Fennel and Rue

William Dean Howells

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I.

The success of Verrian did not come early, and it did not come easily. He had been trying a long time to get his work into the best magazines, and when he had won the favor of the editors, whose interest he had perhaps had from the beginning, it might be said that they began to accept his work from their consciences, because in its way it was so good that they could not justly refuse it. The particular editor who took Verrian's serial, after it had come back to the author from the editors of the other leading periodicals, was in fact moved mainly by the belief that the story would please the better sort of his readers. These, if they were not so numerous as the worse, he felt had now and then the right to have their pleasure studied.

It was a serious story, and it was somewhat bitter, as Verrian himself was, after his struggle to reach the public with work which he knew merited recognition. But the world which does not like people to take themselves too seriously also likes them to take themselves seriously, and the bitterness in Verrian's story proved agreeable to a number of readers unexpectedly great. It intimated a romantic personality in the author, and the world still likes to imagine romantic things of authors. It likes especially to imagine them of novelists, now that there are no longer poets; and when it began to like Verrian's serial, it began to write him all sorts of letters, directly, in care of the

editor, and indirectly to the editor, whom they asked about Verrian more than about his story.

It was a man's story rather than a woman's story, as these may be distinguished; but quite for that reason women seemed peculiarly taken with it. Perhaps the women had more leisure or more courage to write to the author and the editor; at any rate, most of the letters were from women; some of the letters were silly and fatuous enough, but others were of an intelligence which was none the less penetrating for being emotional rather than critical. These maids or matrons, whoever or whichever they were, knew wonderfully well what the author would be at, and their interest in his story implied a constant if not a single devotion. Now and then Verrian was tempted to answer one of them, and under favor of his mother, who had been his confidant at every point of his literary career, he yielded to the temptation; but one day there came a letter asking an answer, which neither he nor his mother felt competent to deal with. They both perceived that they must refer it to the editor of the magazine, and it seemed to them so important that they decided Verrian must go with it in person to the editor. Then he must be so far ruled by him, if necessary, as to give him the letter and put himself, as the author, beyond an appeal which he found peculiarly poignant.

The letter, which had overcome the tacit misgivings of his mother as they read it and read it again together, was from a girl who had perhaps no need to confess herself young, or to own her inexperience of the world where stories were written and printed. She excused herself with a delicacy which Verrian's correspondents by no means always showed for intruding upon him, and then pleaded the power his story had over her as the only shadow of right she had in addressing him. Its fascination, she said, had begun with the first number, the first chapter, almost the first paragraph. It was not for the plot that she cared; she had read too many stories to care for the plot; it was the problem involved. It was one which she had so often pondered in her own mind that she felt, in a way she hoped he would not think conceited, almost as if the story was written for her. She had never been able to solve the problem; how he would solve it she did not see how she could wait to know; and here she made him a confidence without which, she said, she should not have the courage to go on. She was an invalid, and her doctor had told her that, though she might live for months, there were chances that she might die at any moment suddenly. He would think it strange, and it was strange that she should tell him this, and stranger still that she should dare to ask him what she was going to ask. The story had yet four months to run, and she had begun to have a morbid foreboding that she should not live to read it in the ordinary course. She was so ignorant about writers that she did not know whether such a thing was ever done, or could be done; but if he could tell her how the story was to come out he would be doing more for her than anything else that could be done for her on earth. She had read that sometimes authors began to print their serial stories before they had written them to the end, and he might not be sure of the end himself; but if he had finished this story of his, and could let her see the last pages in print, she would owe him the gratitude she could never express.

The letter was written in an educated hand, and there were no foibles of form or excesses of fashion in the stationery to mar the character of sincerity the simple wording conveyed. The postal address, with the date, was fully given, and the name signed at the end was evidently genuine.

Verrian himself had no question of the genuineness of the letter in any respect; his mother, after her first misgivings, which were perhaps sensations, thought as he did about it. She said the story dealt so profoundly with the deepest things that it was no wonder a person, standing like that girl between life and death, should wish to know how the author solved its problem. Then she read the letter carefully over again, and again Verrian read it, with an effect not different from that which its first perusal had made with him. His faith in his work was so great, so entire, that the notion of any other feeling about it was not admissible.

