

THE
SACRED
FOUNT,
REDUCED



HENRY
JAMES

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First edition

May 18, 2012

Locus Solus Industries

73-12 35th Avenue, Apartment E23

Jackson Heights, New York 11372

United States of America

Gertrude Stein was a great reader. In novels, Henry James's for instance, characters talk, and in their nuances lurk the subtlest intricacies of the author's web. Imagine a text of a novel, say James's *The Sacred Fount* (1901), from which everything has been extracted except the dialogue.

(Guy Davenport, "Late Gertrude," p. 189 in *The Hunter Gracchus*)

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CHAPTER I

“I don’t think it very nice of you not to speak to me.”

“Didn’t you really know?”

“Why in the world *should* I know?”

“Oh, it’s only that I thought you always did!”

“What in the world does she mean?”

“*You* know why he should as well as I, don’t you?”

“I didn’t place her at first myself. She had to speak to me. But I hadn’t seen her since her marriage, which was – wasn’t it? – four or five years ago. She’s amazing for her age.”

“What then is her age?”

“Oh – two or three-and-forty.”

“She’s prodigious for that. But can it be so great?”

“Isn’t it easy to count? Don’t you remember, when poor Briss married her, how immensely she was older? What was it they called it? – a case of child-stealing. Everyone made jokes. Briss isn’t yet thirty. I’m bound to say I don’t quite call it beauty.”

“Oh, I only speak of it as relative. She looks so well and somehow so ‘fine.’ Why else shouldn’t we have recognised her?”

“Why indeed? But it isn’t a thing with which beauty has to do. What has happened to her is simply that – well, that nothing has.”

“Nothing has happened? But, my dear man, she has been married. That’s supposed to be something.”

“Yes, but she has been married so little and so stupidly. It must be desperately dull to be married to poor Briss. His comparative youth doesn’t, after all, make

more of him. He's nothing but what he is. Her clock has simply stopped. She looks no older – that's all."

"Ah, and a jolly good thing too, when you start where she did. But I take your discrimination as just. The only thing is that if a woman doesn't grow older she may be said to grow younger; and if she grows younger she may be supposed to grow prettier. That's all except, of course, that it strikes me as charming also for Brissenden himself. *He* had the face, I seem to recall, of a baby; so that if his wife did flaunt her fifty years—!"

"Oh, it wouldn't have mattered to him if she had. That's the awfulness, don't you see? of the married state. People have to get used to each other's charms as well as to their faults. He wouldn't have noticed. It's only you and I who do, and the charm of it is for *us*."

"What a lucky thing then that, with Brissenden so out of it and relegated to the time-table's obscure hereafter, it should be you and I who enjoy her!"

"Ah, then I hope that at least Lady John isn't!"

"Oh, Lady John—!"

"He hinted to me that he had not known you more easily."

"More easily than you did? Oh, nobody does that; and, to be quite honest, I've got used to it and don't mind. People talk of our changing every seven years, but they make me feel as if I changed every seven minutes. What will you have, at any rate, and how can I help it? It's the grind of life, the wear and tear of time and misfortune. And, you know, I'm ninety-three."

"How young you must feel to care to talk of your age! I envy you, for nothing would induce me to let you know mine. You look, you see, just twenty-five."

"Well, you can't say I dress it."

"No, you dress, I make out, ninety-three. If you *would* only dress twenty-five you'd look fifteen."

"Fifteen in a schoolroom charade! Your compliment to my taste is odd. I know,

at all events, what's the difference in Mr. Long?"

"Be so good then, for my relief, as to name it."

"Well, a very clever woman has for some time past—"

"Taken a particular interest in him? Do you mean Lady John? Do you call Lady John a very clever woman?"

"Surely. That's why I kindly arranged that, as she was to take, I happened to learn, the next train, Guy should come with her."

"You arranged it? She's not so clever as you then."

"Because you feel that *she* wouldn't, or couldn't? No doubt she wouldn't have made the same point of it – for more than one reason. Poor Guy hasn't pretensions – has nothing but his youth and his beauty. But that's precisely why I'm sorry for him and try whenever I can to give him a lift. Lady John's company *is*, you see, a lift."

"You mean it has so unmistakably been one to Long?"

"Yes – it has positively given him a mind and a tongue. *That's* what has come over him."

"Then it's a most extraordinary case – such as one really has never met."

"Oh, but it happens."

"Ah, so very seldom! Yes – I've positively never met it. Are you very sure that Lady John *is* the influence?"

"I don't mean to say, of course, that he looks fluttered if you mention her, that he doesn't in fact look as blank as a pickpocket. But that proves nothing – or rather, as they're known to be always together, and she from morning till night as pointed as a hat-pin, it proves just what one sees. One simply takes it in."

"They're scarcely together when she's together with Brissenden."

"Ah, that's only once in a way. It's a thing that from time to time such people – don't you know? – make a particular point of: they cultivate, to cover their game, the appearance of other little friendships. It puts outsiders off the scent, and the real

thing meanwhile goes on. Besides, you yourself acknowledge the effect. If she hasn't made him clever, what has she made him? She has given him, steadily, more and more intellect."

"Well, you may be right though you speak as if it were cod-liver oil. Does she administer it, as a daily dose, by the spoonful? or only as a drop at a time? Does he take it in his food? Is he supposed to know? The difficulty for me is simply that if I've seen the handsome grow ugly and the ugly handsome, the fat grow thin and the thin fat, the short grow long and the long short; if I've even, likewise, seen the clever, as I've too fondly, at least, supposed them, grow stupid: so have I *not* seen – no, not once in all my days – the stupid grow clever."

"All I can say is then that you'll have, the next day or two, an interesting new experience."

"It *will* be interesting, and all the more if I make out for myself that Lady John *is* the agent."

"You'll make it out if you talk to her – that is, I mean, if you make *her* talk. You'll see how she *can*."

"She keeps her wit then in spite of all she pumps into others?"

"Oh, she has enough for two!"

"I'm immensely struck with yours, as well as with your generosity. I've seldom seen a woman take so handsome a view of another."

"It's because I like to be kind!"

CHAPTER 2

“Don’t – there’s a good fellow – leave me any longer alone with her!”

“What was the matter just now – when, though you were so fortunately occupied, you yet seemed to call me to the rescue?”

“Oh, I was only occupied in being frightened!”

“But at what?”

“Well, at a sort of sense that she wanted to make love to me.”

“Mrs. Server? Does Mrs. Server make love?”

“It seemed to me, that she began on it to *you* as soon as she got hold of you.

Weren’t you aware?”

“Not to the point of terror. She’s so gentle and so appealing. Even if she took one in hand with violence, moreover, I don’t see why terror – given so charming a person – should be the result. It’s flattering.”

“Ah, you’re brave.”

“I didn’t know you were ever timid. How can you be, in your profession? Doesn’t it come back to me, for that matter, that – only the other year – you painted her?”

“Yes, I faced her to that extent. But she’s different now.”

“In what way different? She’s as charming as ever.”

“Well, her affections were not then, I imagine, at her disposal. I judge that that’s what it must have been. They were fixed – with intensity; and it made the difference with *me*. Her imagination had, for the time, rested its wing. At present it’s ready for flight – it seeks a fresh perch. It’s trying. Take care.”

“Oh, I don’t flatter myself, that I’ve only to hold out my hand! At any rate, *I* shan’t call for help.”

“I don’t know. You’ll see.”

“If I do I shall see a great deal more than I now suspect. Isn’t she wonderfully lovely?”

“Oh!”

“Isn’t she as lovely as she seems?”

“What has that to do with it?”

“What has anything, then?”

“She’s too beastly unhappy.”

“But isn’t that just one’s advantage?”

“No. It’s uncanny.”

“Yes – isn’t it funny?”

“I think so – but I didn’t particularly notice. What’s the matter with poor Briss?”

“That’s exactly what I thought you might be able to tell me. But if nothing, in him, strikes you—! Where is he?”

“Behind you; only don’t turn round to look, for he knows – he knows we’ve noticed.”

“Ah, but I *haven’t*!”

“He knows what’s the matter with him.”

“Then what the devil is it?”

“Do you see him often?”

“No. Why should I?”

“Do you mean there’s nothing in him that strikes you?”

“‘Strikes’ me – in that boy? Nothing in him, that I know of, ever struck me in my life. He’s not an object of the smallest interest to me!”

“Oh, of course, if you haven’t noticed, you haven’t, and the matter I was going to speak of will have no point. You won’t know what I mean. Mrs. Brissenden’s quite fabulous.”

“‘Fabulous’?”

“Why, for the figure that, by candle-light and in cloth-of-silver and diamonds,

she is still able to make.”

“Oh dear, yes! She has grown so very much less plain.”

“Ah, you put it the other way at Paddington – which was much more the right one.”

“How then did I put it?”

“She hasn’t grown very much less plain. She has only grown very much less old.”

“Ah, well, youth is – comparatively speaking – beauty.”

“Oh, not always. Look at poor Briss himself.”

“Well, if you like better, beauty is youth.”

“Not always, either. Certainly only when it *is* beauty. To see how little it may be either, look at poor Briss.”

“I thought you told me just now not to!”

“Well, at present you can.”

“I’ve looked. What then?”

“You don’t see anything?”

“Nothing.”

“Not what everyone else must?”

“No, confound you!”

“It isn’t really, however, that Brissenden has grown less lovely – it’s only that he has grown less young.”

“Oh!”

“How old, did we make out this afternoon that he would be?”

“That who would?”

“Why, poor Briss.”

“Have you got him on the brain?”

“Don’t I seem to remember, my dear man, that it was you yourself who knew? He’s thirty at the most. He can’t possibly be more. And there he is: as fine, as swaddled, as royal a mummy, to the eye, as one would wish to see. Don’t pretend!

But it's all right. I must talk to Lady John."

"One of the pair has to pay for the other. What ensues is a miracle, and miracles are expensive. What's a greater one than to have your youth twice over? It's a second wind, another 'go' – which isn't the sort of thing life mostly treats us to. Mrs. Briss had to get her new blood, her extra allowance of time and bloom, somewhere; and from whom could she so conveniently extract them as from Guy himself? She *has*, by an extraordinary feat of legerdemain, extracted them; and he, on his side, to supply her, has had to tap the sacred fount. But the sacred fount is like the greedy man's description of the turkey as an 'awkward' dinner dish. It may be sometimes too much for a single share, but it's not enough to go round."

"So that, paying to his last drop, Mr. Briss, as you call him, can only die of the business?"

"Oh, not yet, I hope. But before *her* – yes: long."

"How you polish them off?"

"I only talk as you paint; not a bit worse! But one must indeed wonder how the poor wretches feel."

"You mean whether Brissenden likes it?"

"If he loves her he must. That is if he loves her passionately, sublimely. It's in fact just because he does so love her that the miracle, for her, is wrought."

"Well, for taking a miracle coolly—!"

"She hasn't her equal? Yes, she does take it. She just quietly, but just selfishly, profits by it."

"And doesn't see then how her victim loses?"

"No. She can't. The perception, if she had it, would be painful and terrible – might even be fatal to the process. So she hasn't it. She passes round it. It takes all her flood of life to meet her own chance. She has only a wonderful sense of success and well-being. The *other* consciousness—"

"Is all for the other party?"

“The author of the sacrifice.”

“Then how beautifully ‘poor Briss,’ must have it!”

“Oh, he has it so that, though he goes, in his passion, about with her, he dares scarcely show his face. The agents of the sacrifice are uncomfortable, I gather, when they suspect or fear that you see.”

“How you’ve worked it out!”

“Well, I feel as if I were on the way to something.”

“Something still more?”

“Something still more. I seem to snuff up—”

“*Quoi donc?*”

“The sense of a discovery to be made.”

“And of what?”

“I’ll tell you to-morrow. Good-night.”

CHAPTER 3

“I must let you know that, in spite of your guarantee, it doesn’t go at all – oh, but not at all! I’ve tried Lady John, as you enjoyed, and I can’t but feel that she leaves us very much where we were. You said yesterday at Paddington, to explain the change in Gilbert Long – don’t you recall? – that that woman, plying him with her genius and giving him of her best, is clever enough for two. She’s not clever enough then, it strikes me, for three – or at any rate for four. I confess I don’t see it. Does she really dazzle you? Oh, you’ve a standard of wit!”

“No, I’ve only a sense of reality – a sense not at all satisfied by the theory of such an influence as Lady John’s.”

“Such a one as whose else then?”

“Ah, that’s for us still to find out! Of course this can’t be easy; for as the appearance is inevitably a kind of betrayal, it’s in somebody’s interest to conceal it.”

“Oh, you mean in the lady’s?”

“In the lady’s most. But also in Long’s own, if he’s really tender of the lady – which is precisely what our theory posits.”

“I see. You call the appearance a kind of betrayal because it points to the relation behind it.”

“Precisely.”

“And the relation – to do that sort of thing – must be necessarily so awfully intimate.”

“*Intimissima.*”

“And kept therefore in the background exactly in that proportion.”

“Exactly in that proportion.”

“Very well then, doesn’t Mr. Long’s tenderness of Lady John quite fall in with

what I mentioned to you?”

“His making her come down with poor Briss?”

“Nothing less.”

“And is that all you go upon?”

“That and lots more.”

“I know what you mean by ‘lots.’ Is Brissenden in it?”

“Dear no – poor Briss! He wouldn’t like that. *I* saw the manoeuvre, but Guy didn’t. And you must have noticed how he stuck to her all last evening.”

“How Gilbert Long stuck to Lady John? Oh yes, I noticed. They were like Lord Lutley and Mrs. Froome. But is that what one can call being tender of her?”

“He must speak to her *sometimes*. I’m glad you admit, at any rate, that it does take what you so prettily call some woman’s secretly giving him of her best to account for him.”

“Oh, that I admit with all my heart – or at least with all my head. Only, Lady John has none of the signs—”

“Of being the beneficent woman? What then *are* they – the signs – to be so plain? It proves nothing, you know, that *you* don’t like her.”

“No. It would prove more if she didn’t like *me*, which – fatuous fool as you may find me – I verily believe she does. If she hated me it would be, you see, for my ruthless analysis of her secret. She *has* no secret. She would like awfully to have – and she would like almost as much to be believed to have. Last evening, after dinner, she could feel perhaps for a while that she *was* believed. But it won’t do. There’s nothing in it. You asked me just now what the signs of such a secret would naturally be. Well, bethink yourself a moment of what the secret itself must naturally be.”

“Awfully charming – mustn’t it? – to act upon a person, through an affection, so deeply.”

“Yes – it can certainly be no vulgar flirtation. Whoever she is, she gives all she has. She keeps nothing back – nothing for herself.”

"I see because *he* takes everything. He just cleans her out. Who *is* the lady then?"

"How can she possibly be a woman who gives absolutely nothing whatever; who scrapes and saves and hoards; who keeps every crumb for herself? The whole show's there – to minister to Lady John's vanity and advertise the business – behind her smart shop-window. You can see it, as much as you like, and even amuse yourself with pricing it. But she never parts with an article. If poor Long depended on *her*—"

"Well, what?"

"Why, he'd be the same poor Long as ever. He would go as he used to go – naked and unashamed. No, he deals – turned out as we now see him – at another establishment."

"I'll grant it if you'll only name me the place."

