The Abasement of the Northmores

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When Lord Northmore died public reference to the event took for the most part rather a ponderous and embarrassed form. A great political figure had passed away. A great light of our time had been quenched in mid−career. A great usefulness had somewhat anticipated its term, though a great part, none the less, had been signally played. The note of greatness, all along the line, kept sounding, in short, by a force of its own, and the image of the departed evidently lent itself with ease to figures and flourishes, the poetry of the daily press. The newspapers and their purchasers equally did their duty by it arranged it neatly and impressively, though perhaps with a hand a little violently expeditious, upon the funeral car, saw the conveyance properly down the avenue, and then, finding the subject suddenly quite exhausted, proceeded to the next item on their list. His lordship had been a person, in fact, in connection with whom there was almost nothing but the fine monotony of his success to mention. This success had been his profession, his means as well as his end; so that his career admitted of no other description and demanded, indeed suffered, no further analysis. He had made politics, he had made literature, he had made land, he had made a bad manner and a great many mistakes, he had made a gaunt, foolish wife, two extravagant sons and four awkward daughters he had made everything, as he *could* have made almost anything, thoroughly pay. There had been something deep down in him that did it, and his old friend Warren Hope, the person knowing him earliest and probably, on the whole, best, had never, even to the last, for curiosity, quite made out what it was. The secret was one that this distinctly distanced competitor had in fact mastered as little for intellectual relief as for emulous use; and there was quite a kind of tribute to it in the way that, the night before the obsequies and addressing himself to his wife, he said after some silent thought: "Hang it, you know, I must see the old boy through. I must go to the grave."

Mrs Hope looked at her husband at first in anxious silence. "I've no patience with you. You're much more ill than *he* ever was."

"Ah, but if that qualifies me but for the funerals of others !"

"It qualifies you to break my heart by your exaggerated chivalry, your renewed refusal to consider your interests. You sacrificed them to him, for thirty years, again and again, and from this supreme sacrifice possibly that of your life you might, in your condition, I think, be absolved." She indeed lost patience. "To the grave in this weather after his treatment of you!"

"My dear girl," Hope replied, "his treatment of me is a figment of your ingenious mind your too−passionate, your beautiful loyalty. Loyalty, I mean, to *me*."

"I certainly leave it to you," she declared, "to have any to *him* !"

"Well, he was, after all, one's oldest, one's earliest friend. I'm not in such bad case I do go out; and I want to do the decent thing. The fact remains that we never broke we always kept together."

"Yes indeed," she laughed in her bitterness, "he always took care of that! He never recognised you, but he never let you go. You kept him up, and he kept you down. He used you, to the last drop he could squeeze, and left you the only one to wonder, in your incredible idealism and your incorrigible modesty, how on earth such an idiot made his way. He made his way on your back. You put it candidly to others 'What in the world was his gift?' And others are such gaping idiots that they too haven't the least idea. *You* were his gift!"

"And you're mine, my dear!" her husband, pressing her to him, more resignedly laughed. He went down the next day by 'special'; to the interment, which took place on the great man's own property, in the great man's own church. But he went alone that is in a numerous and distinguished party, the flower of the unanimous, gregarious demonstration; his wife had no wish to accompany him, though she was anxious while he was absent. She passed the time uneasily, watching the weather and fearing the cold; she roamed from room to room, pausing vaguely at dull windows, and before he came back she had thought of many things. It was as if, while he saw the great man buried, she also, by herself, in the contracted home of their later years, stood before an open grave. She lowered into it, with her weak hands, the heavy past and all their common dead dreams and accumulated ashes. The pomp surrounding Lord Northmore's extinction made her feel more than ever that it was not Warren who had made anything pay. He had been always what he was still, the cleverest man and the hardest worker she knew; but what was there, at fifty−seven, as the vulgar said, to 'show' for it all but his wasted genius, his ruined health and his paltry pension? It was the term of comparison conveniently given her by his happy rival's now foreshortened splendour that fixed these things in her eye. It was as happy rivals to their own flat union that she always had thought of the Northmore pair; the two men, at least, having started together, after the University, shoulder to shoulder and with superficially speaking much the same outfit of preparation, ambition and opportunity. They had begun at the same point and wanting the same things only wanting them in such different ways. Well, the dead man had wanted them in the way that got them; had got too, in his peerage, for instance, those Warren had never wanted: there was nothing else to be said. There was nothing else, and yet, in her sombre, her strangely apprehensive solitude at this hour, she said much more than I can tell. It all came to this that there had been, somewhere and somehow, a wrong. Warren was the one who should have succeeded. But she was the one person who knew it now, the single other person having descended, with *his* knowledge, to the tomb.