"Of course," he said, with a sigh of satisfaction, "I must show the letter to Armiger at once."

"Of course," his mother replied. "He is the editor, and you must not do anything without his approval."

The faith in the writer of the letter, which was primary with him, was secondary with her, but perhaps for that reason,she was all the more firmly grounded in it.

II.

There was nothing to cloud the editor's judgment, when Verrian came to him, except the fact that he was a poet as well as an editor. He read in a silence as great as the author's the letter which Verrian submitted. Then he remained pondering it for as long a space before he said, "That is very touching."

Verrian jumped to his question. "Do you mean that we ought to send her the proofs of the story?"

"No," the editor faltered, but even in this decision he did not deny the author his sympathy. "You've touched bottom in that story, Verrian. You may go higher, but you can never go deeper."

Verrian flushed a little. "Oh, thank you!"

"I'm not surprised the girl wants to know how you manage your problem−− such a girl, standing in the shadow of the other world, which is always eclipsing this, and seeing how you've caught its awful outline."

Verrian made a grateful murmur at the praise. "That is what my mother felt. Then you have no doubt of the good faith−−"

"No," the editor returned, with the same quantity, if not the same quality, of reluctance as before. "You see, it would be too daring."

"Then why not let her have the proofs?"

"The thing is so unprecedented−−"

"Our doing it needn't form a precedent."

"No."

"And if you've no doubt of its being a true case−−"

"We must prove that it is, or, rather, we must make her prove it. I quite feel with you about it. If I were to act upon my own impulse, my own convictions, I should send her the rest of the story and take the chances. But she may be an enterprising journalist in disguise it's astonishing what women will do when they take to newspaper work−−and we have no right to risk anything, for the magazine's sake, if not yours and mine. Will you leave this letter with me?"

"I expected to leave the whole affair in your hands. Do you mind telling me what you propose to do? Of course, it won't be anything−−abrupt−−"

"Oh no; and I don't mind telling you what has occurred to me. If this is a true case, as you say, and I've no question but it is, the writer will be on confidential terms with her pastor as well as her doctor and I propose asking her to get him to certify, in any sort of general terms, to her identity. I will treat the matter delicately−− Or, if you prefer to write to her yourself−−"

"Oh no, it's much better for you to do it; you can do it authoritatively."

"Yes, and if she isn't the real thing, but merely a woman journalist trying to work us for a 'story' in her Sunday edition, we shall hear no more from her."

"I don't see anything to object to in your plan," Verrian said, upon reflection. "She certainly can't complain of our being cautious."

"No, and she won't. I shall have to refer the matter to the house−−"

"Oh, will you?"

"Why, certainly! I couldn't take a step like that without the approval of the house."

"No," Verrian assented, and he made a note of the writer's address from the letter. Then, after a moment spent in looking hard at the letter, he gave it back to the editor and went abruptly away.

He had proof, the next morning, that the editor had acted promptly, at least so far as regarded the house. The house had approved his plan, if one could trust the romantic paragraph which Verrian found in his paper at breakfast, exploiting the fact concerned as one of the interesting evidences of the hold his serial had got with the magazine readers. He recognized in the paragraph the touch of the good fellow who prepared the weekly bulletins of the house, and offered the press literary intelligence in a form ready for immediate use. The case was fairly stated, but the privacy of the author's correspondent was perfectly guarded; it was not even made known that she was a woman. Yet Verrian felt, in reading the paragraph, a shock of guilty dismay, as if he had betrayed a confidence reposed in him, and he handed the paper across the table to his mother with rather a sick look.

After his return from the magazine office the day before, there had been a good deal of talk between them about that girl. Mrs. Verrian had agreed with him that no more interesting event could have happened to an author, but she had tried to keep him from taking it too personally, and from making himself mischievous illusions from it. She had since slept upon her anxieties, with the effect of finding them more vivid at waking, and she had been casting about for an opening to penetrate him with them, when fortune put this paragraph in her way.

"Isn't it disgusting?" he asked. "I don't see how Armiger could let them do it. I hope to heaven she'll never see it!"

