give her up?"

Mitchy at this laughed out. "My dear child, you're an adorable family!"

She took it placidly enough. "That's what Mr. Van said. He said I'm trying to make a career for her."

"Did he?" Her visitor, though without prejudice to his amusement, appeared struck. "You must have got in with him rather deep."

She again considered. "Well, I think I did rather. He was awfully beautiful and kind."

"Oh," Mitchy concurred, "trust him always for that!"

"He wrote me, on my note," Nanda pursued, "a tremendously good answer."

Mitchy was struck afresh. "Your note? What note?"

"To ask him to come. I wrote at the beginning of the week."

"Oh—I see" Mitchy observed as if this were rather different. "He couldn't then of course have done less than come."

Yet his companion again thought. "I don't know."

"Oh come—I say: You do know," Mitchy laughed. "I should like to see him—or you either!" There would have been for a continuous spectator of these episodes an odd resemblance between the manner and all the movements that had followed his entrance and those that had accompanied the installation of his predecessor. He laid his hat, as Vanderbank had done, in three places in succession and appeared to question scarcely less the safety, somewhere, of his umbrella and the grace of retaining in his hand his gloves. He postponed the final selection of a seat and he looked at the objects about him while he spoke of other matters. Quite in the same fashion indeed at last these objects impressed him. "How charming you've made your room and what a lot of nice things you've got!"

"That's just what Mr. Van said too. He seemed immensely struck."

But Mitchy hereupon once more had a drop to extravagance. "Can I do nothing then but repeat him? I came, you know, to be original."

"It would be original for you," Nanda promptly returned, "to be at all like him. But you won't," she went back, "not sometimes come for mother only? You'll have plenty of chances."

This he took up with more gravity. "What do you mean by chances? That you're going away? That WILL add to the attraction!" he exclaimed as she kept silence.

"I shall have to wait," she answered at last, "to tell you definitely what I'm to do. It's all in the air—yet I think I shall know to-day. I'm to see Mr. Longdon."

Mitchy wondered. "To-day?"

"He's coming at half-past six."

"And then you'll know?"

"Well—HE will."

"Mr. Longdon?"

"I meant Mr. Longdon," she said after a moment.

Mitchy had his watch out. "Then shall I interfere?"

"There are quantities of time. You must have your tea. You see at any rate," the girl continued, "what I mean by your chances."

She had made him his tea, which he had taken. "You do squeeze us in!"

"Well, it's an accident your coming together—except of course that you're NOT together. I simply took the time that you each independently proposed. But it would have been all right even if you HAD met.

"That is, I mean," she explained, "even if you and Mr. Longdon do. Mr. Van, I confess, I did want alone."

Mitchy had been glaring at her over his tea. "You're more and more remarkable!"

"Well then if I improve so give me your promise."

Mitchy, as he partook of refreshment, kept up his thoughtful gaze. "I shall presently want some more, please. But do you mind my asking if Van knew—"

"That Mr. Longdon's to come? Oh yes, I told him, and he left with me a message for him."

"A message? How awfully interesting!"

Nanda thought. "It WILL be awfully—to Mr. Longdon."

"Some more NOW, please," said Mitchy while she took his cup. "And to Mr. Longdon only, eh? Is that a way of saying that it's none of MY business?"

The fact of her attending—and with a happy show of particular care—to his immediate material want added somehow, as she replied, to her effect of sincerity. "Ah, Mr. Mitchy, the business of mine that has not by this time ever so naturally become a business of yours—well, I can't think of any just now, and I wouldn't, you know, if I could!"

"I can promise you then that there's none of mine," Mitchy declared, "that hasn't made by the same token quite the same shift. Keep it well before you, please, that if ever a young woman had a grave lookout—!"

"What do you mean," she interrupted, "by a grave lookout?"

"Well, the certainty of finding herself saddled for all time to come with the affairs of a gentleman whom she can never get rid of on the specious plea that he's only her husband or her lover or her father or her son or her brother or her uncle or her cousin. There, as none of these characters, he just stands."

"Yes," Nanda kindly mused, "he's simply her Mitchy."

"Precisely. And a Mitchy, you see, is—what do you call it?—simply indissoluble. He's moreover inordinately inquisitive. He goes to the length of wondering whether Van also learned that you were expecting ME."

"Oh yes—I told him everything."

Mitchy smiled. "Everything?"

"I told him—I told him," she replied with impatience.

Mitchy hesitated. “And did he then leave me also a message?”

“No, nothing. What I’m to do for him with Mr. Longdon,” she immediately explained, “is to make practically a kind of apology.”

“Ah and for me”—Mitchy quickly took it up—“there can be no question of anything of that kind. I see. He has done me no wrong.”