She sat there, she roamed there, in the waiting greyness of her small London house, with a deepened sense of the several odd knowledges that had flourished in their company of three. Warren had always known everything and, with his easy power in nothing so high as for indifference had never cared. John Northmore had known, for he had, years and years before, told her so; and thus had had a reason the more in addition to not believing her stupid for guessing at her view. She lived back; she lived it over; she had it all there in her hand. John Northmore had known her first, and how he had wanted to marry her the fat little bundle of his love−letters still survived to tell. He had introduced Warren Hope to her quite by accident and because, at the time they had chambers together, he couldn't help it: that was the one thing he *had* done for them. Thinking of it now, she perhaps saw how much he might conscientiously have considered that it disburdened him of more. Six months later she had accepted Warren, and for just the reason the absence of which had determined her treatment of his friend. She had believed in his future. She held that John Northmore had never afterwards remitted the effort to ascertain the degree in which she felt herself 'sold'. But, thank God, she had never shown him.

Her husband came home with a chill, and she put him straight to bed. For a week, as she hovered near him, they only looked deep things at each other; the point was too quickly passed at which she could bearably have said 'I told you so!' That his late patron should never have had difficulty in making *him* pay was certainly no marvel. But it was indeed a little too much, after all, that he should have made him pay with his life. This was what it had come to she was sure, now, from the first. Congestion of the lungs, that night, declared itself, and on the

morrow, sickeningly, she was face to face with pneumonia. It was more than with all that had gone before they could meet. Warren Hope ten days later succumbed. Tenderly, divinely as he loved her, she felt his surrender, through all the anguish, as an unspeakable part of the sublimity of indifference into which his hapless history had finally flowered. 'His easy power, his easy power!' her passion had never yet found such relief in that simple, secret phrase for him. He was so proud, so fine and so flexible, that to fail a little had been as bad for him as to fail much; therefore he had opened the flood−gates wide had thrown, as the saying was, the helve after the hatchet. He had amused himself with seeing what the devouring world would take. Well, it had taken all.

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But it was after he had gone that his name showed as written in water. What had he left? He had only left *her* and her grey desolation, her lonely piety and her sore, unresting rebellion. Sometimes, when a man died, it did something for him that life had not done; people, after a little, on one side or the other, discovered and named him, annexing him to their flag. But the sense of having lost Warren Hope appeared not in the least to have quickened the world's wit; the sharper pang for his widow indeed sprang just from the commonplace way in which he was spoken of as known. She received letters enough, when it came to that, for of course, personally, he had been liked; the newspapers were fairly copious and perfectly stupid; the three or four societies, 'learned' and other, to which he had belonged, passed resolutions of regret and condolence, and the three or four colleagues about whom he himself used to be most amusing stammered eulogies; but almost anything, really, would have been better for her than the general understanding that the occasion had been met. Two or three solemn noodles in 'administrative circles' wrote her that she must have been gratified at the unanimity of regret, the implication being clearly that she was ridiculous if she were not. Meanwhile what she felt was that she could have borne well enough his not being noticed at all; what she couldn't bear was this treatment of him as a minor celebrity. He was, in economics, in the higher politics, in philosophic history, a splendid unestimated genius, or he was nothing. He wasn't, at any rate heaven forbid! a 'notable figure'. The waters, none the less, closed over him as over Lord Northmore; which was precisely, as time went on, the fact she found it hardest to accept. That personage, the week after his death, without an hour of reprieve, the place swept as clean of him as a hall, lent for a charity, of the tables and booths of a three−days' bazaar that personage had gone straight to the bottom, dropped like a crumpled circular into the waste−basket. Where then was the difference? if the end *was* the end for each alike? For Warren it should have been properly the beginning.