"He doesn't screen Lady John – she doesn't screen herself – with your husband or with anybody. It's she who's herself the screen! And pleased as she is at being so clever, and at being thought so, she doesn't even know it. She doesn't so much as suspect it. She's an unmitigated fool about it. 'Of course Mr. Long's clever, because he's in love with me and sits at my feet, and don't you see how clever I am? Don't you hear what good things I say – wait a little, I'm going to say another in about three minutes; and how, if you'll only give him time too, he comes out with them after me? They don't perhaps sound so good, but you see where he has got them. I'm so brilliant, in fine, that the men who admire me have only to imitate me, which, you observe, they strikingly do.' Something like that is all her philosophy."

"You do sound like her, you know. Yet how, if a woman's stupid—"

"Can she have made a man clever? She can't. She can't at least have begun it. What we shall know the real person by, in the case that you and I are studying, is that the man himself will have made her what she has become. She will have done just what Lady John has not done – she will have put up the shutters and closed the shop. She will have parted, for her friend, with her wit."

"So that she may be regarded as reduced to idiocy?"

"Well – so I can only see it."

“And that if we look, therefore, for the right idiot—”

“We shall find the right woman – our friend’s mystic Egeria? Yes, we shall be at least approaching the truth. We shall ‘burn,’ as they say in hide-and-seek. The cleverest man of the party? Hardly that, perhaps – for don’t you see the proofs I’m myself giving you? But say he *is* the cleverest but one. In that case the thing we’re looking for ought logically to be the person, of the opposite sex, giving us the maximum sense of depletion for his benefit? The biggest fool, you suggest, *must*, consistently, be the right one? Yes again; it would so seem. But that’s not really, you see, the short cut it sounds. The biggest fool is what we want, but the question is to discover who *is* the biggest.”

“I’m glad then *I* feel so safe!”

“Oh, you’re not the biggest! Besides, as I say, there must be the other evidence – the evidence of relations.”

“Won’t *that*, as it happens, then do?”

“Mme. de Dreuil!”

“Then he has nothing *but* screens? The need for so many does suggest a fire! She may exist – and exist as you require her; but what, after all, proves that she’s here? She mayn’t have come down with him. Does it necessarily follow that they always go about together?”

“It’s my belief that he no more goes away without her than you go away without poor Briss.”

“But what have we in common?”

“With the parties to an abandoned flirtation? Well, you’ve in common your mutual attachment and the fact that you’re thoroughly happy together.”

“Ah, we don’t flirt!”

“Well, at all events, you don’t separate. He doesn’t really suffer you out of his sight, and, to circulate in the society you adorn, you don’t leave him at home.”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“It isn’t a question of why you shouldn’t – it’s a question of whether you do. You don’t – do you? That’s all.”

“It seems to me I often leave him when I don’t want him.”

“Oh, when you don’t want him – yes. But when don’t you want him? You want him when you want to be right, and you want to be right when you mix in a scene like this. I mean, when you want to be happy. Happiness, you know, is, to a lady in the full tide of social success, even more becoming than a new French frock. You have the advantage, for your beauty, of being admirably married. You bloom in your husband’s presence. I don’t say he need always be at your elbow; I simply say that you’re most completely yourself when he’s not far off. If there were nothing else there would be the help given you by your quiet confidence in his lawful passion.”

“I’m bound to say that such help is consistent with his not having spoken to me since we parted, yesterday, to come down here by different trains. We haven’t so much as met since our arrival. My finding him so indispensable is consistent with my not having so much as looked at him. Indispensable, please, for what?”

“For your not being without him.”

“What then do I do *with* him?”

“Ah, I think it will be only *he* who can tell you! My point is that you’ve the instinct – playing in you, on either side, with all the ease of experience – of what you are to each other. All I mean is that it’s the instinct that Long and his good friend must have. They too perhaps haven’t spoken to each other. But where he comes she does, and where she comes he does. That’s why I know she’s among us.”

“It’s wonderful what you know! How can you think of them as enjoying the facilities of people in *our* situation?”

“Of people married and therefore logically in presence? I don’t speak of their facilities as the same, and I recognise every limit to their freedom. But I maintain, none the less, that so far as they *can* go, they do go. It’s a relation, and they work the relation: the relation, exquisite surely, of knowing they help each other to

shine. Why are they not, therefore, like you and Brissenden? What I make out is that when they do shine one will find – though only after a hunt, I admit, as you see – they must both have been involved. Feeling their need, and consummately expert, they will have managed, have arranged.”

“Arranged what?”

“Oh, ask *her*!”

“I would if I could find her! But I thought it was just your contention that *she* doesn’t shine. If it’s Lady John’s perfect repair that puts that sort of thing out of the question, your image, it seems to me, breaks down.”

“Not at all. It’s a case of shining as Brissenden shines. By sacrifice.”

“Sacrifice, for mercy’s sake, of what?”

“Well – for mercy’s sake – of his time.”

“His time? Hasn’t he all the time he wants?”

“My dear lady, he hasn’t all the time *you* want!”

“Don’t I make things of an ease, don’t I make life of a charm, for him?”

“That’s perhaps exactly it! It’s what Gilbert Long does for *his* victim – makes things, makes life, of an ease and a charm.”

“Then it’s the woman, simply, who’s happiest?”

“Because Brissenden’s the man who is? Precisely!”

“Do you really mean that if you only knew *me* as I am, it would come to you in the same way to hunt for my confederate? I mean if he weren’t made obvious, you know, by his being my husband.”

“If you were only in flirtation – as you reminded me just now that you’re not? Surely! I should arrive at him, perfectly, after all eliminations, on the principle of looking for the greatest happiness—”

“Of the smallest number? Well, he may be a small number, but he’s wholly content! Look at him now there and judge.”

“By all that’s lovely – May Server!”

“We have her, we have her; it’s *she*!”

CHAPTER 4

“Oh, yes, he *had* managed to interest me. Isn't he curiously interesting? But I hadn't, I hadn't managed to interest *him*. Of course you know why! No one interests him but Lady John, and he could think of nothing, while I kept him there, but of how soon he could return to her.”

“And is Lady John interested in our friend?”

“Not, I suppose, given her situation, so much as he would perhaps desire. You don't know what her situation *is*? Isn't it rather marked that there's only one person she's interested in?”

“One person?”

“Why, here he is!”

“Do you mean Ford Obert?”

“Yes!”

“What an unexpected demon of a critic!”

“Oh yes, – the man with the mask in his hand! He's perfectly amazing, you know – he's perfectly amazing!”

“Obert had evidently laboured under some extraordinary delusion. He must literally have doubted if Long *was* clever.”

“Fancy!”

“They're natural, they're natural, that is, he's natural to *her*, but he's not so to me. Do, my dear man, let us have it again. It's the picture, of all pictures, that most needs an interpreter. *Don't* we want, to know what it means?”

“Yes, what in the world does it mean? One could call it – though that doesn't get one much further – the Mask of Death.”

“Why so? Isn't it much rather the Mask of Life? It's the man's own face that's

Death. The other one, blooming and beautiful—”

“Ah, but with an awful grimace!”

“The other one, blooming and beautiful, is Life, and he’s going to put it on; unless indeed he has just taken it off.”

“He’s dreadful, he’s awful – that’s what I mean. But what does Mr. Long think?”

“The artificial face, on the other hand is extremely studied and, when you carefully look at it, charmingly pretty. I don’t see the grimace.”

“I don’t see anything else! And what does Mr. Obert think?”

“He thinks it looks like a lovely lady.”

“That grinning mask? What lovely lady?”

“It does. It does look remarkably like Mrs. Server.”

“I’m immensely obliged. You deserve that I should say the gentleman’s own face is the image of a certain other gentleman’s.”

“It isn’t the image of yours, but it’s a funny thing that it should really recall to one some face among us here, on this occasion – I mean some face in our party – that I can’t think of. We’ve seen him yesterday – we’ve seen him already this morning. Who the deuce is it?”

“I know. But nothing would induce me to tell.”

“If *I* were the flattered individual, I’ve an idea that you’d give me the benefit of the compliment. Therefore it’s probably not me.”

“Oh, it’s not you in the least. This face is so bad—”

“And mine is so good? Thank you for saving me!”

“Why do you bring against me such an accusation?”

“I don’t know!”

“*Do* name the flattered individual.”

“No, it’s a responsibility I leave to Obert.”

“I see the fellow – yet I don’t. Never mind. He’ll come to me.”

“The resemblance, the resemblance, which I shouldn’t think would puzzle any-

one, is simply to 'poor Briss'!"

"Oh, of course!"

"Ah – I do see it."

"What wonderful things was Long just saying to you?"

"Oh, characteristic ones enough – whimsical, fanciful, funny. The things he says, you know."

"They strike you as characteristic?"

"Of the man himself and his type of mind? Surely. Don't *you*? He talks to talk, but he's really amusing."

"Indeed he is – extraordinarily amusing. See how amusing he is at the present moment to Mrs. Server."

"What's the matter with them?"

"The matter with them? I don't know anything but that they're young and handsome and happy – children, as who should say, of the world; children of leisure and pleasure and privilege."

"Do you remember what I said to you about her yesterday afternoon? She darts from flower to flower, but she clings, for the time, to each. You've been feeling, I judge, the force of my remark."

"Oh, she didn't at all 'dart,' just now at me. I darted, much rather, at *her*."

"Long didn't, then."

"Do you mean he struck you as avoiding her?"

"He struck me as having noticed with what intensity, ever since we came down, she has kept alighting. She inaugurated it, the instant she arrived, with me, and every man of us has had his turn. I dare say it's only fair, certainly, that Long should have."

"He's lucky to get it, the brute! She's as charming as she can possibly be."

"That's it, precisely; and it's what no woman ought to be – as charming as she possibly can! – more than once or twice in her life. This lady is so every blessed

minute, and to every blessed male. It's as if she were too awfully afraid one wouldn't take it in. If she but knew how one does! However, you'll recollect that we differed about her yesterday – and what does it signify? One should of course bear lightly on anything so light. But I stick to it that she's different.”

“Different from whom?”

“Different from herself – as she was when I painted her. There's something the matter with her.”

“Ah, then, it's for me to ask *you* what. I don't myself, you see, perceive it.”

“That's the way she collars us.”

“Oh, Long doesn't mind. But what's the way she strikes you as different?”

“From what she was when she sat to me? Well, a part of it is that she can't keep still. She was as still then as if she had been paid for it. Now she's all over the place. I like your talking, my dear man, of what you 'don't perceive.' I've yet to find out what that remarkable quantity is. What you do perceive has at all events given me so much to think about that it doubtless ought to serve me for the present. I feel I ought to let you know that you've made me also perceive the Brissendens.”

“You put me on them wonderfully, though of course I've kept your idea to myself. All the same it sheds a great light.”

“A great light?”

“As to what may go on even between others still. It's a jolly idea – a torch in the darkness; and do you know what I've done with it? I've held it up, I don't mind telling you, to just the question of the change, since this interests you, in Mrs. Server. If you've got your mystery I'll be hanged if I won't have mine. If you've got your Brissendens I shall see what I can do with *her*. You've given me an analogy, and I declare I find it dazzling. I don't see the end of what may be done with it. If Brissenden's paying for his wife, for her amazing second bloom, who's paying for Mrs. Server? Isn't *that* – what do the newspapers call it? – the missing word? Isn't it perhaps in fact just what you told me last night you were on the track of? But don't

add now, don't add now that the man's obviously Gilbert Long—for I won't be put off with anything of the sort. She collared him much too markedly. The real man must be one she doesn't markedly collar.”

“But I thought that what you a moment ago made out was that she so markedly collars all of us. What makes you think that what you speak of was what I had in my head?”

“Well, the way, simply, that the shoe fits. She's absolutely not the same person I painted. It's exactly like Mrs. Brissenden's having been for you yesterday not the same person you had last seen bearing her name.”

“Very good, though I didn't in the least mean to set you digging so hard. However, dig on your side, by all means, while I dig on mine. All I ask of you is complete discretion.”

“Ah, naturally!”

“We ought to remember that success in such an inquiry may perhaps be more embarrassing than failure. To nose about for a relation that a lady has her reasons for keeping secret—”

“Is made not only quite inoffensive, I hold but positively honourable, by being confined to psychologic evidence.”

“Honourable to whom?”

“Why, to the investigator. Resting on the *kind* of signs that the game takes account of when fairly played—resting on psychologic signs alone, it's a high application of intelligence. What's ignoble is the detective and the keyhole.”

“I see. I did have, last night, my scruples, but you warm me up. Yet I confess also that if I do muster the courage of my curiosity, it's a little because I feel even yet, as I think you also must, altogether destitute of a material clue. If I had a material clue I should feel ashamed: the fact would be deterrent. I start, for my part, at any rate, quite in the dark—or in a darkness lighted, at best, by what you have called the torch of my analogy. The analogy too may very well be only half a help. It was easy to find poor Briss, because poor Briss is here, and it's always easy, moreover, to find a husband. But say Mrs. Server's poor Briss—or his equivalent, whoever it may

be – *isn't* here.”

“I’m sure he is. She tells me he’s near.”

“‘Tells’ you?”

“She wouldn’t be as she is if he weren’t. Her being as she is is the sign of it. He wasn’t present – that is he wasn’t present in her life at all – when I painted her; and the difference we’re impressed with is exactly the proof that he is now.”

“Well, then, grant he’s one of us. There are more than a dozen of us – a dozen even with you and me and Brissenden counted out. The hitch is that we’re nowhere without a primary lead. As to Brissenden there *was* the lead.”

“You mean as afforded by his wife’s bloated state, which was a signal?”

“Precisely: for the search for something or other that would help to explain it. Given his wife’s bloated state, his own shrunken one was what was to have been predicated. I knew definitely, in other words, what to look for.”

“Whereas we don’t know here?”

“Mrs. Server’s state, unfortunately, is not bloated.”

“It’s but now I really see her. She did and said nothing special, nothing striking or extraordinary; but that didn’t matter – it never does: one saw how she is. She’s nothing but *that*.”

“Nothing but what?”

“She’s all in it. Or it’s all in *her*. It comes to the same thing.”

“Of course it’s all in her. That’s what we start with, isn’t it? It leaves us as far as ever from what we must arrive at.”

“I *have* her!”

“Ah, but it’s a question of having *him*!”

“So it is. I leave it to you. I don’t care. Look for the last man. I daresay it would be he.”

“The last? In what sense the last?”

“Well, the last sort of creature who could be believed of her.”

“Oh, the great bar to that is that such a sort of creature as the last won’t *be* here!”

“So much the better. I give him, at any rate, wherever he is, up to you.”

“Thank you for the beauty of the present! You do see, then, that our psychologic glow doesn’t, after all, prevent the thing—”

“From being none of one’s business? Yes. Poor little woman! It isn’t any of one’s business, is it?”

“Why, that’s what I was telling you that *I* feel!”

CHAPTER 5

“It *is* she – quite unmistakably, you know. I don’t see how I can have been so stupid as not to make it out. I haven’t your cleverness, of course, till my nose is rubbed into a thing. But when it *is*—! The two are off together.”

“Off where?”

“I don’t know where, but I saw them a few minutes ago most distinctly ‘slope.’ They’ve gone for a quiet, unwatched hour, poor dears, out into the park or the gardens. When one knows it, it’s all there. But what’s that vulgar song? – ‘You’ve got to know it first!’ It strikes me, if you don’t mind my telling you so, that the way *you* get hold of things is positively uncanny. I mean as regards what first marked her for you.”

“But, my dear lady, nothing at all first marked her for me. She *isn’t* marked for me, first or last. It was only you who so jumped at her.”