Nanda, with her eyes now on the window, turned it over. “I don’t much think he would know even if he had.”

“I see, I see. And we wouldn’t tell him.”

She turned with some abruptness from the outer view. “We wouldn’t tell him. But he was beautiful all round,” she went on. “No one could have been nicer about having for so long, for instance, come so little to the house. As if he hadn’t only too many other things to do! He didn’t even make them out nearly the good reasons he might. But fancy, with his important duties—all the great affairs on his hands—our making vulgar little rows about being ‘neglected’! He actually made so little of what he might easily plead—speaking so, I mean, as if he were all in the wrong—that one had almost positively to SHOW him his excuses. As if”—she really kept it up—“he hasn’t plenty!”

“It’s only people like me,” Mitchy threw out, “who have none?”

“Yes—people like you. People of no use, of no occupation and no importance. Like you, you know,” she pursued, “there are so many.” Then it was with no transition of tone that she added: “If you’re bad, Mitchy, I won’t tell you anything.”

“And if I’m good what will you tell me? What I want really most to KNOW is why he should be, as you said just now, ‘apologetic’ to Mr. Longdon. What’s the wrong he allows he has done HIM?”

“Oh he has ‘neglected’ him—if that’s any comfort to us—quite as much.”

“Hasn’t looked him up and that sort of thing?”

“Yes—and he mentioned some other matter.”

Mitchy wondered. "'Mentioned' it?"

"In which," said Nanda, "he hasn't pleased him."

Mitchy after an instant risked it. "But what other matter?"

"Oh he says that when I speak to him Mr. Longdon will know."

Mitchy gravely took this in. "And shall you speak to him?"

"For Mr. Van?" How, she seemed to ask, could he doubt it? "Why the very first thing."

"And then will Mr. Longdon tell you?"

"What Mr. Van means?" Nanda thought. "Well—I hope not."

Mitchy followed it up. "You 'hope'—?"

"Why if it's anything that could possibly make any one like him any less. I mean I shan't in that case in the least want to hear it."

Mitchy looked as if he could understand that and yet could also imagine something of a conflict. "But if Mr. Longdon insists—?"

"On making me know? I shan't let him insist. Would YOU?" she put to him.

"Oh I'm not in question!"

"Yes, you are!" she quite rang out.

"Ah—!" Mitchy laughed. After which he added: "Well then, I might overbear you."

"No, you mightn't," she as positively declared again, "and you wouldn't at any rate desire to."

This he finally showed he could take from her—showed it in the silence in which for a minute their eyes met; then showed it perhaps even more in his deep exclamation: "You're complete!"

For such a proposition as well she had the same detached sense. "I don't think I am in anything but the wish to keep YOU so."

"Well—keep me, keep me! It strikes me that I'm not at all now on a footing, you know, of keeping myself. I quite give you notice in fact," Mitchy went on, "that I'm going to come to you henceforth for everything. But you're too wonderful," he wound

up as she at first said nothing to this. “I don’t even frighten you.”

“Yes—fortunately for you.”

“Ah but I distinctly warn you that I mean to do my very best for it!”

Nanda viewed it all with as near an approach to gaiety as she often achieved. “Well, if you should ever succeed it would be a dark day for you.”

“You bristle with your own guns,” he pursued, “but the ingenuity of a lifetime shall be devoted to my taking you on some quarter on which you’re not prepared.”

“And what quarter, pray, will that be?”

“Ah I’m not such a fool as to begin by giving you a tip!” Mitchy on this turned off with an ambiguous but unmistakeably natural sigh; he looked at photographs, he took up a book or two as Vanderbank had done, and for a couple of minutes there was silence between them. “What does stretch before me,” he resumed after an interval during which clearly, in spite of his movements, he had looked at nothing—“what does stretch before me is the happy prospect of my feeling that I’ve found in you a friend with whom, so utterly and unreservedly, I can always go to the bottom of things. This luxury, you see now, of our freedom to look facts in the face is one of which, I promise you, I mean fully to avail myself.” He stopped before her again, and again she was silent. “It’s so awfully jolly, isn’t it? that there’s not at last a single thing that we can’t take our ease about. I mean that we can’t intelligibly name and comfortably tackle. We’ve worked through the long tunnel of artificial reserves and superstitious mysteries, and I at least shall have only to feel that in showing every confidence and dotting every ‘i’ I follow the example you so admirably set. You go down to the roots? Good. It’s all I ask!”

He had dropped into a chair as he talked, and so long as she remained in her own they were confronted; but she presently got up and, the next moment, while he kept his place, was busy

restoring order to the objects both her visitors had disarranged. "If you weren't delightful you'd be dreadful!"

"There we are! I could easily, in other words, frighten you if I would."