During the first six months she wondered what she could herself do, and had much of the time the sense of walking by some swift stream on which an object dear to her was floating out to sea. All her instinct was to keep up with it, not to lose sight of it, to hurry along the bank and reach in advance some point from which she could stretch forth and catch and save it. Alas, it only floated and floated; she held it in sight, for the stream was long, but no convenient projection offered itself to the rescue. She ran, she watched, she lived with her great fear; and all the while, as the distance to the sea diminished, the current visibly increased: At the last, to do anything, she must hurry. She went into his papers, she ransacked his drawers; something of that sort, at least, she might do. But there were difficulties, the case was special; she lost herself in the labyrinth, and her competence was questioned; two or three friends to whose judgment she appealed struck her as tepid, even as cold, and publishers, when sounded most of all in fact the house through which his three or four important volumes had been given to the world showed an absence of eagerness for a collection of literary remains. It was only now that she fully understood how remarkably little the three or four important volumes had 'done'. He had successfully kept that from her, as he had kept other things she might have ached at: to handle his notes and memoranda was to come at every turn, in the wilderness, the wide desert, upon the footsteps of his scrupulous soul. But she had at last to accept the truth that it was only for herself, her own relief, she must follow him. His work, unencouraged and interrupted, failed of a final form: there would have been nothing to offer but fragments of fragments. She felt, all the same, in recognising this, that she abandoned him; he died for her at that hour over again.

The hour moreover happened to coincide with another hour, so that the two mingled their bitterness. She received a note from Lady Northmore, announcing a desire to gather in and publish his late lordship's letters, so numerous and so interesting, and inviting Mrs Hope, as a more than probable depositary, to be so good as to contribute to the project those addressed to her husband. This gave her a start of more kinds than one. The long comedy of his late lordship's greatness was *not* then over? The monument was to be built to him that she had but now schooled herself to regard as impossible for his defeated friend? Everything was to break out afresh, the comparisons, the contrasts, the conclusions so invidiously in his favour? the business all cleverly managed to place him in the light and keep every one else in the shade? Letters? had John Northmore indited three lines that could, at that time of day, be of the smallest consequence? Whose idea was such a publication, and what infatuated editorial patronage could the family have secured? She of course didn't know, but she should be surprised if there were material. Then it came to her, on reflection, that editors and publishers must of course have flocked his star would still rule. Why shouldn't he make his letters pay in death as he had made them pay in life? Such as they were they *had* paid. They would be a tremendous success. She thought again of her husband's rich, confused relics thought of the loose blocks of marble that could only lie now where they had fallen; after which, with one of her deep and frequent sighs, she took up anew Lady Northmore's communication.

His letters to Warren, kept or not kept, had never so much as occurred to her. Those to herself were buried and safe she knew where her hand would find them; but those to herself her correspondent had carefully not asked for and was probably unaware of the existence of. They belonged moreover to that phase of the great man's career that was distinctly as it could only be called previous: previous to the greatness, to the proper subject of the volume, and, in especial, to Lady Northmore. The faded fat packet lurked still where it had lurked for years; but she could no more to−day have said why she had kept it than why though he knew of the early episode she had never mentioned her preservation of it to Warren. This last circumstance certainly absolved her from mentioning it to Lady Northmore, who, no doubt, knew of the episode too. The odd part of the matter was, at any rate, that her retention of these documents had not been an accident. She had obeyed a dim instinct or a vague calculation. A calculation of what? She couldn't have told: it had operated, at the back of her head, simply as a sense that, not destroyed, the complete little collection made for safety. But for whose, just heaven? Perhaps she should still see; though nothing, she trusted, would occur requiring her to touch the things or to read them over. She wouldn't have touched them or read them over for the world.