“I don’t see in Mrs. Server any of the right signs.”

“Even after your telling me that you see in Lady John only the wrong ones?”

“Ah, but there are other women here than Mrs. Server and Lady John.”

“Certainly. But didn’t we, a moment ago, think of them all and dismiss them? If Lady John’s out of the question, how can Mrs. Server possibly *not* be in it? We want a fool—”

“Ah, *do* we?”

“Why, exactly by your own theory, in which you’ve so much interested me! It was you who struck off the idea.”

“That we want a fool? Do we really want anyone at all?”

“Ah, you want to take it back now? You’re sorry you spoke. My dear man, you may be— You’ll lead me to believe, if you back out, that there’s suddenly someone

you want to protect. Weak man, something has happened to you since we separated! Weak man, you've been squared!"

"Squared?"

"Does it inconveniently happen that you find you're in love with her yourself?"

"Well, do, if you like, call it that; for you see what a motive it gives me for being, in such a matter as this wonderful one that you and I happened to find ourselves for a moment making so free with, absolutely sure about her. I *am* absolutely sure. There! She won't do. And for your postulate that she's at the present moment in some sequestered spot in Long's company, suffer me without delay to correct it. It won't hold water. If you'll go into the library, through which I have just passed, you'll find her there in the company of the Comte de Dreuil."

"Already? She *was*, at any rate, with Mr. Long, and she told me on my meeting them that they had just come from the pastels."

"Exactly. They met there she and I having gone together; and they retired together under my eyes. They must have parted, clearly, the moment after."

"Then what does that prove but that they're afraid to be seen?"

"Ah, they're *not* afraid, since both you and I saw them!"

"Oh, only just long enough for them to publish themselves as not avoiding each other. All the same, you know, they do."

"Do avoid each other? How is your belief in that consistent with your belief that they parade together in the park?"

"They ignore each other in public; they foregather in private."

"Ah, but they *don't* – since, as I tell you, she's even while we talk the centre of the mystic circle of the twaddle of M. de Dreuil; chained to a stake if you *can* be. Besides, it's not only that she's not the 'right fool' – it's simply that she's not a fool at all. We want the woman who has been rendered most inane. But this lady hasn't been rendered so in any degree. She's the reverse of inane. She's in full possession."

"In full possession of what?"

“Why, of herself.”

“Like Lady John?”

“No, not like Lady John.”

“Like whom then?”

“Like anyone. Like me; like you; like Brissenden. Don’t I satisfy you?”

“If you wished to satisfy me so easily you shouldn’t have made such a point of working me up. I daresay I, after all, however, notice more things than you.”

“As for instance?”

“Well, May Server last evening. I was not quite conscious at the time that I did, but when one has had the ‘tip’ one looks back and sees things in a new light.”

“She’s perfectly natural. What I saw was a test. And so is he.”

“If there hadn’t been so many people I should have noticed of myself after dinner that there was something the matter with her. I should have seen what it was. She was all over the place.”

“Ah, then, in spite of the people, you did notice. What do you mean by ‘all over the place’?”

“She couldn’t keep still. She was different from the woman one had last seen. She used to be so calm – as if she were always sitting for her portrait. Wasn’t she in fact always being painted in a pink frock and one row of pearls, always staring out at you in exhibitions, as if she were saying ‘Here they are again’? Last night she was on the rush.”

“The rush? Oh!”

“Yes, positively – from one man to another. She was on the pounce. She talked to ten in succession, making up to them in the most extraordinary way and leaving them still more crazily. She’s as nervous as a cat. Put it to any man here, and see if he doesn’t tell you.”

“I should think it quite unpleasant to put it to any man here, and I should have been sure you would have thought it the same. I spoke to you in the deepest confidence.”

“How you *are* protecting her! But don’t cry out before you’re hurt. Since your confidence has distinguished me – though I don’t quite see why – you may be sure I haven’t breathed. So I all the more resent your making me a scene on the extraordinary ground that I’ve observed as well as yourself. Perhaps what you don’t like is that my observation may be turned on you. I confess it is.”

“It’s not in the least to your observation that I object, it’s to the extravagant inferences you draw from it. Of course, however, I admit I always want to protect the innocent. What does she gain, on your theory, by her rushing and pouncing? Had she pounced on Brissenden when we met him with her? Are you so very sure he hadn’t pounced on *her*? They had, at all events, to me, quite the air of people settled; she was not, it was clear, at that moment meditating a change. It was we, if you remember, who had absolutely to pull them apart.”

“Is it your idea to make out that she has suddenly had the happy thought of a passion for my husband?”

“She may have a sympathy.”

“You mean she may be sorry for him? On what ground?”

“You neglect him so! But what is she, at any rate, nervous – as nervous as you describe her – *about*?”

“About her danger; the contingency of its being fixed upon them – an intimacy so thoroughgoing that they can scarcely afford to let it be seen even as a mere acquaintance. Think of the circumstances – *her* personal ones, I mean, and admit that it wouldn’t do. It would be too bad a case. There’s everything to make it so. They must live on pins and needles. Anything proved would go tremendously hard for her.”

“In spite of which you’re surprised that I ‘protect’ her?”

“From people in general, no. From me in particular, yes.”

“Well, then, let us be fair all round. That you don’t, as you say, breathe is a discretion I appreciate; all the more that a little inquiry, tactfully pursued, would enable

you to judge whether any independent suspicion does attach. A little loose collateral evidence *might* be picked up; and your scorning to handle it is no more than I should, after all, have expected of you.”

“Thank you for ‘after all’! I know for myself what I scorn to handle. Quite apart from that there’s another matter. You must have noticed yourself that when people are so much liked—”

“There’s a kind of general, amiable consensus of blindness? Yes – one can think of cases. Popularity shelters and hallows – has the effect of making a good-natured world agree not to see.”

“This evidently has been a case then in which it has not only agreed not to see, but agreed not even to look. It has agreed in fact to look straight the other way. They say there’s no smoke without fire, but it appears there may be fire without smoke. I’m satisfied, at all events, that one wouldn’t in connection with these two find the least little puff. Isn’t that just what makes the magnificence of their success – the success that reduces us to playing over them with mere moonshine? I’ve never *seen* such luck!”

“A rare case of the beauty of impunity *as* impunity? Such a case puts a price on passions otherwise to be deprecated? I’m glad indeed you admit we’re ‘reduced.’ We *are* reduced. But what I meant to say just now was that if you’ll continue to join in the genial conspiracy while I do the same – each of us making an exception only for the other – I’ll pledge myself absolutely to the straight course. If before we separate I’ve seen reason to change my mind, I’ll loyally let you know.”

“What good will that do me if you *don’t* change your mind? You won’t change it if you shut your eyes to her.”

“Ah, I feel I can’t do that now. I *am* interested. The proof of that is that I appeal to you for another impression of your own. I still don’t see the logic of her general importunity.”

“The logic is simply that she has a terror of appearing to encourage anyone in

particular.”

“Why then isn’t it in her own interest, for the sake of the screen, just to *do* that? The appearance of someone in particular would be exactly the opposite of the appearance of Long. Your own admission is that that’s *his* line with Lady John.”

“Oh, she doesn’t want to do anything so like the real thing. And, as for what he does, they don’t feel in the same way. He’s not nervous.”

“Then why does he go in for a screen?”

“I mean that he’s not so nervous as May. He hasn’t the same reasons for panic. A man never has. Besides, there’s not so much in Mr. Long to show—”

“What, by my notion, has taken place? Why not, if it was precisely by the change in him that my notion was inspired? Any change in *her* I know comparatively little about.”

“Oh, the man’s not aware of his own change. He doesn’t see it as we do. It’s all to his advantage.”

“But we see it to his advantage. How should that prevent?”

“We see it to the advantage of his mind and his talk, but not to that of—”

“Well, what?”

“His delicacy. His consideration. His thought *for* her. He would think for her if he weren’t selfish. But he *is* selfish – too much so to spare her, to be generous, to realise. It’s only, after all, it’s only an excessive case, a case that in him happens to show as what the doctors call ‘fine,’ of what goes on whenever two persons are so much mixed up. One of them always gets more out of it than the other. One of them – you know the saying – gives the lips, the other gives the cheek.”

“It’s the deepest of all truths. Yet the cheek profits too.”

“It profits most. It takes and keeps and uses all the lips give. The cheek, accordingly, is Mr. Long’s. The lips are what we began by looking for. We’ve found them. They’re drained – they’re dry, the lips. Mr. Long finds his improvement natural and beautiful. He revels in it. He takes it for granted. He’s sublime.”

“So – do you know? – are *you!*”

“That’s only because it’s catching. You’ve *made* me sublime. You found me dense. You’ve affected me quite as Mrs. Server has affected Mr. Long. I don’t pretend I show it quite as much as he does.”

“Because that would entail *my* showing it as much as, by your contention, *she* does? Well, I confess I do feel remarkably like that pair of lips. I feel drained – I feel dry!”

“There! I thought you said that you had left her tucked away somewhere with M. de Dreuil.”

“Well, that is obviously M. de Dreuil.”

“Are you so sure? I don’t make out the person. I only see she’s not alone. I understood you moreover that you had lately left them in the house.”

“They *were* in the house, but there was nothing to keep them from coming out. They’ve had plenty of time while we’ve talked; they must have passed down by some of the other steps. Perhaps also it’s another man.”

“It’s *he!*”

“Gilbert Long? I thought you just said that you can make nobody out.”

“It *must* be he, since it was with him I so distinctly saw her.”

“Let me once more hold you to the fact that she had, to my knowledge, succumbed to M. de Dreuil afterwards. The moments have fled, you see, in our fascinating discussion, and various things, on your theory of her pounce, have come and gone. Don’t I moreover make out a brown shoe, in a white gaiter, protruding from the other side of her dress? It must be Lord Lutley.”

“A brown shoe in a white gaiter?”

“There!”

“Look at her *now!*”

“Dear Guy *again?*”

“You don’t require, I suppose, anything more than *that?*”

“Well, I don’t quite see, I’m bound to say, just where even ‘that’ comes in.”

“Why, this invention of using my husband—!”

“Of ‘using’ him?”

“Trailing him across the scent as she does all of you, one after the other. Excuse my comparing you to so many red herrings. You each have your turn; only *his* seems repeated, poor dear, till he’s quite worn out with it.”

“I can see of course that his whole situation must be something of a strain for him; for I’ve not forgotten what you told me yesterday of his service with Lady John. To have to work in such a way for two of them at once.”

“Oh, the cases are not the same, for with Lady John it amuses him: he thinks he knows.”

“Knows what?”

“What she wants him for. He doesn’t know that she really doesn’t want him for anything; for anything except, of course himself.”

“And he doesn’t know, either that Mrs. Server does.”

“No, he doesn’t know what it’s her idea to do with him.”

“He doesn’t know, in fine, the truth about anything. And of course, by your agreement with me, he’s not to learn it.”

“I certainly don’t want him to become conscious.”

“It’s his unconsciousness that saves him.”

“Yes, even from himself.”

“We must accordingly feed it. It wasn’t, at all events, Gilbert Long behind the tree!”

“Of course it wasn’t. We shouldn’t have been treated to the scene if it *had* been. What could she possibly have put poor Briss there for but just to show it wasn’t?”

CHAPTER 6

CHAPTER 7

“You’re not going then yourself?”

“No, I don’t particularly want tea; and I may as well now confess to you that I’m taking a lonely, unsociable walk. I don’t enjoy such occasions as these unless I from time to time get off by myself somewhere long enough to tell myself how much I do enjoy them. That’s what I was cultivating solitude for when I happened just now to come upon you. When I found you there with Lady John there was nothing for me but to make the best of it; but I’m glad of this chance to assure you that, every appearance to the contrary notwithstanding, I wasn’t prowling about in search of you.”

“Well, I’m glad you turned up. I wasn’t especially amusing myself.”

“Oh, I think I know how little!”

“You ‘know’?”

“Ah, I know everything!”

“You know I decidedly have too much of that dreadful old woman?”

“Of course you can’t quite see the fun of it, and it really isn’t fair to you. You struck me as much more in your element, when, this morning, more than once, I chanced to observe you led captive by Mrs. Server.”

“Oh, that’s a different affair.”

“Mrs. Server’s an old woman, but she can’t seem to a fellow like you as old as Lady John. She has at any rate more charm; though perhaps not quite so much talk.”

“Oh, she hasn’t any *talk*!”

“Not *any*?”

“None to speak of.”

“But wasn’t she chattering to you at luncheon? I was too far away from you to hear, and I could only judge of her flow of conversation from the animated expres-

sion of her face. It was extraordinarily animated. But that, I admit, strikes one always as a sort of *parti pris* with her. She's never *not* extraordinarily animated."

"She has no flow of conversation whatever."

"Really?"

"Why, haven't you seen for yourself—?"

"How the case stands with her on that head? Do you mean haven't I talked with her? Well, scarcely; for it's a fact that every man in the house *but* I strikes me as having been deluged with that privilege: if indeed, her absence of topics suffers it to be either a privilege or a deluge! She affects me, in any case, as determined to have nothing to do with me. She walks all the rest of you about; she gives you each your turn; me only she skips, she systematically ignores. I'm half consoled for it, however, by seeing what short innings any individual of you has. You personally strike me as having had the longest."

"Oh, she's extremely charming. But of course she's strikingly odd."

"Odd? – really?"

"Why, in the sense, I mean, that I thought you suggested you've noticed."

"That of extravagant vivacity? Oh, I've had to notice it at a distance, without knowing what it represents."

"You haven't any idea at all what it represents?"

"How should I have when she never comes near me? I've thought *that*, as I tell you, marked. What does her avoidance of *me* represent? Has she happened, with you, to throw any light on it?"

"I think that she's rather afraid of you."

"The most harmless man in the house?"

"*Are* you really?"

"If you take me for anything else, I doubt if you'll find anyone to back you."

"I don't want anyone to back me. I don't care. I didn't mean just now that Mrs. Server has said to me anything against you, or that she fears you because she dislikes

you. She only told me she thought you disliked *her*.”

“A creature so beautiful, and so – so—”

“So what?”

“Well, so brilliantly happy.”

“Is that what she *is*?”

“Then don’t you, with your opportunities, know? What are you trying to get out of me?”

“Of course if you’ve no idea, I can get nothing.”

“No idea of what?”

“Well, of what’s the matter with her.”

“Is there anything particular? If there *is*, there’s something that I’ve got out of *you*!”

“How so, if you don’t know what it is?”

“Do you mean if you yourself don’t? Of what in especial do the signs consist?”

“Well, of everyone’s thinking so – that there’s something or other.”

“Oh, everyone’s a fool!”

“Then you *have* your own idea?”

“Do you mean people are talking about her?”

“Haven’t they shown you—?”

“No, no one has spoken. Moreover I wouldn’t have let them.”

“Then there you *are*! If you’ve kept them off, it must be because you differ with them.”

“I shan’t be sure of that till I know what they think! However, I repeat that I shouldn’t even then care. I don’t mind admitting that she much interests me.”

“There you are, there you are!”

“That’s all that’s the matter with her so far as *I’m* concerned. You see, at any rate, how little it need make her afraid of me. She’s lovely and she’s gentle and she’s happy.”

“What is there to interest you so in that? Isn’t it a description that applies here to a dozen other women? You can’t say, you know, that you’re interested in them, for you just spoke of them as so many fools.”