She took no notice of the remark, only, after a few more scattered touches, producing an observation of her own. "He's going, all the same, Mr. Van, to be charming to mother. We've settled that."

"Ah then he CAN make time—?"

She judged it. "For as much as THAT, yes. For as much, I mean, as may sufficiently show her that he hasn't given her up. So don't you recognise how much more time YOU can make?"

"Ah—see precisely—there we are again!" Mitchy promptly ejaculated.

Yet he had gone, it seemed, further than she followed. "But where?"

"Why, as I say, at the roots and in the depths of things."

"Oh!" She dropped to an indifference that was but part of her general patience for all his irony.

"It's needless to go into the question of not giving your mother up. One simply DOESN'T give her up. One can't. There she is."

"That's exactly what HE says. There she is."

"Ah but I don't want to say nothing but what 'he' says!" Mitchy laughed. "He can't at all events have mentioned to you any such link as the one that in my case is now almost the most palpable. I'VE got a wife, you know."

"Oh Mitchy!" the girl protestingly though vaguely murmured.

"And my wife—did you know it?" Mitchy went on, "is positively getting thick with your mother. Of course it isn't new to you that she's wonderful for wives. Now that our marriage is an accomplished fact she takes the greatest interest in it—or bids fair to if her attention can only be thoroughly secured—and more particularly in what I believe is generally called our peculiar situation: for it appears, you know, that we're to the

most conspicuous degree possible IN a peculiar situation. Aggie's therefore already, and is likely to be still more, in what's universally recognised as your mother's regular line. Your mother will attract her, study her, finally 'understand' her. In fact she'll 'help' her as she has 'helped' so many before and will 'help' so many still to come. With Aggie thus as a satellite and a frequenter—in a degree in which she never yet HAS been," he continued, "what will the whole thing be but a practical multiplication of our points of contact? You may remind me of Mrs. Brook's contention that if she did in her time keep something of a saloon the saloon is now, in consequence of events, but a collection of fortuitous atoms; but that, my dear Nanda, will become none the less, to your clearer sense, but a pious echo of her momentary modesty or—call it at the worst—her momentary despair. The generations will come and go, and the PERSONNEL, as the newspapers say, of the saloon will shift and change, but the institution itself, as resting on a deep human need, has a long course yet to run and a good work yet to do. WE shan't last, but your mother will, and as Aggie is happily very young she's therefore provided for, in the time to come, on a scale sufficiently considerable to leave us just now at peace. Meanwhile, as you're almost as good for husbands as Mrs. Brook is for wives, why aren't we, as a couple, we Mitchys, quite ideally arranged for, and why mayn't I speak to you of my future as sufficiently guaranteed? The only appreciable shadow I make out comes, for me, from the question of what may to-day be between you and Mr. Longdon. Do I understand," Mitchy asked, "that he's presently to arrive for an answer to something he has put to you?" Nanda looked at him a while with a sort of solemnity of tenderness, and her voice, when she at last spoke, trembled with a feeling that clearly had grown in her as she listened to the string of whimsicalities, bitter and sweet, that he had just unrolled. "You're wild," she said simply—"you're wild."

He wonderfully glared. "Am I then already frightening you?" He shook his head rather sadly. "I'm not in the least trying yet.

There's something," he added after an instant, "that I do want too awfully to ask you."

"Well then—!" If she had not eagerness she had at least charity.

"Oh but you see I reflect that though you show all the courage to go to the roots and depths with ME, I'm not—I never have been—fully conscious of the nerve for doing as much with you. It's a question," Mitchy explained, "of how much—of a particular matter—you know."

She continued ever so kindly to face him. "Hasn't it come out all round now that I know everything?"

Her reply, in this form, took a minute or two to operate, but when it began to do so it fairly diffused a light. Mitchy's face turned of a colour that might have been produced by her holding close to it some lantern wonderfully glazed. "You know, you know!" he then rang out.

"Of course I know."

"You know, you know!" Mitchy repeated.

"Everything," she imperturbably went on, "but what you're talking about."

He was silent a little, his eyes on her. "May I kiss your hand?"

"No," she answered: "that's what I call wild."

He had risen with his question and after her reply he remained a moment on the spot. "See—I've frightened you. It proves as easy as that. But I only wanted to show you and to be sure for myself. Now that I've the mental certitude I shall never wish otherwise to use it." He turned away to begin again one of his absorbed revolutions. "Mr. Longdon has asked you this time for a grand public adhesion, and what he turns up for now is to receive your ultimatum? A final irrevocable flight with him is the line he advises, so that he'll be ready for it on the spot with the post-chaise and the pistols?"