His mother looked up from the paragraph and asked,

"Why?"

"What would she think of me?"

"I don't know. She might have expected something of the kind."

"How expect something of the kind? Am I one of the self−advertisers?"

"Well, she must have realized that she was doing rather a bold thing."

"Bold?"

"Venturesome," Mrs. Verrian compromised to the kindling anger in her son's eyes.

"I don't understand you, mother. I thought you agreed with me about the writer of that letter−−her sincerity, simplicity."

"Sincerity, yes. But simplicity−− Philip, a thoroughly single−minded girl never wrote that letter. You can't feel such a thing as I do. A man couldn't. You can paint the character of women, and you do it wonderfully−−but, after all, you can't know them as a woman does."

"You talk," he answered, a little sulkily, "as if you knew some harm of the girl."

"No, my son, I know nothing about her, except that she is not single− minded, and there is no harm in not being single−minded. A great many single−minded women are fools, and some double−minded women are good."

"Well, single−minded or double−minded, if she is what she says she is, what motive on earth could she have in writing to me except the motive she gives? You don't deny that she tells the truth about herself?"

"Don't I say that she is sincere? But a girl doesn't always know her own motives, or all of them. She may have written to you because she would like to begin a correspondence with an author. Or she may have done it out of the love of excitement. Or for the sake of distraction, to get away from herself and her gloomy forebodings."

"And should you blame her for that?"

"No, I shouldn't. I should pity her for it. But, all the same, I shouldn't want you to be taken in by her."

"You think, then, she doesn't care anything about the story?"

"I think, very probably, she cares a great deal about it. She is a serious person, intellectually at least, and it is a serious story. No wonder she would like to know, at first hand, something about the man who wrote it."

This flattered Verrian, but he would not allow its reasonableness. He took a gulp of coffee before saying, uncandidly, "I can't make out what you're driving at, mother. But, fortunately, there's no hurry about your meaning. The thing's in the only shape we could possibly give it, and I am satisfied to leave it in Armiger's hands. I'm certain he will deal wisely with it−and kindly."

"Yes, I'm sure he'll deal kindly. I should be very unhappy if he didn't. He could easily deal more wisely, though, than she has."

Verrian chose not to follow his mother in this. "All is," he said, with finality, "I hope she'll never see that loathsome paragraph."

"Oh, very likely she won't," his mother consoled him.

III.

Only four days after he had seen Armiger, Verrian received an envelope covering a brief note to himself from the editor, a copy of the letter he had written to Verrian's unknown correspondent, and her answer in the original. Verrian was alone when the postman brought him this envelope, and he could indulge a certain passion for method by which he read its contents in the order named; if his mother had been by, she would have made him read the girl's reply first of all. Armiger wrote:

"MY DEAR VERRIAN,−−I enclose two exhibits which will possess you of all the facts in the case of the young lady who feared she might die before she read the end of your story, but who, you will be glad to find, is likely to live through the year. As the story ends in our October number, she need not be supplied with advance sheets. I am sorry the house hurried out a paragraph concerning the matter, but it will not be

followed by another. Perhaps you will feel, as I do, that the incident is closed. I have not replied to the writer, and you need not return her letter. Yours ever,

"M. ARMIGER."

The editor's letter to the young lady read:

"DEAR MADAM,−−Mr. P. S. Verrian has handed me your letter of the 4th, and I need not tell you that it has interested us both.

"I am almost as much gratified as he by the testimony your request bears to the importance of his work, and if I could have acted upon my instant feeling I should have had no hesitation in granting it, though it is so very unusual as to be, in my experience as an editor, unprecedented. I am sure that you would not have made it so frankly if you had not been prepared to guard in return any confidence placed in you; but you will realize that as you are quite unknown to us, we should not be justified in taking a step so unusual as you propose without having some guarantee besides that which Mr. Verrian and I both feel from the character of your letter. Simply, then, for purposes of identification, as the phrase is, I must beg you to ask the pastor of your church, or, better still, your family physician, to write you a line saying that he knows you, as a sort of letter of introduction to me. Then I will send you the advance proofs of Mr. Verrian's story. You may like to address me personally in the care of the magazine, and not as the editor. "Yours very respectfully, "M. ARMIGER."