“I wasn’t thinking of the ladies – I was thinking of the men.”

“That’s amiable to me.”

“Oh, my dear Brissenden, I except ‘you.’”

“And why should you?”

“I’ll tell you some other time. And among the ladies I except Mrs. Brissenden, with whom, as you may have noticed, I’ve been having much talk.”

“And will you tell me some other time about that too? I’ll get it then from my wife.”

“Never. She won’t tell you.”

“She has passed you her word? That won’t alter the fact that she tells me everything.”

“Are you going back to tea? If you are, I’ll, in spite of my desire to roam, walk twenty steps with you. Do you also tell everything to Mrs. Brissenden?”

“Do you ask me that in order that I shan’t speak to her of this?”

“Of ‘this’—?”

“Why, of what we’ve made out—”

“About Mrs. Server, you and I? You must act as to that, my dear fellow, quite on your own discretion. All the more that what on earth *have* we made out? I assure you I haven’t a secret to confide to you about her, except that I’ve never seen a person more unquenchably radiant.”

“Well, that’s just it!”

“But just what?”

“Why, what they’re all talking about. That she *is* so awfully radiant. That she’s so tremendously happy. It’s the question of what in the world she has to make her so.”

“My dear man, how do *I* know?”

“She *thinks* you know.”

“Mrs. Server thinks I know what makes her happy?”

“She *isn't* happy.”

“You mean that that’s what’s the matter with her under her appearance—? Then what makes the appearance so extraordinary?”

“Why, exactly what I mention – that one doesn’t see anything whatever in her to correspond to it.”

“Do you mean in her circumstances?”

“Yes – or in her character. Her circumstances are nothing wonderful. She has none too much money; she has had three children and lost them; and nobody that belongs to her appears ever to have been particularly nice to her.”

“How you *do* get on with her!”

“Do you call it getting on with her to be the more bewildered the more I see her?”

“Isn’t to say you’re bewildered only, on the whole, to say you’re charmed? That always – doesn’t it? – describes more or less any engrossed relation with a lovely lady.”

“Well, I’m not sure I’m so charmed. I’m not at all easily charmed, you know, and I’m not a fellow who goes about much after women.”

“Ah, that I never supposed! Why in the world *should* you? It’s the last thing! But isn’t this – quite (what shall one call it?) innocently – rather a peculiar case?”

“I knew you knew it was special! I knew you’ve been thinking about it!”

“You certainly have, during the last five minutes, made me do so with some sharpness. I don’t pretend that I don’t now recognise that there must be something the matter. I only desire – not unnaturally – that there *should* be, to put me in the right for having thought, if, as you’re so sure, such a freedom as that can be brought home to me. If Mrs. Server is beautiful and gentle and strange, what are those things but an attraction?”

“They’re not an attraction. They’re too queer.”

“Oh, of course I’m not speaking of her as a party to a silly flirtation, or an object

of any sort of trivial pursuit. But there are so many different ways of being taken.”

“For a fellow like you. But not for a fellow like me. For me there’s only one.”

“To be, you mean, in love?”

“Well, to be thoroughly pleased.”

“Ah, that’s doubtless the best way and the firm ground. And you mean you’re *not* thoroughly pleased with Mrs. Server?”

“No – and yet I want to be kind to her. Therefore what’s the matter?”

“Oh, if it’s what’s the matter with *you* you ask me, that extends the question. If you want to be kind to her, you get on with her, as we were saying, quite enough for my argument. And isn’t the matter also, after all, that you simply feel she desires you to be kind?”

“She does that. It is that she desires me. She likes it. And the extraordinary thing is that *I* like it.”

“And why in the world shouldn’t you?”

“Because she terrifies me. She has something to hide.”

“But, my dear man, my dear man, what woman who’s worth anything hasn’t?”

“Yes, but there are different ways. What *she* tries for is this false appearance of happiness.”

“But isn’t that the best thing?”

“It’s terrible to have to keep it up.”

“Ah, but if you don’t *for* her? If it all comes on herself?”

“It doesn’t. I do – ‘for’ her – help to keep it up. I want to – I try to; that’s what I mean by being kind to her, and by the gratitude with which she takes it. One feels that one doesn’t want her to break down.”

“Oh, but she won’t. You must keep her going.”

“Who am *I* to keep people going?”

“Why, you’re just the man. Aren’t you happy?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then, you belong to the useful class. You’ve the wherewithal to give. It’s the happy people who should help the others.”

“It’s easy for *you* to talk!”

“Because I’m not happy?”

“I think you’re a little so now at my expense.”

“It doesn’t cost you anything if – as I confess to it now – I do to some extent understand.”

“That’s more, then, than – after talking of it this way with you – I feel that *I* do!”

“You’ve nothing to trouble about but that you *are* as kind as the case requires and that you do help. I daresay that you’ll find her even now on the terrace looking out for you. Don’t fall below your chance. Noblesse oblige. We’ll pull her through.”

“You say ‘we,’ but you do keep out of it!”

“Why should you wish me to interfere with you? I wouldn’t keep out of it if she wanted me as much as she wants you. That, by your own admission, is exactly what she doesn’t.”

“Well, then, I’ll make her go for you. I think I want your assistance quite as much as she can want mine.”

“Oh, I’ve really given you already every ounce of mine I can squeeze out. And you know for yourself far more than I do.”

“No, I don’t! For you know *how* you know it – which I’ve not a notion of. It’s just what I think you ought to tell me.”

“I’m a little in doubt of what you’re talking of, but I suppose you to allude to the oddity of my being so much interested without my having been more informed.”

“You’ve got some clue, and a clue is what I myself want.”

“Then get it from Mrs. Server!”

“Does she know?”

“Know what?”

“Why, that you’ve found out what she has to hide.”

“You’re perfectly free to ask her. I wonder even that you haven’t done so yet.”

“Well, well, I suppose it’s because I’m afraid of her.”

“But not too much afraid to be hoping at this moment that you’ll find her if you go back to where most of our party is gathered. You’re not going for tea – you’re going for Mrs. Server: just of whom it was, as I say, you were thinking while you sat there with Lady John. So what is it you so greatly fear?”

“I don’t know that it’s anything that she may do to *me*. It’s as if something might happen to her. It’s what I told you – that she may break down. If you ask me how, or in what, how can I tell you? In whatever it is that she’s trying to do. I don’t understand it. But it’s something or other!”

“What would it be, then, but what you speak of as what I’ve ‘found out’? The effort you distinguish in her is the effort of concealment – vain, as I gather it strikes you both, so far as *I*, in my supernatural acuteness, am concerned.”

“Wouldn’t it really be better if you were to tell me? I don’t ask her myself, you see. I don’t put things to her in that way.”

“Oh, no – I’ve shown you how I do see. That’s a part of your admirable consideration. But I must repeat that nothing would induce me to tell you.”

“But I want so to know.”

“Ah, there it is!”

“There what is?”

“Why, everything. What I’ve divined, between you and Mrs. Server, as the tie. Your wanting so to know.”

“And her wanting me not to?”

“Wanting *me* not to.”

“And being willing, therefore—”

“That you – you only, for sympathy, for fellowship, for the wild wonder of it – *should* know? Well, for all those things, and in spite of what you call your fear, *try* her!”

CHAPTER 8

“You must be weary of walking, and you see I’ve been keeping a seat for you.”

“I like a lonely walk at the end of a day full of people: it’s always, to me, on such occasions, quite as if something has happened that the mind wants to catch and fix before the vividness fades. So I mope by myself an hour – I take stock of my impressions. But there’s one thing I don’t believe you know. This is the very first time, in such a place and at such an hour, that it has ever befallen me to come across a friend stricken with the same perversity and engaged in the same pursuit. Most people, don’t you see? don’t in the least know what has happened to them, and don’t care to know. That’s one way, and I don’t deny it may be practically the best. But if one does care to know, that’s another way. As soon as I saw you there at the end of the alley I said to myself, with quite a little thrill of elation, ‘Ah, then it’s *her* way too!’ I wonder if you’ll let me tell you that I immediately liked you the better for it. It seemed to bring us more together. That’s what I sat straight down here to show you. ‘Yes,’ I wished you to understand me as frankly saying, ‘*I am*, as well as you, on the mope, or on the muse, or on whatever you call it, and this isn’t half a bad corner for such a mood.’ I can’t tell you what a pleasure it is to me to see you do understand.”

“I think you’re very kind. What is it that has happened to you?”

“Oh, what is it that has happened to *you*?”

“Yes, my dear man, I do understand you – quite perfectly now, and (by I know not what miracle) I’ve really done so to some extent from the first. Deep is the rest of feeling with you, in this way, that I’m watched, for the time, only as you watch me. It has all stopped, and *I* can stop. How can I make you understand what it is for me that there isn’t at last a creature any more in sight, that the wood darkens about me, that the sounds drop and the relief goes on; what can it mean for you even that

I've given myself up to not caring whether or no, amongst others, I'm missed and spoken of? It does help my strange case, in fine, as you see, to let you keep me here; but I should have found still more what I was in need of if I had only found, instead of you, him whom I had in mind. He is as much better than you as you are than everyone else. I parted with him, some way from here, some time ago. I had found him in one of the gardens with Lady John; after which we came away from her together. We strolled a little and talked, but I knew what he really wanted. He wanted to find you, and I told him he would probably do so at tea on the terrace. It was visibly with that idea – to return to the house – that he left me.”

“You found him with Lady John?”

“Don't you know how she's perpetually pouncing on him?”

“Do you mean – a – do you mean? There are so *many* gentlemen!”

“Poor Briss, you know, is always in her clutches.”

“Poor Briss?”

“I had a fancy, at any rate, that he was looking for you – all the more that he didn't deny it.”

“What made you have such a fancy?”

“What makes me ever have any? My extraordinary interest in my fellow-creatures. I have more than most men. I've never really seen anyone with half so much. That breeds observation, and observation breeds ideas. Do you know what it has done? It has bred for me the idea that Brissenden's in love with you.”

“How can that be when he's so strikingly in love with his wife?”

“Strikingly, you call it?”

“Why, I thought it was noticed – what he does for her.”

“Well, of course she's extremely handsome – or at least extremely fresh and attractive. He *is* in love with her, no doubt, if you take it by the quarter, or by the year, like a yacht or a stable,. But isn't there such a state also as being in love by the day?”

“How do I know? I've never *been* in love.”

“Not even by the day?”

“Oh, a day’s surely a long time.”

“It is. But I’ve none the less, more fortunately than you, been in love for a whole one. I daresay you wonder why, at all, I should have thrust Brissenden in.”

“Oh, I *do* so wonder!”

“I supposed you to have Brissenden in your head because it’s evidently what he himself takes for granted. But let him tell you!”

CHAPTER 9

“No, indeed, you shan’t carry him off this time! Because he has gone to talk with May Server? I don’t quite see what you mean, for I believe him really to be in terror of her. Most of the men here *are*, you know, and I’ve really assured myself that he doesn’t find her any less awful than the rest. He finds her the more so by just the very marked extra attention that you may have noticed she has given him.”

“And does that now happen to be what he has so eagerly gone off to impress upon her?”

“If you mean by ‘impressing upon’ her speaking to her, he hasn’t gone – you can see for yourself – to impress upon her anything; they have the most extraordinary way, which I’ve already observed, of sitting together without sound. I don’t know what’s the matter with such people!”

“It proves in general either some coldness or some warmth, and I quite understand that that’s not the way you sit with your friends. You steer admirably clear of every extravagance. I don’t see, at any rate, why Mrs. Server is a terror—”

“If she doesn’t chatter as *I* do? But she does – to everyone but Mr. Briss. I mean to every man she can pick up.”

“Do they complain of it to you?”

“They’re more civil than you, for if, when they flee before it, they bump up against me in their flight, they don’t explain that by intimating that they’re come from bad to worse. Besides, I see what they suffer.”

“And do you hear it?”

“What they suffer? No, I’ve taken care not to suffer myself. I don’t listen. It’s none of my business.”

“Is that a way of gently expressing that it’s also none of mine?”

“It might be if I had, as you appear to, the imagination of atrocity. But I don’t pretend to so much as conceive what’s your business.”

“I wonder if it isn’t just now to convict you of an attempt at duplicity that has not even had the saving grace of success! Was it for Brissenden himself that you spoke just now as if you believed him to wish to cling to you?”

“Well, I’m kind enough for anything. But what are you trying to find out?”

“Well, I’m quite aching to ask you if you’ll forgive me a great liberty, which I owe to your candid challenge my opportunity to name. Will you allow me to say frankly that I think you play a dangerous game with poor Briss, in whom I confess I’m interested? I don’t of course speak of the least danger to yourself; but it’s an injustice to any man to make use of him quite so flagrantly. You don’t in the least flatter yourself that the poor fellow is in love with you – you wouldn’t care a bit if he were. Yet you’re willing to make him think you like him, so far as that may be necessary to explain your so frequently ingenious appropriation of him. He doesn’t like you *too* much, as yet; doesn’t even like you quite enough. But your potency may, after all, work on him, and then, as your interest is so obviously quite elsewhere, what will happen will be that you’ll find, to your inconvenience, that you’ve gone too far. A man never likes a woman enough unless he likes her *more* than enough. Unfortunately it’s what the inveterate ass is sure sooner or later to do.”

“Do I understand that to be the pretty name by which you describe Mr. Briss?”

“He has his share of it, for I’m thinking of the idiots that we everyone of us are. I throw out a warning against a contingency.”

“Are you providing for the contingency of his ceasing to care for his wife? If you are, you may be said to have a prudent mind and to be taking time by the forelock.”

“Do you mean because of his apparently incorruptible constancy?”

“I mean because the whole thing’s so before one. She has him so in hand that they’re neither of them in as much danger as would count for a mouse. It doesn’t prevent his liking to dally by the way – for *she* dallies by the way, and he does every-

thing she does. Haven't I observed her dallying a little, so far as that goes, with *you*? You've the tact to tell me that he doesn't think me good enough, but I don't require, do I? – for such a purpose as his – to be very extraordinarily good. You may say that you wrap it up immensely and try to sugar the dose! Well, all the same, give up, for a quiet life, the attempt to be a providence. You can't be a providence and not be a bore. A real providence *knows*; whereas you, have to find out – and to find out even by asking 'the likes of' *me*. Your fine speech meanwhile doesn't a bit tell me what."

"You've a lucidity of your own in which I'm forced to recognise that the highest purity of motive looks shrivelled and black. You bring out accordingly what has made me thus beat about the bush. Have you really such a fund of indulgence for Gilbert Long as we most of us, I gather – though perhaps in our blindness – seem to see it stick out again that he supposes? *May* he fondly feel that he can continue to count on it? Or, if you object to my question in that form, is it not, frankly, to making his attitude – after all so thoroughly public – more convenient to each of you that (without perhaps quite measuring what you're about,) you've gone on sacrificing poor Briss? I call it sacrificing, you see, in spite of there having been as yet no such great harm done. And if you ask me again what business of mine such inquiries may represent, why, the best thing will doubtless be to say to you that, with a smaller dose of irrepressible irony in my composition than you have in yours, I can't make so light as you of my tendency to worry on behalf of those I care for. Let me finally hasten to add that I'm not now including in that category either of the two gentlemen I've named."

"Then who in the world *are* these objects of your solicitude?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you."

"Asking me everything and telling me nothing, you nevertheless look to me to satisfy you? Do you mean that you speak for persons whose interest is more legitimately founded than the interest you so flatteringly attribute to myself?"