The image appeared really to have for Nanda a certain vividness, and she looked at it a space without a hint of a smile. "We shan't need any pistols, whatever may be decided about the

post-chaise; and any flight we may undertake together will need no cover of secrecy or night. Mother, as I've told you—"

"Won't fling herself across your reckless path? I remember," said Mitchy—"you alluded to her magnificent resignation. But father?" he oddly demanded.

Nanda thought for this a moment longer. "Well, Mr. Longdon has—off in the country—a good deal of shooting."

"So that Edward can sometimes come down with his old gun? Good then too—if it isn't, as he takes you by the way, to shoot YOU. You've got it all shipshape and arranged, in other words, and have only, if the fancy does move you, to clear out. You clear out—you make all sorts of room. It IS interesting," Mitchy exclaimed, "arriving thus with you at the depths! I look all round and see every one squared and every one but one or two suited. Why then reflexion and delay?"

"You don't, dear Mr. Mitchy," Nanda took her time to return, "know nearly as much as you think."

"But isn't my question absolutely a confession of ignorance and a renunciation of thought? I put myself from this moment forth with you," Mitchy declared, "on the footing of knowing nothing whatever and of receiving literally from your hands all information and all life. Let my continued attitude of dependence, my dear Nanda, show it. Any hesitation you may yet feel, you imply, proceeds from a sense of duties in London not to be lightly renounced? Oh," he thoughtfully said, "I do at least know you HAVE them."

She watched him with the same mildness while he vaguely circled about. "You're wild, you're wild," she insisted. "But it doesn't in the least matter. I shan't abandon you."

He stopped short. "Ah that's what I wanted from you in so many clear-cut golden words—though I won't in the least of course pretend that I've felt I literally need it. I don't literally need the big turquoise in my neck-tie; which incidentally means, by the way, that if you should admire it you're quite welcome to it. Such words—that's my point—are like such jewels: the pride, you see, of one's heart. They're mere vanity,

but they help along. You've got of course always poor Tishy," he continued.

"Will you leave it all to ME?" Nanda said as if she had not heard him.

"And then you've got poor Carrie," he went on, "though HER of course you rather divide with your mother."

"Will you leave it all to ME?" the girl repeated.

"To say nothing of poor Cashmore," he pursued, "whom you take ALL, I believe, yourself?"

"Will you leave it all to ME?" she once more repeated.

This time he pulled up, suddenly and expressively wondering. "Are you going to do anything about it at present?—I mean with our friend?"

She appeared to have a scruple of saying, but at last she produced it. "Yes—he doesn't mind now."

Mitchy again laughed out. "You ARE, as a family—!" But he had already checked himself. "Mr. Longdon will at any rate, you imply, be somehow interested—"

"In MY interests? Of course—since he has gone so far. You expressed surprise at my wanting to wait and think; but how can I not wait and not think when so much depends on the question—now so definite—of how much further he WILL go?"

"I see," said Mitchy, profoundly impressed. "And how much does that depend on?"

She had to reflect. "On how much further I, for my part, MUST!"

Mitchy's grasp was already complete. "And he's coming then to learn from you how far this is?"

"Yes—very much."

Mitchy looked about for his hat. "So that of course I see my time's about up, as you'll want to be quite alone together."

Nanda glanced at the clock. "Oh you've a margin yet."

"But you don't want an interval for your thinking—?"

"Now that I've seen you?" Nanda was already very obviously thoughtful.

"I mean if you've an important decision to take."

"Well," she returned, "seeing you HAS helped me."

"Ah but at the same time worried you. Therefore—" And he picked up his umbrella.

Her eyes rested on its curious handle. "If you cling to your idea that I'm frightened you'll be disappointed. It will never be given you to reassure me."

"You mean by that that I'm primarily so solid—!"

"Yes, that till I see you yourself afraid—!"

"Well?"

"Well, I won't admit that anything isn't exactly what I was prepared for."

Mitchy looked with interest into his hat. "Then what is it I'm to 'leave' to you?" After which, as she turned away from him with a suppressed sound and said, while he watched her, nothing else, "It's no doubt natural for you to talk," he went on, "but I do make you nervous. Good-bye—good-bye."

She had stayed him, by a fresh movement, however, as he reached the door. "Aggie's only trying to find out—!"

"Yes—what?" he asked, waiting.

"Why what sort of a person she is. How can she ever have known? It was carefully, elaborately hidden from her—kept so obscure that she could make out nothing. She isn't now like ME."

He wonderingly attended. "Like you?"

"Why I get the benefit of the fact that there was never a time when I didn't know SOMETHING or other, and that I became more and more aware, as I grew older, of a hundred little chinks of daylight."

Mitchy stared. "You're stupendous, my dear!" he murmured.

Ah but she kept it up. "*I* had my idea about Aggie."