The editor's letter was dated the 6th of the month; the answer, dated the 8th, betrayed the anxious haste of the writer in replying, and it was not her fault if what she wrote came to Verrian when he was no longer able to do justice to her confession. Under the address given in her first letter she now began, in, a hand into which a kindlier eye might have read a pathetic perturbation:

"DEAR SIR,−−I have something awful to tell you. I might write pages without making you think better of me, and I will let you think the worst at once. I am not what I pretended to be. I wrote to Mr. Verrian saying what I did, and asking to see the rest of his story on the impulse of the moment. I had been reading it, for I think it is perfectly fascinating; and a friend of mine, another girl, and I got together trying to guess how he would end it, and we began to dare each other to write to him and ask. At first we did not dream of doing such a thing, but we went on, and just for the fun of it we drew lots to see which should write to him. The lot fell to me; but we composed that letter together, and we put in about my dying for a joke. We never intended to send it; but then one thing led to another, and I signed it with my real name and we sent it. We did not really expect to hear anything from it, for we supposed he must get lots of letters about his story and never paid any attention to them. We did not realize what we had done till I got your letter yesterday. Then we saw it all, and ever since we have been trying to think what to do, and I do not believe either of us has slept a moment. We have come to the conclusion that there was only one thing we could do, and that was to tell you just exactly how it happened and take the consequences. But there is no reason why more than one person should be brought into it, and so I will not let my friend sign this letter with me, but I will put my own name alone to it. You may not think it is my real name, but it is; you can find out by writing to the postmaster here. I do not know whether you will publish it as a fraud for the warning of others, but I shall not blame you if you do. I deserve anything.

Yours truly,

"JERUSHA PEREGRINE BROWN."

If Verrian had been an older man life might have supplied him with the means of judging the writer of this letter. But his experience as an author had not been very great, and such as it was it had hardened and sharpened him.

There was nothing wild or whirling in his mood, but in the deadly hurt which had been inflicted upon his vanity he coldly and carefully studied what deadlier hurt he might inflict again. He was of the crueller intent because he had not known how much of personal vanity there was in the seriousness with which he took himself and his work. He had supposed that he was respecting his ethics and aesthetics, his ideal of conduct and of art, but now it was brought home to him that he was swollen with the conceit of his own performance, and that, however well others thought of it, his own thought of it far outran their will to honor it. He wished to revenge himself for this consciousness as well as the offence offered him; of the two the consciousness was the more disagreeable.

His mother, dressed for the street, came in where he sat quiet at his desk, with the editor's letters and the girl's before him, and he mutely referred them to her with a hand lifted over his shoulder. She read them, and then she said, "This is hard to bear, Philip. I wish I could bear it for you, or at least with you; but I'm late for my engagement with Mrs. Alfred, as it is−−No, I will telephone her I'm detained and we'll talk it over−−"

"No, no! Not on any account! I'd rather think it out for myself. You couldn't help me. After all, it hasn't done me any harm−−"

"And you've had a great escape! And I won't say a word more now, but I'll be back soon, and then we−−Oh, I'm so sorry I'm going."

Verrian gave a laugh. "You couldn't do anything if you stayed, mother. Do go!"

"Well−−" She looked at him, smoothing her muff with her hand a moment, and then she dropped a fond kiss on his cheek and obeyed him.

IV

Verrian still sat at his desk, thinking, with his burning face in his hands. It was covered with shame for what had happened to him, but his humiliation had no quality of pity in it. He must write to that girl, and write at once, and his sole hesitation was as to the form he should give his reply. He could not address her as Dear Miss Brown or as Dear Madam. Even Madam was not sharp and forbidding enough; besides, Madam, alone or with the senseless prefix, was archaic, and Verrian wished to be very modern with this most offensive instance of the latest girl. He decided upon dealing with her in the third person, and trusting to his literary skill to keep the form from clumsiness.

He tried it in that form, and it was simply disgusting, the attitude stiff and swelling, and the diction affected and unnatural. With a quick reversion to the impossible first type, he recast his letter in what was now the only possible shape.