She had not as yet, at all events, overhauled those receptacles in which the letters Warren kept would have accumulated; and she had her doubts of their containing any of Lord Northmore's. Why should he have kept any? Even she herself had had more reasons. Was his lordship's later epistolary manner supposed to be good, or of the kind that, on any grounds, prohibited the waste−basket or the fire? Warren had lived in a deluge of documents, but these perhaps he might have regarded as contributions to contemporary history. None the less, surely, he wouldn't have stored up many. She began to look, in cupboards, boxes, drawers yet unvisited, and she had her surprises both as to what he had kept and as to what he hadn't. Every word of her own was there every note that, in occasional absence, he had ever had from her. Well, that matched happily enough her knowing just where to put her finger on every note that, on such occasions, she herself had received. *Their* correspondence at least was complete. But so, in fine, on one side, it gradually appeared, was Lord Northmore's. The superabundance of these missives had not been sacrificed by her husband, evidently, to any passing convenience; she judged more and more that he had preserved every scrap; and she was unable to conceal from herself that she was she scarce knew why a trifle disappointed. She had not quite unhopefully, even though vaguely, seen herself writing to Lady Northmore that, to her great regret and after an exhausting search, she could find nothing at all.

She found, alas, in fact, everything. She was conscientious and she hunted to the end, by which time one of the tables quite groaned with the fruits of her quest. The letters appeared moreover to have been cared for and roughly classified she should be able to consign them to the family in excellent order. She made sure, at the last, that she had overlooked nothing, and then, fatigued and distinctly irritated, she prepared to answer in a sense so different from the answer she had, as might have been said, planned. Face to face with her note, however, she found she couldn't write it; and, not to be alone longer with the pile on the table, she presently went out of the room. Late in

the evening just before going to bed she came back, almost as if she hoped there might have been since the afternoon some pleasant intervention in the interest of her distaste. Mightn't it have magically happened that her discovery was a mistake? that the letters were either not there or were, after all, somebody's else? Ah, they *were* there, and as she raised her lighted candle in the dusk the pile on the table squared itself with insolence. On this, poor lady, she had for an hour her temptation.

It was obscure, it was absurd; all that could be said of it was that it was, for the moment, extreme. She saw herself, as she circled round the table, writing with perfect impunity: 'Dear Lady Northmore, I have hunted high and low and have found nothing whatever. My husband evidently, before his death, destroyed everything. I'm *so* sorry I should have liked so much to help you. Yours most truly.' She should have only, on the morrow, privately and resolutely to annihilate the heap, and those words would remain an account of the matter that nobody was in a position to challenge. What good it would do her? was *that* the question? It would do her the good that it would make poor Warren seem to have been just a little less used and duped. This, in her mood, would ease her off. Well, the temptation was real; but so, she after a while felt, were other things. She sat down at midnight to her note. 'Dear Lady Northmore, I am happy to say I have found a great deal my husband appears to have been so careful to keep everything. I have a mass at your disposition if you can conveniently send. So glad to be able to help your work. Yours most truly.' She stepped out as she was and dropped the letter into the nearest pillar−box. By noon the next day the table had, to her relief, been cleared. Her ladyship sent a responsible servant her butler, in a four−wheeler, with a large japanned box.

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After this, for a twelvemonth, there were frequent announcements and allusions. They came to her from every side, and there were hours at which the air, to her imagination, contained almost nothing else. There had been, at an early stage, immediately after Lady Northmore's communication to her, an official appeal, a circular *urbi et orbi*, reproduced, applauded, commented in every newspaper, desiring all possessors of letters to remit them without delay to the family. The family, to do it justice, rewarded the sacrifice freely so far as it was a reward to keep the world informed of the rapid progress of the work. Material had shown itself more copious than was to have been conceived. Interesting as the imminent volumes had naturally been expected to prove, those who had been favoured with a glimpse of their contents already felt warranted in promising the public an unprecedented treat. They would throw upon certain sides of the writer's mind and career lights hitherto unsuspected. Lady Northmore, deeply indebted for favours received, begged to renew her solicitation; gratifying as the response had been, it was believed that, particularly in connection with several dates, which were given, a residuum of buried treasure might still be looked for.