"Oh don't I know you had? And how you were positive about the sort of person—!"

"That she didn't even suspect herself," Nanda broke in, "to be? I'm equally positive now. It's quite what I believed, only

there's ever so much more of it. More HAS come—and more will yet. You see, when there has been nothing before, it all has to come with a rush. So that if even I'm surprised of course she is."

"And of course *I* am!" Mitchy's interest, though even now not wholly unqualified with amusement, had visibly deepened. "You admit then," he continued, "that you're surprised?"

Nanda just hesitated. "At the mere scale of it. I think it's splendid. The only person whose astonishment I don't quite understand," she added, "is Cousin Jane."

"Oh Cousin Jane's astonishment serves her right!"

"If she held so," Nanda pursued, "that marriage should do everything—!"

"She shouldn't be in such a funk at finding what it IS doing? Oh no, she's the last one!" Mitchy declared. "I vow I enjoy her scare."

"But it's very bad, you know," said Nanda.

"Oh too awful!"

"Well, of course," the girl appeared assentingly to muse, "she couldn't after all have dreamed—!" But she took herself up. "The great thing is to be helpful."

"And in what way—?" Mitchy asked with his wonderful air of inviting competitive suggestions.

"Toward Aggie's finding herself. Do you think," she immediately continued, "that Lord Petherton really is?"

Mitchy frankly considered. "Helpful? Oh he does his best, I gather. Yes," he presently added—"Petherton's all right."

"It's you yourself, naturally," his companion threw off, "who can help most."

"Certainly, and I'm doing my best too. So that with such good assistance"—he seemed at last to have taken it all from her—"what is it, I again ask, that, as you request, I'm to 'leave' to you?"

Nanda required, while he still waited, some time to reply. "To keep my promise."

"Your promise?"

"Not to abandon you."

"Ah," cried Mitchy, "that's better!"

"Then good-bye," she said.

"Good-bye." But he came a few steps forward. "I MAYN'T kiss your hand?"

"Never."

"Never?"

"Never."

"Oh!" he oddly sounded as he quickly went out.

IV

The interval he had represented as likely to be useful to her was in fact, however, not a little abbreviated by a punctuality of arrival on Mr. Longdon's part so extreme as to lead the first thing to a word almost of apology. "You can't say," her new visitor immediately began, "that I haven't left you alone, these many days, as much as I promised on coming up to you that afternoon when after my return to town I found Mr. Mitchett instead of your mother awaiting me in the drawing-room."

"Yes," said Nanda, "you've really done quite as I asked you."

"Well," he returned, "I felt half an hour ago that, near as I was to relief, I could keep it up no longer; so that though I knew it would bring me much too soon I started at six sharp for our trysting-place."

"And I've no tea, after all, to reward you!" It was but now clearly that she noticed it. "They must have removed the things without my heeding."

Her old friend looked at her with some intensity. "Were you in the room?"

"Yes—but I didn't see the man come in."

"What then were you doing?"

Nanda thought; her smile was as usual the faintest discernible outward sign. "Thinking of YOU."

"So tremendously hard?"

"Well, of other things too and of other persons. Of everything really that in our last talk I told you I felt I must have out with myself before meeting you for what I suppose you've now in mind."

Mr. Longdon had kept his eyes on her, but at this he turned away; not, however, for an alternative, embracing her material situation with the embarrassed optimism of Vanderbank or the mitigated gloom of Mitchy. "Ah"—he took her up with some dryness—"you've been having things out with yourself?" But he went on before she answered: "I don't want any tea, thank you. I found myself, after five, in such a fidget that I went three times in the course of the hour to my club, where I've the impression I each time had it. I dare say it wasn't there, though, I did have it," he after an instant pursued, "for I've somehow a confused image of a shop in Oxford Street—or was it rather in Regent?—into which I gloomily wandered to beguile the moments with a mixture that if I strike you as upset I beg you to set it all down to. Do you know in fact what I've been doing for the last ten minutes? Roaming hither and thither in your beautiful Crescent till I could venture to come in."

"Then did you see Mitchy go out? But no, you wouldn't"—Nanda corrected herself. "He has been gone longer than that."

Her visitor had dropped on a sofa where, propped by the back, he sat rather upright, his glasses on his nose, his hands in his pockets and his elbows much turned out. "Mitchy left you more than ten minutes ago, and yet your state on his departure remains such that there could be a bustle of servants in the room without your being aware? Kindly give me a lead then as to what it is he has done to you."

She hovered before him with her obscure smile. "You see it for yourself."

He shook his head with decision. "I don't see anything for myself, and I beg you to understand that it's not what I've come here to-day to do. Anything I may yet see which I don't already see will be only, I warn you, so far as you shall make it very

clear. There—you've work cut out. And is it with Mr. Mitchett, may I ask, that you've been, as you mention, cutting it?"