> "MY DEAR MISS BROWN,−− The editor of the American Miscellany has sent me a copy of his recent letter to you and your own reply, and has remanded to me an affair which resulted from my going to him with your request to see the close of my story now publishing in his magazine.
>
> "After giving the matter my best thought, I have concluded that it will be well to enclose all the exhibits to you, and I now do this in the hope that a serious study of them will enable you to share my surprise at the moral and social conditions in which the business could originate. I willingly leave with you the question which is the more trustworthy, your letter to me or your letter to him, or which the more truly represents the interesting diversity of your nature. I confess that the first moved me more than the second, and I do not see why I should not tell you that as soon as I had

your request I went with it to Mr. Armiger and did what I could to prompt his compliance with it. In putting these papers out of my hands, I ought to acknowledge that they have formed a temptation to make literary use of the affair which I shall now be the better fitted to resist. You will, of course, be amused by the ease with which you could abuse my reliance on your good faith, and I am sure you will not allow any shame for your trick to qualify your pleasure in its success.

"It will not be necessary for you to acknowledge this letter and its enclosures. I will register the package, so that it will not fail to reach you, and I will return any answer of yours unopened, or, if not recognizably addressed, then unread.

"Yours sincerely,

"P. S. VERRIAN."

He read and read again these lines, with only the sense of their insufficiency in doing the effect of the bitterness in his heart. If the letter was insulting, it was by no means as insulting as he would have liked to make it. Whether it would be wounding enough was something that depended upon the person whom he wished to wound. All that was proud and vain and cruel in him surged up at the thought of the trick that had been played upon him, and all that was sweet and kind and gentle in him, when he believed the trick was a genuine appeal, turned to their counter qualities. Yet, feeble and inadequate as his letter was, he knew that he could not do more or worse by trying, and he so much feared that by waiting he might do less and better that he hurried it into the post at once. If his mother had been at hand he would have shown it her, though he might not have been ruled by her judgment of it. He was glad that she was not with him, for either she would have had her opinion of what would be more telling, or she would have insisted upon his delaying any sort of reply, and he could not endure the thought of difference or delay.

He asked himself whether he should let her see the rough first draft of his letter or not, and he decided that he would not. But when she came into his study on her return he showed it her.

She read it in silence, and then she seemed to temporize in asking, "Where are her two letters?"

"I've sent them back with the answer."

His mother let the paper drop from her hands. "Philip! You haven't sent this!"

"Yes, I have. It wasn't what I wanted to make it, but I wished to get the detestable experience out of my mind, and it was the best I could do at the moment. Don't you like it?"

"Oh−−" She seemed beginning to say something, but without saying anything she took the fallen leaf up and read it again.

"Well!" he demanded, with impatience.

"Oh, you may have been right. I hope you've not been wrong."

"Mother!"

"She deserved the severest things you could say; and yet−−"

"Well?"

"Perhaps she was punished enough already."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't like your being−vindictive."

"Vindictive?"

"Being so terribly just, then." She added, at his blank stare, "This is killing, Philip."

He gave a bitter laugh. "I don't think it will kill her. She isn't that kind."

"She's a girl," his mother said, with a kind of sad absence.

"But not a single−minded girl, you warned me. I wish I could have taken your warning. It would have saved me from playing the fool before myself and giving myself away to Armiger, and letting him give himself away. I don't think Miss Brown will suffer much before she dies. She will 'get together,' as she calls it, with that other girl and have 'a real good time' over it. You know the village type and the village conditions, where the vulgar ignorance of any larger world is so thick you could cut it with a knife. Don't be troubled by my vindictiveness or my justice, mother! I begin to think I have done justice and not fallen short of it, as I was afraid."

Mrs. Verrian sighed, and again she gave his letter back to her son. "Perhaps you are right, Philip. She is probably so tough as not to feel it very painfully."

"She's not so tough but she'll be very glad to get out of it so lightly. She has had a useful scare, and I've done her a favor in making the scare a sharp one. I suppose," Verrian mused, "that she thinks I've kept copies of her letters."

"Yes. Why didn't you?" his mother asked.

Verrian laughed, only a little less bitterly than before. "I shall begin to believe you're all alike, mother.