Mrs Hope saw, she felt, as time went on, fewer and fewer people; yet her circle was even now not too narrow for her to hear it blown about that Thompson and Johnson had 'been asked'. Conversation in the London world struck her for a time as almost confined to such questions and such answers. "Have *you* been asked?" "Oh yes rather. Months ago. And you?" The whole place was under contribution, and the striking thing was that being asked had been clearly accompanied, in every case, with the ability to respond. The spring had but to be touched millions of letters flew out. Ten volumes, at such a rate, Mrs Hope mused, would not exhaust the supply. She mused a great deal did nothing but muse; and, strange as this may at first appear, it was inevitable that one of the final results of her musing should be a principle of doubt. It could only seem possible, in view of such unanimity, that she should, after all, have been mistaken. It *was* then, to the general sense, the great departed's, a reputation sound and safe. It wasn't he who had been at fault it was her silly self, still burdened with the fallibility of Being. He had been a giant then, and the letters would triumphantly show it. She had looked only at the envelopes of those she had surrendered, but she was prepared for anything. There was the fact, not to be blinked, of Warren's own marked testimony. The attitude of others was but *his* attitude; and she sighed as she perceived him in this case, for

the only time in his life, on the side of the chattering crowd.

She was perfectly aware that her obsession had run away with her, but as Lady Northmore's publication really loomed into view it was now definitely announced for March, and they were in January her pulses quickened so that she found herself, in the long nights, mostly lying awake. It was in one of these vigils that, suddenly, in the cold darkness, she felt the brush of almost the only thought that, for many a month, had not made her wince; the effect of which was that she bounded out of bed with a new felicity. Her impatience flashed, on the spot, up to its maximum she could scarce wait for day to give herself to action. Her idea was neither more nor less than immediately to collect and put forth the letters of *her* hero. She would publish her husband's own glory be to God! and she even wasted none of her time in wondering why she had waited. She *had* waited all too long; yet it was perhaps no more than natural that, for eyes sealed with tears and a heart heavy with injustice, there should not have been an instant vision of where her remedy lay. She thought of it already as her remedy though she would probably have found an awkwardness in giving a name, publicly, to her wrong. It was a wrong to feel, but not, doubtless, to talk about. And lo, straightway, the balm had begun to drop: the balance would so soon be even. She spent all that day in reading over her own old letters, too intimate and too sacred oh, unluckily! to figure in her project, but pouring wind, nevertheless, into its sails and adding magnificence to her presumption. She had of course, with separation, all their years, never frequent and never prolonged, known her husband as a correspondent much less than others; still, these relics constituted a property she was surprised at their number and testified hugely to his inimitable gift.

He was a letter−writer if you liked natural, witty, various, vivid, playing, with the idlest, lightest hand, up and down the whole scale. His easy power his easy power: everything that brought him back brought back that. The most numerous were of course the earlier, and the series of those during their engagement, witnesses of their long probation, which were rich and unbroken; so full indeed and so wonderful that she fairly groaned at having to defer to the common measure of married modesty. There was discretion, there was usage, there was taste; but she would fain have flown in their face. If there were pages too intimate to publish, there were too many others too rare to suppress. Perhaps after her death ! It not only pulled her up, the happy thought of that liberation alike for herself and for her treasure, making her promise herself straightway to arrange: it quickened extremely her impatience for the term of her mortality, which would leave a free field to the justice she invoked. Her great resource, however, clearly, would be the friends, the colleagues, the private admirers to whom he had written for years, to whom she had known him to write, and many of whose own letters, by no means remarkable, she had come upon in her recent sortings and siftings. She drew up a list of these persons and immediately wrote to them or, in cases in which they had passed away, to their widows, children, representatives; reminding herself in the process not disagreeably, in fact quite inspiringly, of Lady Northmore. It had struck her that Lady Northmore took, somehow, a good deal for granted; but this idea failed, oddly enough, to occur to her in regard to Mrs Hope. It was indeed with her ladyship she began, addressing her exactly in the terms of this personage's own appeal, every word of which she remembered.

Then she waited, but she had not, in connection with that quarter, to wait long. 'Dear Mrs Hope, I have hunted high and low and have found nothing whatever. My husband evidently, before his death, destroyed everything. I'm so sorry I should have liked so much to help you. Yours most truly.' This was all Lady Northmore wrote, without the grace of an allusion to the assistance she herself had received; though even in the first flush of amazement and resentment our friend recognised the odd identity of form between her note and another that had never been written. She was answered as she had, in the like case, in her one evil hour, dreamed of answering. But the answer was not over with this it had still to flow in, day after day, from every other source reached by her question. And day after day, while amazement and resentment deepened, it consisted simply of three lines of regret. Everybody had looked, and everybody had looked in vain. Everybody would have been so glad, but everybody was reduced to being, like Lady Northmore, so sorry. Nobody could find anything, and nothing, it was therefore to be gathered, had been kept. Some of these informants were more prompt than others, but all replied in time, and the business went on for a month, at the end of which the poor woman, stricken, chilled to the heart, accepted perforce her situation and turned her face to the wall. In this position, as it were, she remained for days,