Nanda looked about her as if weighing many things; after which her eyes came back to him. "Do you mind if I don't sit down?"

"I don't mind if you stand on your head—at the pass we've come to."

"I shall not try your patience," the girl good-humouredly replied, "so far as that. I only want you not to be worried if I walk about a little."

Mr. Longdon, without a movement, kept his posture. "Oh I can't oblige you there. I SHALL be worried. I've come on purpose to be worried, and the more I surrender myself to the rack the more, I seem to feel, we shall have threshed our business out. So you may dance, you may stamp, if you like, on the absolutely passive thing you've made of me."

"Well, what I HAVE had from Mitchy," she cheerfully responded, "is practically a lesson in dancing: by which I perhaps mean rather a lesson in sitting, myself, as I want you to do while *I* talk, as still as a mouse. They take," she declared, "while THEY talk, an amount of exercise!"

"They?" Mr. Longdon wondered. "Was his wife with him?"

"Dear no—he and Mr. Van."

"Was Mr. Van with him?"

"Oh no—before, alone. All over the place."

Mr. Longdon had a pause so rich in appeal that when he at last spoke his question was itself like an answer. "Mr. Van has been to see you?"

"Yes. I wrote and asked him."

"Oh!" said Mr. Longdon.

"But don't get up." She raised her hand. "Don't."

"Why should I?" He had never budged.

"He was most kind; stayed half an hour and, when I told him you were coming, left a good message for you."

Mr. Longdon appeared to wait for this tribute, which was not immediately produced. “What do you call a ‘good’ message?”

“I’m to make it all right with you.”

“To make what?”

“Why, that he has not, for so long, been to see you or written to you. That he has seemed to neglect you.”

Nanda’s visitor looked so far about as to take the neighbourhood in general into the confidence of his surprise. “To neglect ME?”

“Well, others too, I believe—with whom we’re not concerned. He has been so taken up. But you above all.”

Mr. Longdon showed on this a coldness that somehow spoke for itself as the greatest with which he had ever in his life met an act of reparation and that was infinitely confirmed by his sustained immobility. “But of what have I complained?”

“Oh I don’t think he fancies you’ve complained.”

“And how could he have come to see me,” he continued, “when for so many months past I’ve been so little in town?”

He was not more ready with objections, however, than his companion had by this time become with answers. “He must have been thinking of the time of your present stay. He evidently has you much on his mind—he spoke of not having seen you.”

“He has quite sufficiently tried—he has left cards,” Mr. Longdon returned. “What more does he want?”

Nanda looked at him with her long grave straight-ness, which had often a play of light beyond any smile. “Oh, you know, he does want more.”

“Then it was open to him—”

“So he so strongly feels”—she quickly took him up—“that you must have felt. And therefore it is I speak for him.”

“Don’t!” said Mr. Longdon.

“But I promised him I would.”

“Don’t!” her friend repeated as in stifled pain.

She had kept for the time all her fine clearness turned to him; but she might on this have been taken as giving him up with a movement of obedience and a strange soft sigh. The smothered sound might even have represented to a listener at all initiated a consenting retreat before an effort greater than her reckoning—a retreat that was in so far the snap of a sharp tension. The next minute, none the less, she evidently found a fresh provocation in the sight of the pale and positively excessive rigour she had imposed, so that, though her friend was only accommodating himself to her wish she had a sudden impulse of criticism. "You're proud about it—too proud!"

"Well, what if I am?" He looked at her with a complexity of communication that no words could have meddled with. "Pride's all right when it helps one to bear things."

"Ah," said Nanda, "but that's only when one wants to take the least from them. When one wants to take the most—!"

"Well?"—he spoke, as she faltered, with a certain small hardness of interest.

She faltered, however, indeed. "Oh I don't know how to say it." She fairly coloured with the attempt. "One must let the sense of all that I speak of—well, all come. One must rather like it. I don't know—but I suppose one must rather grovel."

Mr. Longdon, though with visible reluctance, turned it over. "That's very fine—but you're a woman."

"Yes—that must make a difference. But being a woman, in such a case, has then," Nanda went on, "its advantages."

On this point perhaps her friend might presently have been taken as relaxing. "It strikes me that even at that the advantages are mainly for others. I'm glad, God knows, that you're not also a young man."

"Then we're suited all round."

She had spoken with a promptitude that appeared again to act on him slightly as an irritant, for he met it—with more delay—by a long and derisive murmur. "Oh MY pride—!" But this she in no manner took up; so that he was left for a little to

his thoughts. “That’s what you were plotting when you told me the other day that you wanted time?”