I didn't keep copies of her letters because I wanted to get her and her letters out of my mind, finally and forever. Besides, I didn't choose. to emulate her duplicity by any sort of dissimulation.

"I see what you mean," his mother said. "And, of course, you have taken the only honorable way."

Then they were both silent for a time, thinking their several thoughts.

Verrian broke the silence to say, "I wish I knew what sort of 'other girl' it was that she 'got together with.'"

"Why?"

"Because she wrote a more cultivated letter than this magnanimous creature who takes all the blame to herself."

"Then you don't believe they're both the same?"

"They are both the same in stationery and chirography, but not in literature."

"I hope you won't get to thinking about her, then," his mother entreated, intelligibly but not definitely.

"Not seriously," Verrian reassured her. "I've had my medicine."

V.

Continuity is so much the lesson of experience that in the course of a life by no means long it becomes the instinctive expectation. The event that has happened will happen again; it will prolong itself in a series of recurrences by which each one's episode shares in the unending history of all. The sense of this is so pervasive that humanity refuses to accept death itself as final. In the agonized affections, the shattered hopes, of those who remain, the severed life keeps on unbrokenly, and when time and reason prevail, at least as to the life here, the defeated faith appeals for fulfilment to another world, and the belief of immortality holds against the myriad years in which none of the numberless dead have made an indisputable sign in witness of it. The lost limb still reports its sensations to the brain; the fixed habit mechanically attempts its repetition when the conditions render it impossible.

Verrian was aware how deeply and absorbingly he had brooded upon the incident which he had done his utmost to close, when he found himself expecting an answer of some sort from his unknown correspondent. He perceived, then, without owning the fact, that he had really hoped for some protest, some excuse, some extenuation, which in the end would suffer him to be more merciful. Though he had wished to crush her into silence, and to forbid her all hope of his forgiveness, he had, in a manner, not meant to do it. He had kept a secret place in his soul where the sinner against him could find refuge from his justice, and when this sanctuary remained unattempted he found himself with a regret that he had barred the way to it so effectually. The regret was so vague, so formless, however, that he could tacitly deny it to himself at all times, and explicitly deny it to his mother at such times as her touch taught him that it was tangible.

One day, after ten or twelve days had gone by, she asked him, "You haven't heard anything more from that girl?"

"What girl?" he returned, as if he did not know; and he frowned. "You mean the girl that wrote me about my story?"

He continued to frown rather more darkly. "I don't see how you could expect me to hear from her, after what I wrote. But, to be categorical, I haven't, mother."

"Oh, of course not. Did you think she would be so easily silenced?"

"I did what I could to crush her into silence."

"Yes, and you did quite right; I am more and more convinced of that. But such a very tough young person might have refused to stay crushed. She might very naturally have got herself into shape again and smoothed out the creases, at least so far to try some further defence."

"It seems that she hasn't," Verrian said, still darkly, but not so frowningly.

"I should have fancied," his mother suggested, "that if she had wanted to open a correspondence with you−−if that was her original object−−she would not have let it drop so easily."

"Has she let it drop easily? I thought I had left her no possible chance of resuming it."

"That is true," his mother said, and for the time she said no more about the matter.

Not long after this he came home from the magazine office and reported to her from Armiger that the story was catching on more and more with the best class of readers. The editor had shown Verrian some references to it in newspapers of good standing and several letters about it.

"I thought you might like to look at the letters," Verrian said, and he took some letters from his pocket and handed them to her across the lunch−table. She did not immediately look at them, because he went on to add something that they both felt to be more important. "Armiger says there has been some increase of the sales, which I can attribute to my story if I have the cheek."

"That is good."

"And the house wants to publish the book. They think, down there, that it will have a very pretty success−−not be a big seller, of course, but something comfortable."

Mrs. Verrian's eyes were suffused with pride and fondness. "And you can always think, Philip, that this has come to you without the least lowering of your standard, without forsaking your ideal for a moment."

"That is certainly a satisfaction."

She kept her proud and tender gaze upon him. "No one will ever know as I do how faithful you have been to your art. Did any of the newspapers recognize that−−or surmise it, or suspect it?"