taking heed of nothing and only feeling and nursing her wound. It was a wound the more cruel for having found her so unguarded. From the moment her remedy had been whispered to her, she had not had an hour of doubt, and the beautiful side of it had seemed that it was, above all, so easy. The strangeness of the issue was even greater than the pain. Truly it was a world *pour rire*, the world in which John Northmore's letters were classed and labelled for posterity and Warren Hope's kindled fires. All sense, all measure of anything, could only leave one leave one indifferent and dumb. There was nothing to be done the show was upside−down. John Northmore was immortal and Warren Hope was damned. And for herself, she was finished. She was beaten. She leaned thus, motionless, muffled, for a time of which, as I say, she took no account; then at last she was reached by a great sound that made her turn her veiled head. It was the report of the appearance of Lady Northmore's volumes.

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This was a great noise indeed, and all the papers, that day, were particularly loud with it. It met the reader on the threshold, and the work was everywhere the subject of a 'leader' as well as of a review. The reviews moreover, she saw at a glance, overflowed with quotation; it was enough to look at two or three sheets to judge of the enthusiasm. Mrs Hope looked at the two or three that, for confirmation of the single one she habitually received, she caused, while at breakfast, to be purchased; but her attention failed to penetrate further; she couldn't, she found, face the contrast between the pride of the Northmores on such a morning and her own humiliation. The papers brought it too sharply home; she pushed them away and, to get rid of them, not to feel their presence, left the house early. She found pretexts for remaining out; it was as if there had been a cup prescribed for her to drain, yet she could put off the hour of the ordeal. She filled the time as she might; bought things, in shops, for which she had no use, and called on friends for whom she had no taste. Most of her friends, at present, were reduced to that category, and she had to choose, for visits, the houses guiltless, as she might have said, of her husband's blood. She couldn't speak to the people who had answered in such dreadful terms her late circular; on the other hand the people out of its range were such as would also be stolidly unconscious of Lady Northmore's publication and from whom the sop of sympathy could be but circuitously extracted. As she had lunched at a pastrycook's, so she stopped out to tea, and the March dusk had fallen when she got home. The first thing she then saw in her lighted hall was a large neat package on the table; whereupon she knew before approaching it that Lady Northmore had sent her the book. It had arrived, she learned, just after her going out; so that, had she not done this, she might have spent the day with it. She now quite understood her prompt instinct of flight. Well, flight had helped her, and the touch of the great indifferent general life. She would at last face the music.

She faced it, after dinner, in her little closed drawing−room, unwrapping the two volumes *The Public and Private Correspondence of the Right Honourable and looking well, first, at the great escutcheon on the purple cover and at the various portraits within, so numerous that wherever she opened she came on one. It had not been present to her before that he was so perpetually 'sitting', but he figured in every phase and in every style, and the gallery was enriched with views of his successive residences, each one a little grander than the last. She had ever, in general, found that, in portraits, whether of the known or the unknown, the eyes seemed to seek and to meet her own; but John Northmore everywhere looked straight away from her, quite as if he had been in the room and were unconscious of acquaintance. The effect of this was, oddly enough, so sharp that at the end of ten minutes she found herself sinking into his text as if she had been a stranger and beholden, vulgarly and accidentally, to one of the libraries. She had been afraid to plunge, but from the moment she got in she was to do every one, all round, justice thoroughly held. She sat there late, and she made so many reflections and discoveries that as the only way to put it she passed from mystification to stupefaction. Her own contribution had been almost exhaustively used; she had counted Warren's letters before sending them and perceived now that scarce a dozen were not all there a circumstance explaining to her Lady Northmore's present. It was to these pages she had turned first, and it was as she hung over them that her stupefaction dawned. It took, in truth, at the outset, a particular form the form of a sharpened wonder at Warren's unnatural piety. Her original surprise had been*

keen when she had tried to take reasons for granted; but her original surprise was as nothing to her actual bewilderment. The letters to Warren had been practically, she judged, for the family, the great card; yet if the great card made only that figure, what on earth was one to think of the rest of the pack?