“Ah I wasn’t plotting—though I was, I confess, trying to work things out. That particular idea of simply asking Mr. Van by letter to present himself—that particular flight of fancy hadn’t in fact then at all occurred to me.”

“It never occurred, I’m bound to say, to ME,” said Mr. Longdon. “I’ve never thought of writing to him.”

“Very good. But you haven’t the reasons. I wanted to attack him.”

“Not about me, I hope to God!” Mr. Longdon, distinctly a little paler, rejoined.

“Don’t be afraid. I think I had an instinct of how you would have taken THAT. It was about mother.”

“Oh!” said her visitor.

“He has been worse to her than to you,” she continued. “But he’ll make it all right.”

Mr. Longdon’s attention retained its grimness. “If he has such a remedy for the more then, what has he for the less?”

Nanda, however, was but for an instant checked.

“Oh it’s I who make it up to YOU. To mother, you see, there’s no one otherwise to make it up.”

This at first unmistakeably sounded to him too complicated for acceptance. But his face changed as light dawned. “That puts it then that you WILL come?”

“I’ll come if you’ll take me as I am—which is what I must previously explain to you: I mean more than I’ve ever done before. But what HE means by what you call his remedy is my making you feel better about himself.”

The old man gazed at her. “‘Your’ doing it is too beautiful! And he could really come to you for the purpose of asking you?”

“Oh no,” said the girl briskly, “he came simply for the purpose of doing what he HAD to do. After my letter how could he not come? Then he met most kindly what I said to him for mother and what he quite understood to be all my business

with him; so that his appeal to me to plead with you for—well, for his credit—was only thrown in because he had so good a chance."

This speech brought Mr. Longdon abruptly to his feet, but before she could warn him again of the patience she continued to need he had already, as if what she evoked for him left him too stupefied, dropped back into submission. "The man stood there for you to render him a service?—for you to help him and praise him?"

"Ah but it wasn't to go out of my way, don't you see? He knew you were presently to be here." Her anxiety that he should understand gave her a rare strained smile. "I mustn't make—as a request from him—too much of it, and I've not a doubt that, rather than that you should think any ill of him for wishing me to say a word, he would gladly be left with whatever bad appearance he may actually happen to have." She pulled up on these words as with a quick sense of their really, by their mere sound, putting her in deeper; and could only give her friend one of the looks that expressed: "If I could trust you not to assent even more than I want, I should say 'You know what I mean!'" She allowed him at all events—or tried to allow him—no time for uttered irony before going on: "He was everything you could have wished; quite as beautiful about YOU—"

"As about you?"—Mr. Longdon took her up.

She demurred. "As about mother." With which she turned away as if it handsomely settled the question.

But it only left him, as she went to the window, sitting there sombre. "I like, you know," he brought out as his eyes followed her, "your saying you're not proud! Thank God you ARE, my dear. Yes—it's better for us."

At this, after a moment, in her place, she turned round to him. "I'm glad I'm anything—whatever you may call it and though I can't call it the same—that's good for YOU."

He said nothing more for a little, as if by such a speech something in him were simplified and softened. "It would be

good for me—by which I mean it would be easier for me—if you didn't quite so immensely care for him."

"Oh!" came from Nanda with an accent of attenuation at once so precipitate and so vague that it only made her attitude at first rather awkward. "Oh!" she immediately repeated, but with an increase of the same effect. After which, conscious, she made, as if to save herself, a quick addition. "Dear Mr. Longdon, isn't it rather yourself most—?"

"It would be easier for me," he went on, heedless, "if you didn't, my poor child, so wonderfully love him."

"Ah but I don't—please believe me when I assure you I DON'T!" she broke out. It burst from her, flaring up, in a queer quaver that ended in something queerer still—in her abrupt collapse, on the spot, into the nearest chair, where she choked with a torrent of tears. Her buried face could only after a moment give way to the flood, and she sobbed in a passion as sharp and brief as the flurry of a wild thing for an instant uncaged; her old friend meantime keeping his place in the silence broken by her sound and distantly—across the room—closing his eyes to his helplessness and her shame. Thus they sat together while their trouble both conjoined and divided them. She recovered herself, however, with an effort worthy of her fall and was on her feet again as she stammeringly spoke and angrily brushed at her eyes. "What difference in the world does it make—what difference ever?" Then clearly, even with the words, her checked tears suffered her to see how it made the difference that he too had been crying; so that "I don't know why you mind!" she thereupon wailed with extravagance.

"You don't know what I would have done for him. You don't know, you don't know!" he repeated—while she looked as if she naturally couldn't—as with a renewal of his dream of beneficence and of the soreness of his personal wound.

"Well, but HE does you justice—he knows. So it shows, so it shows—!"