"Well, yes – let them be so described! Can't you guess who constitutes at least *one*

of my preoccupations?”

“Is it your idea to pretend to me that I’m keeping Grace Brissenden awake? She has not been anything but nice to me; she’s not a person whose path one crosses without finding it out; and I can’t imagine what has got into her if any such grievance as that is what she has been pouring out to you in your apparently so deep confabulations.”

“Dear no! Mrs. Brissenden certainly feels her strength, and I should never presume to take under my charge any personal situation of hers. I had in my mind a very different identity.”

CHAPTER IO

“For a few minutes – presently.”

“Do you mean alone? Shall I come with you?”

“Oh, no – but before it’s too late. A few minutes hence. Where shall you be? We don’t go up quite yet. In the morning I suppose you leave early.”

“I haven’t thought. And you?”

“I haven’t thought either.”

“I am young – I am and I *will* be; see, *see* if I’m not; there, there, there!”

“Oh, any woman of your resources can look young with her back turned! But you’ve had to turn it to make that proclamation.”

“*What* shall I see when I next see you?”

“God grant I don’t see *you* again at all!”

“Is everyone then dispersing?”

“Some of the men, I think, are following me; others, I believe – wonderful creatures! – have gone to array themselves. Others still, doubtless, have gone to bed.”

“And the ladies?”

“Oh, they’ve floated away – soared aloft; to high finks – isn’t that the idea? – in their own quarters. Don’t they too, at these hours, practise sociabilities of sorts? They make, at any rate, here, an extraordinary picture on that great staircase.”

“I wish I had seen it. But I do see it. Yes – splendid. Is the place wholly cleared of them?”

“Save, it struck me, so far as they may have left some ‘black plume as a token’ —”

“Not, I trust, of any ‘lie’ their ‘soul hath spoken!’ But not one of them lingers?”

“Lingers?’ For what?”

“Oh, I don’t know – in this house!”

“Was one of them to linger for *you*?”

“Well, since you ask me, it was what I hoped. But since you answer for it that my hope has not been met, I bow to a superior propriety.”

“You mean you’ll come and smoke with me? Do then come.”

“What, if I do, will you give me?”

“I’m afraid I can promise you nothing more that *I* deal in than a bad cigarette.”

“And what then will you take from me?”

“Well, I’m afraid I *can’t* take any more—”

“Of the sort of stuff you’ve already had? Sorry stuff, perhaps – a poor thing but mine own! Such as it is, I only ask to keep it for myself, and that isn’t what I meant. I meant what flower will you gather, what havoc will you play—?”

“Well?”

“Among superstitions that I, after all, cherish. *Mon siege est fait* – a great glittering crystal palace. How many panes will you reward me for amiably sitting up with you by smashing?”

“How on earth can I tell what you’re talking about?”

“Did you happen to count them?”

“Count whom?”

“Why, the ladies as they filed up. Was the number there?”

“Go and see for yourself!”

“But suppose I should find Mrs. Server?”

“Prowling there on the chance of you? Well – I thought she was what you wanted.”

“Then, you *could* tell what I was talking about! You didn’t really notice if any lady stayed behind?”

“I think you ask too much of me. Take care of your ladies, my dear man, yourself! Go and see.”

“Certainly – it’s better; but I’ll rejoin you in three minutes.”

CHAPTER II

“Then you *could* tell what I was talking about! Since you thought Mrs. Server was the person whom, when I stopped you, I was sorry to learn from you I had missed.”

“Then you find you *have* missed her? She wasn’t there for you?”

“There’s no one ‘there for me’; so that I fear that if you weren’t, as it happens, here for me, my amusement would be quite at an end. I had, in fact, already given it up as lost when I came upon you, a while since, in conversation with the lady we’ve named. At that, I confess, my prospects gave something of a flare. I said to myself that since *your* interest hadn’t then wholly dropped, why, even at the worst, should mine? Yours *was* mine, wasn’t it? for a little, this morning. Or was it mine that was yours? We exchanged, at any rate, some lively impressions. Only, before we had done, your effort dropped or your discretion intervened: you gave up, as none of your business, the question that had suddenly tempted us.”

“And you gave it up too.”

“Yes, and it was on the idea that it was mine as little as yours that we separated.”

“Well then?”

“Well then, if I’ve correctly gathered that you’re, in spite of our common renunciation, still interested, I confess to you that I am. I took my detachment too soon for granted. I haven’t been detached. I’m not, hang me! detached now. And it’s all because you were originally so suggestive.”

“Originally?”

“Why, from the moment we met here yesterday – the moment of my first seeing you with Mrs. Server. The look you gave me then was really the beginning of everything. Everything was traceably to spring from it.”

“What do you mean by everything?”

“Well, this failure of detachment. What you said to me as we were going up yesterday afternoon to dress – what you said to me then is responsible for it. And since it comes to that, I make out for myself now that you’re not detached either – unless, that is, simply detached from *me*. I had indeed a suspicion of that as I passed through the room there.”

“You’ve extraordinary notions of responsibility.”

“I see you *are* serious!”

“You’ve extraordinary notions of responsibility. I deny altogether mine.”

“You *are* serious – you *are*! But no matter. You’re no worse than I.”

“I’m clearly, by your own story, not half so bad. But, as you say, no matter. I don’t care.”

“Oh, don’t you?”

“I don’t care.”

“Then why didn’t you so much as look at me a while ago?”

“Didn’t I look at you?”

“You know perfectly you didn’t. Mrs. Server did – with her unutterable intensity; making me feel afresh, by the way, that I’ve never seen a woman compromise herself so little by proceedings so compromising. But though you saw her intensity, it never diverted you for an instant from your own.”

“A man engaged in talk with a charming woman scarcely selects that occasion for winking at somebody else.”

“You mean he contents himself with winking at *her*? My dear fellow, that wasn’t enough for you yesterday, and it wouldn’t have been enough for you this morning, among the impressions that led to our last talk. It was just the fact that you did wink, that you *had* winked, at me that wound me up.”

“And what about the fact that you had winked at *me*? *Your* winks – come – are portentous!”

“Oh, if we recriminate, we agree.”

"I'm not so sure that we agree."

"Ah, then, if we differ it's still more interesting. Because, you know, we didn't differ either yesterday or this morning."

"I thought you said just now we did – recognising, as you ought, that you were keen about a chase of which I washed my hands."

"No – I wasn't keen. You've just mentioned that you remember my giving up. I washed my hands too."

"Then, if our hands are clean, what are we talking about?"

"Our hands are not clean."

"Ah, speak for your own! I assure you I decline all responsibility. I see the responsibility as quite beautifully yours."

"Well, I only want to be fair. You were the first to bring it out that she was changed."

"Well, she isn't changed! Or rather, she *is*. She's changed back."

"'Back'?"

"Back."

"Back to what she was when you painted her?"

"No – not quite to that."

"To what then?"

"To something else."

"You don't quite know to *what* else?"

"No – I don't quite know."

"If her change is to something other, I suppose then a change back is not quite the exact name for it."

"Perhaps not. She isn't at any rate what I thought her yesterday."

"I remember what you said of her yesterday."

"She was so beastly unhappy."

"And do you mean that that's gone?"

“What do *you* mean? Don’t you think so yourself?”

“It would take long to tell you what I mean.”

“Well, haven’t we got the whole night?”

“Oh, it would take more than the whole night – even if we had it!”

“By which you suggest that we haven’t it?”

“No – we haven’t it. I want to get away.”

“To go to bed? I thought you were so keen.”

“I *am* keen. Keen is no word for it. I don’t want to go to bed. I want to get away.”

“To leave the house – in the middle of the night?”

“Yes – absurd as it may seem. You excite me too much. You don’t know what you do to me.”

“If you’re too excited, then, to be coherent now, will you tell me to-morrow?”

“Oh, tomorrow I shall be off in space!”

“Certainly we shall neither of us be here. But can’t we arrange, say, to meet in town, or even to go up together in such conditions as will enable us to talk?”

“Thank you for your patience. It’s really good of you. Who knows if I shall be alive to-morrow? We *are* meeting. We do talk.”

“We don’t! My wink, at all events, would have been nothing for any question between us, as I’ve just said, without yours. That’s what I call your responsibility. It was, as we put the matter, the torch of your analogy—”

“Oh, the torch of my analogy!”

“It was your making me, as I told you this morning, think over what you had said about Brissenden and his wife: it was *that*—”

“That made you think over what you yourself had said about our troubled lady? Yes, precisely. That *was* the torch of my analogy. What I showed you in the one case seemed to tell you what to look for in the other. You thought it over. I accuse you of nothing worse than of *having* thought it over. But you see what thinking it over does for it.”

"I see what it does for *you*!"

"No, you don't! Not at all yet. That's just the embarrassment."

"Just whose? Just yours?"

"Well, say mine. But when you do—!"

"When I do see where you are, you mean?"

"The only difficulty is whether you *can* see. But we must try. You've set me whirling round, but we must go step by step. Oh, but it's all in your germ! If she isn't now beastly unhappy—"

"She's beastly happy? Well, that *is* the way I see her difference. Her difference, I mean, her difference from her other difference! There! Isn't *that* clear for you?"

"Crystalline for *me*. But that's because I know why."

"So then do I!"

"But how in the world? I know, for myself, *how* I know."

"So then do I."

"And can you tell me?"

"Certainly. But what I've already named to you – the torch of your analogy."

"You've made evidently an admirable use of it. But the wonderful thing is that you seem to have done so without having all the elements."

"What do you call all the elements?"

"Oh, it would take me long to tell you! That's the sort of thing we just now spoke of taking a day for. At any rate, such as they are, these elements, I believe myself practically in possession of them. But what I don't quite see is how you can be."

"Why in the world shouldn't your analogy have put me? I'm not an idiot either."

"I see."

"Did you think I *was*?"

"No. I see."

"You made me think of your view of the Brissenden pair till I could think of nothing else."

"Yes – yes. Go on."

"Well, as you had planted the theory in me, it began to bear fruit. I began to watch them. I continued to watch them. I did nothing but watch them."

"You too? How then we've been occupied! For I, you see, have watched – or had, until I found you just now with Mrs. Server everyone, everything *but* you."

"Oh, I've watched *you*, I admit that I made you out for myself to be back on the scent; for I thought I made you out baffled."

"What scent do you allude to?"

"Why, the pursuit of the identification that's none of our business – the identification of her lover."

"Ah, it's as to that, you've judged me baffled? I'm afraid that I must admit I *have* been. Luckily, at all events, it *is* none of our business."

"Yes, nothing's our business that we can't find out. I saw you hadn't found him. And what does he matter now?"

"What, indeed? But how did you see I had failed?"

"By seeing that I myself had. For I've been looking too. He isn't here."

"Oh, for you to be so sure, has Mrs. Server squared you?"

"*Is* he here?"

"No; he isn't here. It's no thanks to one's scruples, but perhaps it's lucky for one's manners. I speak at least for mine. If you've watched, you've doubtless sufficiently seen what has already become of mine. He isn't here, at all events, and we must do without his identity. What, in fact, are we showing each other but that we *have* done without it?"

"*I* have! I've done perfectly without it."

"So that if you spoke therefore just now of watching them—"

"I meant of course watching the Brissendens. And naturally, above all, the wife."

"Ah, naturally, above all, the wife."

"A woman's lover doesn't matter – doesn't matter at least to anyone but himself,

doesn't matter to you or to me or to her – when once she has given him up.”

“She *has* given him up?”

“Of what else then are we talking?”

“Of nothing else, of course. But the way you see—!”

“I do see. But only through your having seen first. You gave me the pieces. I've but put them together. You gave me the Brissendens – bound hand and foot; and I've but made them, in that sorry state, pull me through. I've blown on my torch, in other words, till, flaring and smoking, it has guided me, through a magnificent chiaroscuro of colour and shadow, out into the light of day.”

“You've done more than I, it strikes me – and with less to do it with. If I gave you the Brissendens I gave you all I had.”

“But all you had was immense, my dear man. The Brissendens are immense.”

“Of course the Brissendens are immense! If they hadn't been immense they wouldn't have been – *nothing* would have been – anything. Your image is splendid, your being out of the cave. But what is it exactly that you *call* the 'light of day'?”

“What do *you*—?”

“You tell me first.”

“If you really haven't found it for yourself, you know, I scarce see what you *can* have found.”

“Oh, don't be afraid – greater things than yours!”

“What I call the light of day is the sense I've arrived at of her vision.”

“Her vision?”

“Of what they have in common. *His* – poor chap's extraordinary situation too.”

“Bravo! And you see in that—?”

“What, all these hours, has touched, fascinated, drawn her. It has been an instinct with her.”

“Bravissimo!”

“The instinct of sympathy, pity – the response to fellowship in misery; the sight

of another fate as strange, as monstrous as her own.”

“So that whoever may have *been* the man, the man *now*, the actual man—”

“Oh, the man now, the actual man—!”

“My wife has something to say to you.”

“Mrs. Briss? Good! Is she with you there?”

“No, but she has asked me to say to you that if you’ll presently be in the drawing-room she’ll come.”

“It’s most uncommonly good of both of you.”

“She says you’ll know what she wishes – and she was sure I’d find you here. So I may tell her you’ll come?”

“Why, my dear man, with all the pleasure—! So many thousand thanks. I’ll be with her.”

“Thanks to *you*. She’ll be down. Good-night.”

“Good-night, Brissenden. I shall be gone tomorrow before you show.”

“Show? *What* do I show?”

“Good-bye!”

“He looks a hundred years old!”

“Oh, but you should see his shoulders, always, as he goes off! *Two* centuries – ten! Isn’t it amazing?”

“I should have thought that he would have been on the contrary—”

“Visibly rejuvenated? So should I. I must make it out. I *shall*.”

“I should have thought that he too might have changed back.”

“Certainly. You wouldn’t have thought he would have changed forward. Was what you most saw while you were there with *her* – was this that her misery, the misery you first phrased to me, has dropped?”

“Dropped, yes. I called her beastly unhappy to you though I even then knew that beastly unhappiness wasn’t quite all of it. It was part of it, it was enough of it; for she was – well, no doubt you could tell *me*. Just now, at all events, just now she’s all right.”

“All right?”

“All right.”

“You mean you saw nothing whatever in her that was the least bit strange?”

“Oh, I won’t say as much as that. But nothing that was more strange than that she *should* be – well, after all, all right.”

“All there, eh?”

“Oh, when a woman’s so clever—!”

“It was her cleverness that held you so that when I passed you couldn’t look at me?”

“I knew you were passing, but I wanted precisely to mark for you the difference. If you really want to know, I was a little ashamed of myself. I had given her away to you, you know, rather, before.”

“And you were bound you wouldn’t do it again?”

He smiled in his now complete candour. “Ah, there was no reason.” Then he used, happily, to right himself, my own expression. “She was all there.”

“I see – I see.”

“Where are you going?”

“To do what Brissenden came to me for.”

“But I don’t *know*, you see, what Brissenden came to you for.”

“Well, with a message. She was to have seen me this evening, but, as she gave me no chance, I was afraid I had lost it and that, so rather awkwardly late, she didn’t venture. But what he arrived for just now, at her request, was to say she does venture.”

“At this extraordinary hour?”

“Ah, the hour is no more extraordinary than any other part of the business: no more so, for instance, than this present talk of yours and mine. What part of the business isn’t extraordinary? If it is, at all events, remarkably late, that’s *her* fault.”