She pressed on, at random, with a sense of rising fever; she trembled, almost panting, not to be sure too soon; but wherever she turned she found the prodigy spread. The letters to Warren were an abyss of inanity; the others followed suit as they could; the book was surely then a sandy desert, the publication a theme for mirth. She so lost herself, as her perception of the scale of the mistake deepened, in uplifting visions, that when her parlour−maid, at eleven o'clock, opened the door she almost gave the start of guilt surprised. The girl, withdrawing for the night, had come but to say so, and her mistress, supremely wide−awake and with remembrance kindled, appealed to her, after a blank stare, with intensity. "What have you done with the papers?"

"The papers, ma'am?"

"All those of this morning don't tell me you've destroyed them! Quick, quick bring them back." The young woman, by a rare chance, had not destroyed them; she presently reappeared with them, neatly folded; and Mrs Hope, dismissing her with benedictions, had at last, in a few minutes, taken the time of day. She saw her impression portentously reflected in the public prints. It was not then the illusion of her jealousy it was the triumph, unhoped for, of her justice. The reviewers observed a decorum, but, frankly, when one came to look, their stupefaction matched her own. What she had taken in the morning for enthusiasm proved mere perfunctory attention, unwarned in advance and seeking an issue for its mystification. The question was, if one liked, asked civilly, but it was asked, none the less, all round: 'What *could* have made Lord Northmore's family take him for a letter−writer?' Pompous and ponderous, yet loose and obscure, he managed, by a trick of his own, to be both slipshod and stiff. Who, in such a case, had been primarily responsible, and under what strangely belated advice had a group of persons destitute of wit themselves been thus deplorably led thus astray? With fewer accomplices in the preparation, it might almost have been assumed that they had been dealt with by practical jokers.

They had at all events committed an error of which the most merciful thing to say was that, as founded on loyalty, it was touching. These things, in the welcome offered, lay perhaps not quite on the face, but they peeped between the lines and would force their way through on the morrow. The long quotations given were quotations marked Why? 'Why,' in other words, as interpreted by Mrs Hope, 'drag to light such helplessness of expression? why give the text of his dulness and the proof of his fatuity?' The victim of the error had certainly been, in his way and day, a useful and remarkable person, but almost any other evidence of the fact might more happily have been adduced. It rolled over her, as she paced her room in the small hours, that the wheel had come full circle. There was after all a rough justice. The monument that had over−darkened her was reared, but it would be within a week the opportunity of every humourist, the derision of intelligent London. Her husband's strange share in it continued, that night, between dreams and vigils, to puzzle her, but light broke with her final waking, which was comfortably late. She opened her eyes to it, and, as it stared straight into them, she greeted it with the first laugh that had for a long time passed her lips. How could she, idiotically, not have guessed? Warren, playing insidiously the part of a guardian, had done what he had done on purpose! He had acted to an end long foretasted, and the end the full taste had come.

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It was after this, none the less after the other organs of criticism, including the smoking−rooms of the clubs, the lobbies of the House and the dinner−tables of everywhere, had duly embodied their reserves and vented their irreverence, and the unfortunate two volumes had ranged themselves, beyond appeal, as a novelty insufficiently curious and prematurely stale it was when this had come to pass that Mrs Hope really felt how beautiful her

own chance would now have been and how sweet her revenge. The success of *her* volumes, for the inevitability of which nobody had had an instinct, would have been as great as the failure of Lady Northmore's, for the inevitability of which everybody had had one. She read over and over her letters and asked herself afresh if the confidence that had preserved *them* might not, at such a crisis, in spite of everything, justify itself. Did not the discredit to English wit, as it were, proceeding from the uncorrected attribution to an established public character of such mediocrity of thought and form, really demand, for that matter, some such redemptive stroke as the appearance of a collection of masterpieces gathered from a similar walk? To have such a collection under one's hand and yet sit and see one's self not use it was a torment through which she might well have feared to break down.