But in this direction too, unable to say what it showed, she had again broken down and again could only hold herself and

let her companion sit there. “Ah Nanda, Nanda!” he deeply murmured; and the depth of the pity was, vainly and blindly, as the depth of a reproach.

“It’s I—it’s I, therefore,” she said as if she must then so look at it with him; “it’s I who am the horrible impossible and who have covered everything else with my own impossibility. For some different person you COULD have done what you speak of, and for some different person you can do it still.”

He stared at her with his barren sorrow. “A person different from him?”

“A person different from ME!”

“And what interest have I in any such person?”

“But your interest in me—you see well enough where THAT lands us.”

Mr. Longdon now got to his feet and somewhat stiffly remained; after which, for all answer, “You say you WILL come then?” he asked. Then as—seemingly with her last thought—she kept silent: “You understand clearly, I take it, that this time it’s never again to leave me—or to BE left.”

“I understand,” she presently replied. “Never again. That,” she continued, “is why I asked you for these days.”

“Well then, since you’ve taken them—”

“Ah but have YOU?” said Nanda. They were close to each other now, and with a tenderness of warning that was helped by their almost equal stature she laid her hand on his shoulder. “What I did more than anything else write to him for,” she had now regained her clearness enough to explain, “was that—with whatever idea you had—you should see for yourself how he could come and go.”

“And what good was that to do me? HADN’T I seen for myself?”

“Well—you’ve seen once more. Here he was. I didn’t care what he thought. Here I brought him. And his reasons remain.”

She kept her eyes on her companion's face, but his own now and afterwards seemed to wander far. "What do I care for his reasons so long as they're not mine?"

She thought an instant, still holding him gently and as if for successful argument. "But perhaps you don't altogether understand them."

"And why the devil, altogether, SHOULD I?"

"Ah because you distinctly want to," said Nanda ever so kindly. "You've admitted as much when we've talked—"

"Oh but when HAVE we talked?" he sharply interrupted.

This time he had challenged her so straight that it was her own look that strayed. "When?"

"When."

She hesitated. "When HAVEN'T we?"

"Well, YOU may have: if that's what you call talking—never saying a word. But I haven't. I've only to do at any rate, in the way of reasons, with my own."

"And yours too then remain? Because, you know," the girl pursued, "I AM like that."

"Like what?"

"Like what he thinks." Then so gravely that it was almost a supplication, "Don't tell me," she added, "that you don't KNOW what he thinks. You do know."

Their eyes, on that strange ground, could meet at last, and the effect of it was presently for Mr. Longdon. "I do know."

"Well?"

"Well!" He raised his hands and took her face, which he drew so close to his own that, as she gently let him, he could kiss her with solemnity on the forehead. "Come!" he then very firmly said—quite indeed as if it were a question of their moving on the spot.

It literally made her smile, which, with a certain compunction, she immediately corrected by doing for him in the pressure of her lips to his cheek what he had just done for herself. "To-day?" she more seriously asked.

He looked at his watch. “To-morrow.”

She paused, but clearly for assent. “That’s what I mean by your taking me as I am. It IS, you know, for a girl—extraordinary.”

“Oh I know what it is!” he exclaimed with an odd fatigue in his tenderness.

But she continued, with the shadow of her scruple, to explain. “We’re many of us, we’re most of us—as you long ago saw and showed you felt—extraordinary now. We can’t help it. It isn’t really our fault. There’s so much else that’s extraordinary that if we’re in it all so much we must naturally be.” It was all obviously clearer to her than ever yet, and her sense of it found renewed expression; so that she might have been, as she wound up, a very much older person than her friend. “Everything’s different from what it used to be.”

“Yes, everything,” he returned with an air of final indoctrination. “That’s what he ought to have recognised.”

“As YOU have?” Nanda was once more—and completely now—enthroned in high justice. “Oh he’s more old-fashioned than you.”

“Much more,” said Mr. Longdon with a queer face.

“He tried,” the girl went on—“he did his best. But he couldn’t. And he’s so right—for himself.”

Her visitor, before meeting this, gathered in his hat and stick, which for a minute occupied his attention. “He ought to have married—!”

“Little Aggie? Yes,” said Nanda.

They had gained the door, where Mr. Longdon again met her eyes. “And then Mitchy—!”

But she checked him with a quick gesture. “No—not even then!”

So again before he went they were for a minute confronted. “Are you anxious about Mitchy?”

She faltered, but at last brought it out. “Yes. Do you see? There I am.”

“I see. There we are. Well,” said Mr. Longdon—“to-morrow.”

THE END

The Awkward Age

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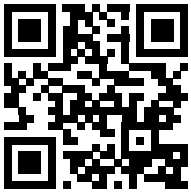

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