“And – a – where is it then you meet?”

“Oh, in the drawing-room or the hall. So good-night.”

“The household sits up for you?”

“She must have squared the household! And it won’t probably take us very long.”

“Do you mean you propose to discuss with her—?”

“My dear fellow, it’s *she* – don’t you see? – who proposes.”

“But what in the world—?”

“Oh, *that* I shall have to wait to tell you.”

“With all the other things? Well, it will make a lot, really—! You do know more than I!”

“And haven’t I admitted that?”

“I’ll be hanged if you *don’t* know who he is!”

“No, I really don’t know. But it’s exactly what I shall perhaps now learn.”

“You mean that what she has proposed is to *tell* you?”

“She’ll tell me who he *won’t* have been!”

“Ah, but *that*—”

“That will be luminous.”

“As a sign, you think, that he must be the very one she denies?”

“The very one!”

CHAPTER 12

“Perhaps you don’t know – but I mentioned in the proper quarter that I should sit up a little. They’re of a kindness here, luckily—! So it’s all right. We shall only take moreover a minute.”

“I supposed that you’d have arranged; for, in spite of the way things were going, I hadn’t given you up. I haven’t understood, I confess why you’ve preferred a conference so intensely nocturnal – of which I quite feel, however, that, if it has happened to suit you, it isn’t for me to complain. But I felt sure of you – that was the great thing – from the moment, half an hour ago, you so kindly spoke to me. I gave you, you see, what’s called ‘rope.’”

“I don’t suppose you mean for me to hang myself! – for that, I assure you, is not at all what I’m prepared for. Were you really so impatient?”

“I wanted to see you quietly; which was what I tried – not altogether successfully, it rather struck me at the moment – to make you understand when I let you know about it. You stared so that I didn’t quite know what was the matter. Nothing could be quiet, I saw, till the going to bed was over, and I felt it coming off then from one minute to the other. I didn’t wish publicly to be called away for it from this putting of our heads together, and, though you may think me absurd, I had a dislike to having our question of May up so long as she was hanging about. I knew of course that she would hang about till the very last moment, and that was what I perhaps a little clumsily – if it was my own fault! – made the effort to convey to you. She may be hanging about still, but at any rate I shall have done what I could. I had a feeling – perfectly preposterous, I admit! – against her seeing us together; but if she comes down again, as I’ve so boldly done, and finds us, she’ll have no one but herself to thank. It’s a funny house, for that matter, and I’m not sure that anyone *has* gone

to bed. One does what one likes; I'm an old woman, at any rate, and *I* do!"

"If you were so bent on not losing what I might have to give you that you fortunately stuck to the ship, for poor Briss to pick you up, wasn't this also a good deal because you've been nursing all day the grievance with which I this morning so comfortably furnished you?"

"Oh, I certainly had my reasons – as I've no less certainly had my luck – for not indeed deserting our dear little battered, but still just sufficiently buoyant vessel, from which everyone else appears, I recognise; to *s'être sauvé*. She'll float a few minutes more! But (before she sinks!) do you mean by my grievance—"

"Oh, you know what I mean by your grievance! I was to give you time to make up your mind that Mrs. Server was our lady. You so resented, for some reason, my suggesting it that I scarcely believed you'd consider it at all; only I hadn't forgotten, when I spoke to you a while since, that you had nevertheless handsomely promised me that you would do your best."

"Yes, and, still more handsomely, that if I changed my mind, I would eat, in your presence, for my error, the largest possible slice of humble pie. If you didn't see this morning quite why I should have cared so much, so I don't quite see why, in your different way, you should; at the same time that I do full justice to the good faith with which you've given me my chance. Please believe that if I *could* candidly embrace that chance I should feel all the joy in the world in repaying you. It's only, alas! because I cling to my candour that I venture to disappoint you. If I cared this morning it was really simple enough. You didn't convince me, but I should have cared just as much if you had. I only didn't see what you saw. I needed more than you could then give me. I knew, you see, what I needed – I mean before I struck! It was the element of collateral support that we both lacked. I couldn't do without it as you could. This was what I, clumsily enough, tried to show you I felt. You, on your side, grasped admirably the evident truth that that element *could* be present only in such doses as practically to escape detection. Of course if you've got new evidence I shall

be delighted to hear it; and of course I can't help wondering whether the possession of it and the desire to overwhelm me with it aren't, together, the one thing you've been nursing till now."

"It's nonsense. I've nothing to tell you. I feel there's nothing in it and I've given it up."

"It's *you* who've come round?"

"To your doubt of its being May? Yes – I've come round."

"Ah, pardon me, what I expressed this morning was, if I remember rightly, not at all a 'doubt,' but a positive, intimate conviction that was inconsistent with *any* doubt. I was emphatic – purely and simply – that I didn't see it."

"Then why did you say to me that if you should reconsider—"

"You should handsomely have it from me, and my grounds? Why, as I've just reminded you, as a form of courtesy to you – magnanimously to help you, as it were, to feel as comfortable as I conceived you naturally would desire to feel in your own conviction. Only for that. And now, I'm to understand from you that, in spite of that immense allowance, you *haven't*, all this while, felt comfortable?"

"Mrs. Server isn't in it!"

"You've made out then who *is*?"

"Oh, I don't make out, you know, so much as you! *She* isn't."

"Ah, but, do you know? it really strikes me you make out marvels. You made out this morning quite what I couldn't. I hadn't put together anything so extraordinary as that – in the total absence of everything – it *should* have been our friend."

"What do you mean by the total absence? When I made my mistake, I didn't think everything absent."

"I see. I see. And do you, then, think everything now?"

"I had my honest impression of the moment. There were appearances that, as it at the time struck me, fitted."

"Precisely. There was in especial the appearance that she was at a particular mo-

ment using Brissenden to show whom she was not using. You felt *then* the force of that.”

“Is it your wish to confront me, to my confusion, with my inconsistency? You should do me the justice to recognise how little I need have spoken another word to you, and how little, also, this amiable explanation to you is in the interest of one’s natural pride. It seems to me I’ve come to you here altogether in the interest of *yours*. You talk about humble pie, but I think that, upon my word – with all I’ve said to you – it’s I who have had to eat it. The magnanimity you speak of, I really don’t see, either, whose it is but mine. I don’t see what account of anything I’m in any way obliged to give.”

“You’re not obliged to give any – you’re quite right: you do it only because you’re such a large, splendid creature. I quite feel that, beside you, I move in a tiny circle. Still, I won’t have it that our occasion has nothing for you but the taste of abasement. You gulp your mouthful down, but hasn’t it been served on gold plate? You’ve had a magnificent day – a brimming cup of triumph, and you’re more beautiful and fresh, after it all, and at an hour when fatigue would be almost positively graceful, than you were even this morning, when you met me as a daughter of the dawn. That’s the sort of sense that must sustain a woman! No, no. I thank you – thank you immensely. But I don’t pity you. You can afford to lose.”

“I don’t mean that anything alters the fact that you lose gracefully. It *is* awfully charming, your thus giving yourself up, and yet, justified as I am by it, I can’t help regretting a little the excitement I found it this morning to pull a different way from you. Shall I tell you what, for some reason, a man feels aware of? That pulling against you also had its thrill. You defended your cause. Oh, I know – who should know better? – that it was bad. Only – what shall I say? – *you* weren’t bad, and one had to fight. And then there was what one was fighting for! Well, you’re not bad now, either; so that you may ask me, of course, what more I want. It isn’t that, thrown back on the comparative dullness of security, I find – as people have been

known to – my own cause less good: no, it isn't that. I'll tell you what it is: it's the come-down of ceasing to work with you!"

"To 'work'?"

"Even fighting was working, for we struck, you'll remember, sparks, and sparks were what we wanted. There we are then. Sparks are what we still want, and you've not come to me, I trust, with a mere spent match. I depend upon it that you've another to strike. Who, then, *has*?"

"Who then has what?"

"Why, done it. You haven't, with the force of your revulsion, I hope, literally lost our thread. Done what we spent the morning wondering at. Who then, if it isn't, certainly, Mrs. Server, *is* the woman who has made Gilbert Long – well, what you know?"

"I'm afraid I know nothing."

"But I thought you just recognised that you do enjoy the sense of your pardonable mistake. You knew something when you knew enough to see you had made it."

"Oh, I think one generally knows when one has made a mistake."

"That's all then I invite you – A mistake, as you properly call it – to allow me to impute to you. I'm not accusing you of having made fifty. You made none whatever, I hold, when you agreed with me with such eagerness about the striking change in him."

"The change, do you mean, in poor Mr. Long?"

"Of what other change – except, as you may say, your own – have you met me here to speak of? Your own, I needn't remind you, is part and parcel of Long's."

"Oh, my own is a much simpler matter even than that. My own is the recognition that I just expressed to you and that I can't consent, if you please, to your twisting into the recognition of anything else. It's the recognition that I know nothing of any other change. I stick, if you'll allow me, to my ignorance."

"I'll allow you with joy, if you'll let me stick to it *with* you. Your own change is

quite sufficient – it gives us all we need. It will give us, if we retrace the steps of it, everything, everything!”

“I don’t quite see, do I? why, at this hour of the night, we should begin to retrace steps.”

“Simply because it’s the hour of the night you’ve happened, in your generosity and your discretion, to choose. I’m struck, I confess, with the wonderful charm of it for our purpose.”

“And, pray, what do you call with such solemnity our purpose?”

“I can only, with positiveness, answer for mine! That has remained all day the same – to get at the truth: not, that is, to relax my grasp of that tip of the tail of it which you so helped me this morning to fasten to. If you’ve ceased to *care* to help me, that’s a difference indeed. But why *should* you cease to care? What on earth is between us, anyhow, but our confounded interest? That’s only quickened, for me, don’t you see? by the charming way you’ve come round; and I don’t see how it can logically be anything less than quickened for yourself. We’re like the messengers and heralds in the tale of Cinderella, and I protest, I assure you, against any sacrifice of our denouement. We’ve still the glass shoe to fit.”

“How can I tell, please, what you consider you’re talking about?”

“And you knew, so beautifully, you glowed over it so, this morning! You’ve not availed yourself of this occasion to pretend to me that poor Mr. Long, as you call him, is, after all, the same limited person—”

“That he always was, and that you, yesterday, so suddenly discovered him to have ceased to be? You see too much.”

“Oh, I know I do – ever so much too much. And much as I see, I express only half of it – so you may judge! But what will you have? I see what I see, and this morning, for a good bit, you did me the honour to do the same. I returned, also, the compliment, didn’t I? by seeing something of what *you* saw. We put it, the whole thing, together, and we shook the bottle hard. I’m to take from you, after this, that what it

contains is a perfectly colourless fluid?”

“You talk too much!”

“Why, whom have I told?”

“I mean you’re carried away – you’re abused by a fine fancy: so that, with your art of putting things, one doesn’t know where one is – nor, if you’ll allow me to say so, do I quite think *you* always do. Of course I don’t deny you’re awfully clever. But you build up, you build up houses of cards.”

“Long *isn’t* what he seems?”

“Seems to whom?”

“Well, call it – for simplicity – to *me*. For you see, it all stands or falls by that.”

“The trouble with you is that you over-estimate the penetration of others. How can it approach your own?”

“Well, yours had for a while, I should say, distinct moments of keeping up with it. Nothing is more possible than that I do talk too much; but I’ve done so – about the question in dispute between us – only to *you*. I haven’t, as I conceived we were absolutely not to do, mentioned it to anyone else, nor given anyone a glimpse of our difference. If you’ve not understood yourself as pledged to the same reserve, and have consequently appealed to the light of other wisdom, it shows at least that, in spite of my intellectual pace, you must more or less have followed me. What am I *not*, in fine, to think of your intelligence, if, deciding for a resort to headquarters, you’ve put the question to Long himself?”

“The question?”

“Of the identity of the lady.”

“To Long himself?”

CHAPTER 13

“It would have been a short cut, and even more strikingly perhaps – to do it justice – a bold deed. But it would have been, in strictness, a departure – wouldn’t it? – from our so distinguished little compact. Yet while I look at you, I wonder. Bold deeds are, after all, quite in your line; and I’m not sure I don’t rather want not to have missed so much possible comedy. ‘I have it for you from Mr. Long himself that, every appearance to the contrary notwithstanding, his stupidity is unimpaired’ – isn’t that, for the beauty of it, after all, what you’ve veraciously to give me? The beauty of it would be great!”

“Do you imagine he would have told me?”

“Who the lady really is? Well, hardly; and that’s why, as you so acutely see, the question of your having risked such a step has occurred to me only as a jest. Fancy indeed your saying to him: ‘We’re all noticing that you’re so much less of an idiot than you used to be, and we’ve different views of the miracle!’”

“I’ve not spoken to a creature.”

“Ah, then, we’re all right! I mean, however, only as far as that. I don’t at all feel comfortable about your new theory itself, which puts me so wretchedly in the wrong.”

“Rather! Wretchedly indeed in the wrong!”

“Yet only – equally of course, if I come within a conceivability of accepting it. Are you conscious that, in default of Long’s own word equivocal as that word would be – you press it upon me without the least other guarantee?”

“And pray, what guarantee had *you*?”

“For the theory with which we started? Why, our recognised fact. The change in the man. You may say that I was the first to speak for him; but being the first didn’t,

in your view, constitute a weakness when it came to your speaking yourself for Mrs. Server. By which I mean speaking against her.”

“Well, you then asked me my warrant. And as regards Mr. Long and your speaking against *him*—”

“Do you describe what I say as ‘against’ him?”

“Surely – to have made him out horrid.”

“‘Horrid’—?”

“Why, having such secrets. Sacrificing poor May.”

“But *you*, dear lady, sacrificed poor May! It didn’t strike you as horrid *then*.”

“Well, that was only because you talked me over.”

“And who is it then that – if, as you say, you’ve spoken to no one – has, as I may call it, talked you under?”

“Not a creature has spoken to me.”

“You’ve communicated so little with anyone!”

“So little? I’ve not communicated the least mite.”

“Precisely. But don’t think me impertinent for having for a moment wondered. What I should say to you if you had, you know, would be that you just accused me.”

“Accused you?”

“Of talking too much.”

“Are we accusing each other?”

“Dear no, not each other; only with each other’s help, a few of our good friends.”

“A few? But one or two at the best.”

“Or at the worst! And not even those, it after all appears, very much!”

“Well, I accuse no one.”

“It’s doubtless your best line; and I really quite feel, at all events, that when you mentioned a while since that I talk too much you only meant too much to *you*.”

“Yes – I wasn’t imputing to you the same direct appeal. I didn’t suppose that – to match your own supposition of *me* – you had resorted to May herself.”

“You didn’t suppose I had asked her? No, of course you couldn’t have supposed anything so cruel – all the more that, as you knew, I had not admitted the possibility.”

“Of course, at the same time, you yourself saw that your not admitting the possibility would have taken the edge from your cruelty. It’s not the innocent that we fear to frighten.”

“Oh, I fear, mostly, I think, to frighten *any* one. I’m not particularly brave. I haven’t, at all events, in spite of my certitude, interrogated Mrs. Server, and I give you my word of honour that I’ve not had any denial from her to prop up my doubt. It still stands on its own feet, and it was its own battle that, when I came here at your summons, it was prepared to fight. Let me accordingly remind you, in connection with that, of the one sense in which you were, as you a moment ago said, talked over by me. I persuaded you apparently that Long’s metamorphosis was not the work of Lady John. I persuaded you of nothing else.”