But there was another thing she might do, not redemptive indeed, but perhaps, after all, as matters were going, apposite. She fished out of their nook, after long years, the packet of John Northmore's epistles to herself, and, reading them over in the light of his later style, judged them to contain to the full the promise of that inimitability; felt that they would deepen the impression and that, in the way of the *inédit*, they constituted her supreme treasure. There was accordingly a terrible week for her in which she itched to put them forth. She composed mentally the preface, brief, sweet, ironic, representing her as prompted by an anxious sense of duty to a great reputation and acting upon the sight of laurels so lately gathered. There would naturally be difficulties; the documents were her own, but the family, bewildered, scared, suspicious, figured to her fancy as a dog with a dust−pan tied to its tail and ready for any dash to cover at the sound of the clatter of tin. They would have, she surmised, to be consulted, or, if not consulted, would put in an injunction; yet of the two courses, that of scandal braved for the man she had rejected drew her on, while the charm of this vision worked, still further than that of delicacy over−ridden for the man she had married.

The vision closed round her and she lingered on the idea fed, as she handled again her faded fat packet, by re−perusals more richly convinced. She even took opinions as to the interference open to her old friend's relatives; took, in fact, from this time on, many opinions; went out anew, picked up old threads, repaired old ruptures, resumed, as it was called, her place in society. She had not been for years so seen of men as during the few weeks that followed the abasement of the Northmores. She called, in particular, on every one she had cast out after the failure of her appeal. Many of these persons figured as Lady Northmore's contributors, the unwitting agents of the unprecedented exposure; they having, it was sufficiently clear, acted in dense good faith. Warren, foreseeing and calculating, might have the benefit of such subtlety, but it was not for any one else. With every one else for they did, on facing her, as she said to herself, look like fools she made inordinately free; putting right and left the question of what, in the past years, they, or their progenitors, could have been thinking of. 'What on earth had you in mind, and where, among you, were the rudiments of intelligence, when you burnt up my husband's priceless letters and clung as if for salvation to Lord Northmore's? You see how you have been saved!' The weak explanations, the imbecility, as she judged it, of the reasons given, were so much balm to her wound. The great balm, however, she kept to the last: she would go to see Lady Northmore only when she had exhausted all other comfort. That resource would be as supreme as the treasure of the fat packet. She finally went and, by a happy chance, if chance could ever be happy in such a house, was received. She remained half an hour there were other persons present, and, on rising to go, felt that she was satisfied. She had taken in what she desired, had sounded what she saw; only, unexpectedly, something had overtaken her more absolute than the hard need she had obeyed or the vindictive advantage she had cherished. She had counted on herself for almost anything but for pity of these people, yet it was in pity that, at the end of ten minutes, she felt everything else dissolve.

They were suddenly, on the spot, transformed for her by the depth of their misfortune, and she saw them, the great Northmores, as of all things consciously weak and flat. She neither made nor encountered an allusion to volumes published or frustrated; and so let her arranged inquiry die away that when, on separation, she kissed her wan sister in widowhood, it was not with the kiss of Judas. She had meant to ask lightly if she mightn't have *her* turn at editing; but the renunciation with which she re−entered her house had formed itself before she left the room. When she got home indeed she at first only wept wept for the commonness of failure and the strangeness of life. Her tears perhaps brought her a sense of philosophy; it was all as broad as it was long. When they were

spent, at all events, she took out for the last time the faded fat packet. Sitting down by a receptacle daily emptied for the benefit of the dustman, she destroyed, one by one, the gems of the collection in which each piece had been a gem. She tore up, to the last scrap, Lord Northmore's letters. It would never be known now, as regards this series, either that they had been hoarded or that they had been sacrificed. And she was content so to let it rest. On the following day she began another task. She took out her husband's and attacked the business of transcription. She copied them piously, tenderly, and, for the purpose to which she now found herself settled, judged almost no omissions imperative. By the time they should be published ! She shook her head, both knowingly and resignedly, as to criticism so remote. When her transcript was finished she sent it to a printer to set up, and then, after receiving and correcting proof, and with every precaution for secrecy, had a single copy struck off and the type, under her eyes, dispersed. Her last act but one or rather perhaps but two was to put these sheets, which she was pleased to find, would form a volume of three hundred pages, carefully away. Her next was to add to her testamentary instrument a definite provision for the issue, after her death, of such a volume. Her last was to hope that death would come in time.

THE END