“You persuaded me that it was the work of somebody. It came to the same thing.”

“The same thing as what?”

“Why, as claiming that it *was* she.”

“Poor May – ‘claiming’? When I insisted it wasn’t!”

“You didn’t insist it wasn’t anybody!”

“Why should I when I didn’t believe so? I’ve left you in no doubt of my beliefs. It was somebody – and it still is.”

“The mistake’s now yours.”

“Can you tell me then what one does to recover from such mistakes?”

“One thinks a little.”

“Ah, the more I’ve thought the deeper I’ve sunk! And that seemed to me the case with you this morning, the more *you* thought.”

“Well, then, I must have stopped thinking!”

“Could you tell me then at what point?”

“At what point?”

“What in particular determined, I mean, your arrest? You surely didn’t – launched as you were – stop short all of yourself.”

“I confess I don’t make out why you seem so little pleased that I agree with you.”

“But, you poor, dear thing, you don’t in the *least* agree with me! You flatly contradict me. You deny my miracle.”

“I don’t believe in miracles.”

“So I exactly, at this late hour, learn. But I don’t insist on the name. Nothing is, I admit, a miracle from the moment one’s on the track of the cause, which was the scent we were following. Call the thing simply my fact.”

“If it’s yours it’s nobody else’s!”

“Ah, there’s just the question – if we could know all! But my point is precisely, for the present, that you do deny it.”

“Of course I deny it.”

“Your ‘of course’ would be what I would again contest, what I would denounce and brand as the word too much – the word that spoils, were it not that it seems best, that it in any case seems necessary, to let all question of your consistency go.”

“You do let it go?”

“Yes, I let it go, your change of front, though it vexes me a little – and I’ll in a moment tell you why – to have to. But let us put it that it’s on a condition.”

“Change of front? Your expressions are not of the happiest.”

“It scarce matters if I’m clumsy when you’re practically so bland. I wonder if you’ll understand if I make you an explanation.”

“Most probably not.”

“Let me at all events try you. It’s moreover the one I just promised; which was no more indeed than the development of a feeling I’ve already permitted myself to show you. I lose by your agreeing with me!”

“Lose’?”

“Yes; because while we disagreed you were, in spite of that, on the right side.”

“And what do you call the right side?”

“Well, on the same side as my imagination.”

“Oh, your imagination!”

“Yes – I know what you think of it; you’ve sufficiently hinted how little that is. But it’s precisely because you regard it as rubbish that I now appeal to you.”

“Appeal? I thought you were on the ground, rather, of dictation.”

“Well, I’m that too. I dictate my terms. But my terms are in themselves the appeal. See?”

“How in the world can I see?”

“*Voyons*, then. Light or darkness, my imagination rides me. But of course if it’s all wrong I want to get rid of it. You can’t, naturally, help me to destroy the faculty itself, but you can aid in the defeat of its application to a particular case. It was because you so smiled, before, on that application, that I valued even my minor difference with you; and what I refer to as my loss is the fact that your frown leaves me struggling alone. The best thing for me, accordingly, as I feel, is to get rid altogether of the obsession. The way to do that, clearly, since *you’ve* done it, is just to quench the fire. By the fire I mean the flame of the fancy that blazed so for us this morning. What the deuce have you, for yourself, poured on it? Tell me and teach me.”

“Teach you?”

“To abandon my false gods. Lead me back to peace by the steps *you’ve* trod. By so much as they must have remained traceable to you, shall I find them of interest and profit. They must in fact be most remarkable: won’t they even – for what *I* may find in them – be more remarkable than those we should now be taking together if we hadn’t separated, if we hadn’t pulled up? You’ll just tell me, however, that since I do pull up and turn back with you we shall just have *not* separated. Well, then, so much the better – I see you’re right. But I want not to lose an inch of the journey.”

“The journey has been a very simple one. With my mind made up on a single point, it was taken at a stride.”

“On a single point? You mean the still commonplace character of Long’s – a – consciousness?”

“Do you know what I think?”

“It’s exactly what I’m pressing you to make intelligible.”

“Well, I think you’re crazy.”

“Crazy?”

“Crazy.”

“But do you call that intelligible?”

“No: I don’t suppose it *can* be so for you if you *are* insane.”

“‘If I am’ is lovely! Dear woman, it’s the point at issue!”

“It’s not at issue for me now.”

“It always happens, of course, that one is one’s self the last to know. You’re perfectly convinced?”

“Oh, so far as what we’ve talked of is concerned, perfectly!”

“And it’s actually what you’ve come down then to tell me?”

“Just exactly what. And if it’s a surprise to you, that I *should* have come down – why, I can only say I was prepared for anything.”

“Anything?”

“In the way of a surprise.”

“Do you know that’s what I was too?”

“Prepared—?”

“For anything in the way of a surprise. But only *from* you. And of course – yes, I’ve got it. If I *am* crazy, it’s indeed simple.”

“Oh, I don’t pretend it’s simple!”

“No? I thought that was just what you did pretend.”

“I didn’t suppose, that you’d like it. I didn’t suppose that you’d accept it or even listen to it. But I owed it to you—”

“You owed it to me to let me know what you thought of me even should it prove

very disagreeable?”

“I owed it to myself.”

“To let me know I’m demented?”

“To let you know I’m *not*. That’s all.”

“All? Ah, don’t speak as if it were so little. It’s much. It’s everything.”

“It’s anything you will! Good-night.”

“Good-night? You leave me on it?”

“I must leave you on something. I couldn’t come to spend a whole hour.”

“But do you think it’s so quickly done to persuade a man he’s crazy?”

“I haven’t expected to persuade you.”

“Only to throw out the hint?”

“Well, it would be good if it could work in you. But I’ve told you what determined me.”

“I beg your pardon. That’s just what you’ve not told me. The reason of your change—”

“I’m not speaking of my change.”

“Ah, but *I* am! It’s your change that’s the interesting thing. If I’m crazy, I must once more remind you, you were simply crazy *with* me; and how can I therefore be indifferent to your recovery of your wit or let you go without having won from you the secret of your remedy? You mustn’t leave me till you’ve placed it in my hand.”

“I thought you just said that you let my inconsistency go.”

“Your moral responsibility for it – perfectly. But how can I show a greater indulgence than by positively desiring to enter into its history? It’s in that sense that, as I say, I do speak of your change. There must have been a given moment when the need of it – or when, in other words, the truth of my personal state – dawned upon you. That moment is the key to your whole position – the moment for us to fix.”

“Fix it when you like!”

“I had much rather fix it when *you* like. I want – you surely must understand if I

want anything of it at all – to get it absolutely right. You *won't* help me?”

“It wasn't with such views I came. I don't believe, I don't believe if you want to know the reason – that you're really sincere.”

“Not sincere – *I*?”

“Not properly honest. I mean in giving up.”

“Giving up what?”

“Why, everything.”

“Everything? Is it a question of *that*?”

“You would if you *were* honest.”

“Everything?”

“Everything.”

“But is that quite the readiness I've professed?”

“If it isn't then, what is?”

“Why, isn't it simply a matter rather of the renunciation of a confidence?”

“In your sense and your truth? Well, what is that but everything?”

“Perhaps, perhaps. We'll take it then for everything, and it's as so taking it that I renounce. I keep nothing at all. Now do you believe I'm honest?”

“Well – yes, if you say so.”

“Ah, I see you don't! What can I do to prove it?”

“You can easily prove it. You can let me go.”

“Does it strike you that I should take your going as a sign of your belief?”

“Of what else, then?”

“Why, surely my assent to your leaving our discussion where it stands would constitute a very different symptom. Wouldn't it much rather represent a failure of belief on my own part in *your* honesty? If you can judge me, in short, as only pretending—”

“Why shouldn't you also judge *me*? What have I to gain by pretending?”

“I'll tell you, if you'll tell me what *I* have.”

"If I don't understand you in any way, of course I don't in that. Put it, at any rate that one of us has as little to gain as the other. I believe you. There!"

"Thanks for the way you say it. If you don't, as you say, understand me, it's because you think me crazy. And if you think me crazy I don't see how you *can* leave me."

"If I believe you're sincere in saying you give up I believe you've recovered. And if I believe you've recovered I don't think you crazy. It's simple enough."

"Then why isn't it simple to understand me?"

"Is it *ever*?"

"It was quite worth your while, this sitting up to this hour, to show a fellow how you bloom when other women are fagged. If that was really, with the truth that we're so pulling about laid bare, what you did most want to show, why, then, you've splendidly triumphed, and I congratulate and thank you. No, I daresay, to do you justice, the interpretation of my tropes and figures *isn't* 'ever' perfectly simple. You doubtless *have* driven me into a corner with my dangerous explosive, and my only fair course must be therefore to sit on it till you get out of the room. I'm sitting on it now; and I think you'll find you can get out as soon as you've told me *this*. Was the moment your change of view dawned upon you the moment of our exchanging a while ago, in the drawing-room, our few words?"

"That moment?"

"It was when, after the music, I had been talking to Lady John. You were on a sofa, not far from us, with Gilbert Long; and when, on Lady John's dropping me, I made a slight movement toward you, you most graciously met it by rising and giving me a chance while Mr. Long walked away."

"Mr. Long walked away?"

"Oh, I don't mean to say that that had anything to do with it."

"To do with what?"

"With the way the situation comes back to me now as possibly marking your

crisis.”

“Was it a ‘situation’?”

“That’s just what I’m asking you. *Was* it? Was it *the* situation?”

“I remember the moment you mean – it was when I said I would come to you here. But why should it have struck you as a crisis?”

“It didn’t in the least at the time, for I didn’t then know you were no longer ‘with’ me. But in the light of what I’ve since learned from you I seem to recover an impression which, on the spot, was only vague. The impression of your taking a decision that presented some difficulty, but that was determined by something that had then – and even perhaps a little suddenly – come up for you. That’s the point on which my question bears. *Was* this ‘something’ your conclusion, then and there, that there’s nothing in anything?”

“In anything?”

“And that I could only be, accordingly, out of my mind? Come, such a perception as that had, at some instant or other, to *begin*; and I’m only trying to aid you to recollect when the devil it did!”

“Does it particularly matter?”

“That depends a little – doesn’t it? – on what you mean by ‘matter’! It matters for your meeting my curiosity, and that matters, in its turn, as we just arranged, for my releasing you. You may ask of course if my curiosity itself matters; but to that, fortunately, my reply can only be of the clearest. The satisfaction of my curiosity is the pacification of my mind. We’ve granted, we’ve accepted, I again press upon you, in respect to that precarious quantity, its topsy-turvy state. Only give me a lead; I don’t ask you for more. Let me for an instant see play before me any feeble reflection whatever of the flash of new truth that unsettled you.”

“It didn’t come in a flash.”

“It came little by little? It began then perhaps earlier in the day than the moment to which I allude? And yet, we were pretty well on in the day, I must keep in mind,

when I had your last news of your credulity.”

“My credulity?”

“Call it then, if you don’t like the word, your sympathy.”

“As soon as I was not with you – I mean with you personally – you *never* had my sympathy.”

“Is my person then so irresistible?”

“It *was*. But it’s not, thank God, now!”

“Then there we are again at our mystery! I don’t think, you know, it was my person, really, that gave its charm to my theory; I think it was much more my theory that gave its charm to my person. My person, I flatter myself, has remained through these few hours – hours of tension, but of a tension, you see, purely intellectual – as good as ever; so that if we’re not, even in our anomalous situation, in danger from any such source, it’s simply that my theory is dead and that the blight of the rest is involved.”

“As soon as I was away from you I hated you.”

“Hated *me*?”

“Well, hated what you call ‘the rest’ – hated your theory.”

“I see. Yet you’re not at present – though you wish to goodness, no doubt, you *were* – away from me.”

“Oh, I don’t care now, since – for you see I believe you – we’re away from your delusions.”

“You wouldn’t, in spite of your belief, like to be a little further off yet? Perhaps my idea – my timing, that is, of your crisis – is the result, in my mind, of my own association with that particular instant. It comes back to me that what I was most full of while your face signed to me and your voice then so graciously confirmed it, and while too, as I’ve said, Long walked away – what I was most full of, as a consequence of another go, just ended, at Lady John, was, once more, this same Lady John’s want of adjustability to the character you and I, in our associated speculation of the

morning, had so candidly tried to fit her with. I was still even then, you see, speculating – all on my own hook, alas! – and it had just rolled over me with renewed force that she was nothing whatever, not the least little bit, to our purpose. The moment, in other words, if you understand, happened to be one of *my* moments; so that, by the same token, I simply wondered if it mightn't likewise have happened to be one of yours."

"It *was* one of mine in the sense that – as you've only to consider – it was to lead more or less directly to these present words of ours."

"Ah, but you had then *already* backed out. Won't you understand – for you're a little discouraging – that I want to catch you at the earlier stage?"

"To 'catch' me?"

"Absolutely catch! Focus you under the first shock of the observation that was to make everything fall to pieces for you."

"But I've told you that there was no 'first' shock."

"Well, then, the second or the third."

"There was no shock at all."

"You found it so natural then – and you so rather liked it – to make up your mind of a sudden that you had been steeped in the last intellectual intimacy with a maniac?"

"I had at the moment you speak of wholly given up any idea of Lady John."

"Of course you had, you poor innocent! You couldn't otherwise, hours before, have strapped the saddle so tight on another woman."

"I had given up everything."

"It's exactly what, in reference to that juncture, I perfectly embrace."

"Well, even in reference to that juncture you may catch me as much as you like. You talk of 'focussing,' but what else, even in those minutes, were you in fact engaged in?"

"Ah, then, you do recognise them, those minutes?"

“Yes – as, consenting thus to be catechised, I cudgel my brain for your amusement – I do recognise them. I remember what I thought. You focussed – I felt you focus. I saw you wonder whereabouts, in what you call our associated speculation, I would by that time be. I asked myself whether you’d understand if I should try to convey to you simply by my expression such a look as would tell you all. By ‘all’ I meant the fact that, sorry as I was for you – or perhaps for myself – it had struck me as only fair to let you know as straight as possible that I was nowhere. That was why I stared so, and I of course couldn’t explain to you to whom my stare had reference.”

“But you can *now*?”

“Perfectly. To Mr. Long.”

“Ah, but this is lovely! It’s what I want.”

“You were saying just now what you were full of, and I can do the same. I was full of *him*.”

“Yes? He had left you full as he walked away?”

“He had reason to walk!”

“What had you said to him?”

“Nothing – or very little. But I had listened.”

“And to *what*?”

“To what he says. To his platitudes.”

“His platitudes? Long’s?”

“Why, don’t you know he’s a prize fool?”

“He *was*.”

“He *is*!”

“Your confidence is splendid; only mustn’t I remember that your sense of the finer kinds of cleverness isn’t perhaps absolutely secure? Don’t you know? – you also, till just now, thought *me* a prize fool.”

“Oh, no – not anything of that sort, you, at all. Only an intelligent man gone wrong.”

“Whereas Long’s only a stupid man gone right?”

“I thought that just what you told me, this morning or yesterday, was that you had never known a case of the conversion of an idiot.”

“It’s true it would have been the only one.”

“Ah, you’ll have to do without it! And if you know what I think of him, you know no more than *he* does.”

“You mean you told him?”

“I told him, practically – and it was in fact all I did have to say to him. It was enough, however, and he disgustedly left me on it. Then it was that, as you gave me the chance, I tried to telegraph you – to say to you on the spot and under the sharp impression: ‘What on earth do you mean by your nonsense? It doesn’t hold water!’ It’s a pity I didn’t succeed! It would have settled the question, and I should have gone to bed.”

“It would have settled the question perhaps; but I should have lost this impression of you.”

“Oh, this impression of me!”

“Ah, but don’t undervalue it: it’s what I want! What was it then Long had said?”

“Not a word to repeat – you wouldn’t believe! He does say nothing at all. One can’t remember. It’s what I mean. I tried him on purpose, while I thought of you. But he’s perfectly stupid. I don’t see how we can have fancied—!”

“It’s life, you know, and I, accordingly, can only cling to mine. But you, poor dear – shall *you* give up?”

“Give up? For what do you take me? I shall fight by your side, please, and we can compare and exchange weapons and manoeuvres, and you may in every way count upon me.”

“There’s really nothing in him at all!”

CHAPTER 14

“Then I go utterly to pieces!”

“You shouldn’t have perched yourself in such a preposterous place!”

“Ah, that’s my affair, and if I accept the consequences I don’t quite see what you’ve to say to it. That I do accept them – so far as I make them out as not too intolerable and you as not intending them to be – that I do accept them is what I’ve been trying to signify to you. Only my fall is an inevitable shock. You remarked to me a few minutes since that you didn’t recover yourself in a flash. I differ from you, you see, in that *I* do; I take my collapse all at once. Here then I am. I’m smashed. I don’t see, as I look about me, a piece I can pick up. I don’t attempt to account for my going wrong; I don’t attempt to account for yours with me; I don’t attempt to account for anything. If Long *is* just what he always was it settles the matter, and the special clincher for us can be but your honest final impression, made precisely more aware of itself by repentance for the levity with which you had originally yielded to my contagion.”

“Oh, but add to my impression everyone else’s impression! Has anyone noticed anything?”

“Ah, I don’t know what anyone has noticed. I haven’t ventured – as you know – to ask anyone.”

“Well, if you had you’d have seen – seen, I mean, all they don’t see. If they had been conscious they’d have talked.”

“To me?”

“Well, I’m not sure to you; people have such a notion of what you embroider on things that they’re rather afraid to commit themselves or to lead you on: they’re sometimes in, you know, for more than they bargain for, than they quite know what

to do with, or than they care to have on their hands.”

“You mean I see so much?”

“Don’t you sometimes see horrors?”

“Well, names are a convenience. People catch me in the act?”

“They certainly think you critical.”

“And is criticism the vision of horrors?”

“It isn’t, perhaps, so much that you see them—”

“As that I perpetrate them?”

“Dear no – you don’t perpetrate anything. Perhaps it would be better if you did!

But – always by people’s idea – you like them.”

“Horrors?”

“Well, you don’t—”

“Yes—?”

“You take them too much for what they are. You don’t seem to want—”

“To come down on them strong? Oh, but I often do!”

“So much the better then.”

“Though I do like – whether for that or not – to look them first well in the face.”

“When they *have* no face, then, you can’t do it! It isn’t at all events now a question of people’s keeping anything back, and you’re perhaps in any case not the person to whom it would first have come.”

“It would have come to Long himself?”

“Oh, one doesn’t know what comes – or what doesn’t – to Long himself! I’m not sure he’s too modest to misrepresent – if he had the intelligence to play a part.”

“Which he hasn’t!”

“Which he hasn’t. It’s to *me* they might have spoken – or to each other.”

“But I thought you exactly held they *had* chattered in accounting for his state by the influence of Lady John.”

“Not a bit. That chatter was mine only – and produced to meet yours. There had

so, by your theory, to be a woman—”

“That, to oblige me, you invented *her*? Precisely. But I thought—”

“You needn’t have thought! I didn’t invent her.”

“Then what are you talking about?”

“I didn’t invent her. She’s true. Well, see here: since you’ve wanted it, I’m afraid that, however little you may like it, you’ll have to take it. You’ve pressed me for explanations and driven me much harder than you must have seen I found convenient. If I’ve seemed to beat about the bush it’s because I hadn’t only myself to think of. One can be simple for one’s self – one can’t be, always, for others.”

“Ah, to whom do you say it?”

“I should have preferred to tell you nothing more than what I *have* told you. I should have preferred to close our conversation on the simple announcement of my recovered sense of proportion. But you *have*, I see, got me in too deep.”

“O-oh!”

“You’ve made of me too big a talker, too big a thinker, of nonsense.”

“Thank you, for intimating that I trifle so agreeably.”

“Oh, *you’ve* appeared not to mind! But let me then at last not fail of the luxury of admitting that *I* mind. Yes, I mind particularly. I may, be bad, but I’ve a grain of gumption.”

“‘Bad’?”

“Bad I may be. In fact, there’s no doubt whatever I *am*.”

“I’m delighted to hear it, for it was exactly something strong I wanted of you!”

“It *is* then strong. You’ve worried me for my motive and harassed me for my ‘moment,’ and I’ve had to protect others and, at the cost of a decent appearance, to pretend to be myself half an idiot. I’ve had even, for the same purpose – if you must have it – to depart from the truth; to give you, that is, a false account of the manner of my escape from your tangle. But now the truth shall be told, and others can take care of themselves! Lady John *is* the woman.”

“But I thought your present position was just that she’s *not!*”

“Lady John *is* the woman.”

“But I thought your present position was just that nobody *is!*”

“Lady John *is* the woman.”

“Then there *is* one?”

“A woman? There’s *her!* I know that I said she wouldn’t do (as I had originally said she would do better than any one), when you a while ago mentioned her. But that was to save her.”

“And you don’t care now if she’s lost!”

“She *is* lost. But she can take care of herself.”

“I’m afraid indeed that, with what you’ve done with her, *I* can’t take care of her. But why is she now to the purpose any more than she was?”

“Why? On the very system you yourself laid down. When we took him for brilliant, she couldn’t be. But now that we see him as he is—”

“We can only see her also as *she* is? Possibly! Do you owe your discovery, however, wholly to my system? My system, where so much made for protection, wasn’t intended to have the effect of exposure.”

“It appears to have been at all events intended to have the effect of driving me to the wall; and the consequence of that effect is nobody’s fault but your own.”

“And it’s only on ‘that effect’—?”

“That I’ve made up my mind? Wouldn’t it be surely, if your ideas were worth anything, enough? But it isn’t only on that. It’s on something else.”

“I’m to understand that you *know?*”

“That they’re intimate enough for anything? I know.”

“What if she *should* be right? Of course if she is – it *is* smash!”

“And haven’t you yet got used to its being?”

“She’s good enough for a fool; and so is he! If he *is* the same ass – yes – they *might* be.”

"*And* he is the same ass!"

"He would have no need then of her having transformed and inspired him."

"Or of her having *deformed* and idiotised herself."

"No, no – she wouldn't need that."

"The great point is that *he* wouldn't!"

"She would do perfectly."

"My dear man, she has got to do!"

"Almost anyone would do."

"Almost anyone *would*. Still, we want the right one."

"Surely; the right one. But how has it happily been confirmed to you?"

"'Confirmed'—?"

"That he's her lover."

"By my husband."

"Brissenden knows?"

"Don't you suppose I've told him?"

"Ah – so you *have* talked!"

"One's husband isn't talk. You're cruel moreover to my joke. It was Briss, poor dear, who talked – though, I mean, only to me. *He* knows."

"Since when?"

"Since this evening."

"Just in time then! And the *way* he knows—?"

"Oh, the way! I take his word."

"You haven't then asked him?"

"The beauty of it was – half an hour ago, upstairs – that I *hadn't* to ask. He came out with it himself, and *that* – to give you the whole thing – was, if you like, my moment. He dropped it on me without in the least, sweet innocent, knowing what he was doing; more, at least, that is, than give her away."

"Which was comparatively nothing!"

"He's simple – but he sees."

"And when he sees, he luckily tells."

"He has seen, in short; there comes some chance when one does. His, as luckily as you please, came this evening. If you ask me what it showed him you ask more than *I've* either cared or had time to ask. Do you consider, for that matter, that one does ask? Let us leave it alone."

"Don't you think it a little late for that?"

"Late for everything! But there you are."

"But if Brissenden already knew—?"

"If he knew?"

"Why, that Long and Lady John were thick?"

"Ah, then," she cried, "you admit they *are*!"

"Am I not admitting everything you tell me? But the more I admit the more I must understand. It's *to* admit, you see, that I inquire. If Briss came down with Lady John yesterday to oblige Mr. Long—"

"He didn't come to oblige Mr. Long!"

"Well, then, to oblige Lady John herself—"

"He didn't come to oblige Lady John herself!"

"Well, then, to oblige his clever wife—"

"He didn't come to oblige his clever wife! He came, just to amuse himself. He *has* his amusements, and it's odd that you should grudge them to him!"

"It would be odd indeed if I did! But put his proceeding on any ground you like; you described to me the purpose of it as a screening of the pair."

"I described to you the purpose of it as nothing of the sort. I didn't describe to you the purpose of it at all. I described to you the *effect* of it – which is a very different thing."

"You're of an astuteness—!"

"Of course I'm of an astuteness! I *see* effects. And I saw that one. How much

Briss himself had seen it is, as I've told you, another matter; and what he had, at any rate, quite taken the affair for was the sort of flirtation in which, if one is a friend to either party, and one's own feelings are not at stake, one may now and then give people a lift. Haven't I asked you before if you suppose he would have given one had he had an idea where these people *are*?"

"I scarce know what you have asked me before! And 'where they are' is just what you haven't told me."

"It's where my husband was so annoyed unmistakably to discover them. He's peculiar, dear old Briss, but in a way by which, if one uses him – by which, I mean, if one depends on him – at all, one gains, I think, more than one loses. Up to a certain point, in any case that's the least a case for subtlety, he sees nothing at all; but beyond it – when once he does wake up – he'll go through a house. Nothing then escapes him, and what he drags to light is sometimes appalling."

"Rather, since witness this occasion!"

"But isn't the interest of this occasion, as I've already suggested, simply that it makes an end, bursts a bubble, rids us of an incubus and permits us to go to bed in peace? I thank God for dear old Briss to-night."

"So do I, but I shall do so with still greater fervour if you'll have for the space of another question a still greater patience. Remember that you're costing me a perfect palace of thought!"

"Oh, those who live in glass houses—"

"Shouldn't – no, I know they shouldn't – throw stones; and that's precisely why I don't. You, from your fortress of granite, can chuck them about as you will! All the more reason, however, that, before my frail, but, as I maintain, quite sublime structure, you honour me, for a few seconds, with an intelligent look at it. I seem myself to see it again, perfect in every part, even while I thus speak to you, and to feel afresh that, weren't the wretched accident of its weak foundation, it wouldn't have the shadow of a flaw. I've spoken of it in my conceivable regret as already a

mere heap of disfigured fragments; but that was the extravagance of my vexation, my despair. It's in point of fact so beautifully fitted that it comes apart piece by piece – which, so far as that goes, you've seen it do in the last quarter of an hour at your own touch, quite handing me the pieces, one by one, yourself and watching me stack them along the ground. They're not even in this state – see! A pile of ruins! I should almost like, piece by piece, to hand them back to you. I believe that, for the very charm of it, you'd find yourself placing them by your own sense in their order and rearing once more the splendid pile. Will you take just *one* of them from me again, and let me see if only to have it in your hands doesn't positively start you off? That's what I meant just now by asking you for another answer. There was nothing, you know, I had so fitted as your account of poor Mrs. Server when, on our seeing them, from the terrace, together below, you struck off your explanation that old Briss was *her* screen for Long."

"Fitted? I thought my stupid idea the one for which you had exactly no use!"

"I had no use for your stupid idea, but I had great use for your stupidly, alas! having it. *That* fitted beautifully till the piece came out. And even now, I don't feel it quite accounted for."

"Their being there together?"

"No. Your not liking it that they were."

"Not liking it?"

"Yes. Your not liking it is what I speak of as the piece. I hold it, you see, up before you. What, artistically, would you do with it?"

"How do you know what I mayn't, or may, have liked?"

"Because you were conscious of not telling me? Well, even if you didn't—!"

"That made no difference because you could always imagine? Of course you could always imagine – which is precisely what is the matter with you! But I'm surprised at your coming to me with it once more as evidence of anything."

"It *is* the weakness of my case that any particular thing you don't grant me be-

comes straightway the strength of yours. Of course, however I'm absolutely rejoicing (am I not?) in the strength of yours. The weakness of my own is what, under your instruction, I'm now going into; but don't you see how much weaker it will show if I draw from you the full expression of your indifference? How *could* you in fact care when what you were at the very moment urging on me so hard was the extravagance of Mrs. Server's conduct? That extravagance then proved her, to your eyes, the woman who had a connection with Long to keep the world off the scent of – though you maintained that in spite of the dust she kicked up by it she was, at a pinch, now and then to be caught with him. That instead of being caught with him she was caught only with Brissenden annoyed you naturally for the moment; but what was that annoyance compared to your appreciation of her showing – by undertaking your husband, of all people! – just the more markedly *as* extravagant?"

"What was it indeed?"

"And yet if she is extravagant – what do you do with it?"

"I thought you wouldn't hear of it!"

"What do you do with it?"

"I thought you wouldn't hear of it!"

"It's not a question of my dispositions. It's a question of her having been, or not been, for you 'all over the place,' and of everyone's also being, for you, on the chatter about it. You go by that in respect to Long – by your holding, that is, that nothing has been noticed; therefore mustn't you go by it in respect to *her* – since I understand from you that everything has?"

"Everything always is in a place and a party like this; but so little – anything in particular – that, with people moving 'every which' way, it comes to the same as if nothing was. Things are not, also, gouged out to *your* tune, and it depends, still further, on what you mean by 'extravagant.'"

"I mean whatever you yourself meant."

"Well, I myself mean no longer, you know, what I did mean."

“She isn’t then—?”

“Isn’t what?”

“What the woman we so earnestly looked for would have to be.”

“All gone? No, she isn’t all gone, since there was enough of her left to make up to poor Briss.”

“Precisely – and it’s just what we saw, and just what, with her other dashes of the same sort, led us to have to face the question of her being – well, what I say. Or rather, what *you* say. That is, what you say you *don’t* say.”

“Extravagant? I tell you she *isn’t* that!”

“Exactly; and it’s only to ask you what in the world then she *is*.”

“She’s horrid!”

“‘Horrid’?”

“Horrid. It wasn’t a ‘dash,’ as you say, ‘of the same sort’ – though goodness knows of what sort you mean: it wasn’t, to be plain, a ‘dash’ at all. She settled. She stuck. She made love to him.”

“But – a – really?”

“Really. That’s how I knew.”

“‘Knew’? But you saw.”

“I knew – that is I learnt – more than I saw. I knew she couldn’t be gone.”

“Knew it by *him*?”

“He told me.”

“Does he then regularly tell?”

“Regularly. But what he tells is not always so much to the point as the two things I’ve repeated to you.”

“His revelation, in the first place, of Long and Lady John?”

“And his revelation in the second of May Server and himself?”

“And what does he say that’s further interesting about *that*?”

“Why, that she’s awfully sharp.”

"*She* – Mrs. Server?"

"Why, isn't it the very thing you maintained?"

"Awfully sharp?"

"You after all then now don't? Then what on earth *do* you think? My poor dear, you *are* crazy, and I bid you good-night!"