"No, that isn't the turn they take. They speak of the strong love interest involved in the problem. And the abundance of incident. I looked out to keep something happening, you know. I'm sorry I didn't ask Armiger to let me bring the notices home to you. I'm not sure that I did wisely not to subscribe to that press−clippings bureau."

His mother smiled. "You mustn't let prosperity corrupt you, Philip. Wouldn't seeing what the press is saying of it distract you from the real aim you had in your story?"

"We're all weak, of course. It might, if the story were not finished; but as it is, I think I could be proof against the stupidest praise."

"Well, for my part, I'm glad you didn't subscribe to the clippings bureau. It would have been a disturbing element." She now looked down at the letters as if she were going to take them up, and he followed the direction of her eyes. As if reminded of the fact by this, he said:

"Armiger asked me if I had ever heard anything more from that girl."

"Has he?" his mother eagerly asked, transferring her glance from the letters to her son's face.

"Not a word. I think I silenced her thoroughly."

"Yes," his mother said. "There could have been no good object in prolonging the affair and letting her confirm herself in the notion that she was of sufficient importance either to you or to him for you to continue the correspondence with her. She couldn't learn too distinctly that she had done−−a very wrong thing in trying to play such a trick on you."

"That was the way I looked at it," Verrian said, but he drew a light sigh, rather wearily.

"I hope," his mother said, with a recurrent glance at the letters, "that there is nothing of that silly kind among these."

"No, these are blameless enough, unless they are to be blamed for being too flattering. That girl seems to be sole of her kind, unless the girl that she 'got together with' was really like her."

"I don't believe there was any other girl. I never thought there was more than one."

"There seemed to be two styles and two grades of culture, such as they were."

"Oh, she could easily imitate two manners. She must have been a clever girl," Mrs. Verrian said, with that admiration for any sort of cleverness in her sex which even very good women cannot help feeling.

"Well, perhaps she was punished enough for both the characters she assumed," Verrian said, with a smile that was not gay.

"Don't think about her!" his mother returned, with a perception of his mood. "I'm only thankful that she's out of our lives in every sort of way."

VI.

Verrian said nothing, but he reflected with a sort of gloomy amusement how impossible it was for any woman, even a woman so wide−minded and high−principled as his mother, to escape the personal view of all things and all persons which women take. He tacitly noted the fact, as the novelist notes whatever happens or appears to him, but he let the occasion drop out of his mind as soon as he could after it had dropped out of his talk.

The night when the last number of his story came to them in the magazine, and was already announced as a book, he sat up with his mother celebrating, as he said, and exulting in the future as well as the past. They had a little supper, which she cooked for him in a chafing−dish, in the dining−room of the tiny apartment where they lived together, and she made some coffee afterwards, to carry off the effect of the Newburg lobster. Perhaps because there was nothing to carry off the effect of the coffee, he heard her, through the partition of their rooms, stirring restlessly after he had gone to bed, and a little later she came to his door, which she set ajar, to ask, "Are you awake, Philip?"

"You seem to be, mother," he answered, with an amusement at her question which seemed not to have imparted itself to her when she came in and stood beside his bed in her dressing−gown.

"You don't think we have judged her too harshly, Philip?"

"Do you, mother?"

"No, I think we couldn't be too severe in a thing like that. She probably thought you were like some of the other story−writers; she couldn't feel differences, shades. She pretended to be taken with the circumstances of your work, but she had to do that if she wanted to fool you. Well, she has got her come−uppings, as she would probably say."

Verrian replied, thoughtfully, "She didn't strike me as a country person −−at least, in her first letter."

"Then you still think she didn't write both?"

"If she did, she was trying her hand in a personality she had invented."

"Girls are very strange," his mother sighed. "They like excitement, adventure. It's very dull in those little places. I shouldn't wish you to think any harm of the poor thing."

"Poor thing? Why this magnanimous compassion, mother?"

"Oh, nothing. But I know how I was myself when I was a girl. I used almost to die of hunger for something to happen. Can you remember just what you said in your letter?"

Verrian laughed. "NO, I can't. But I don't believe I said half enough. You're nervous, mother."

"Yes, I am. But don't you get to worrying. I merely got to thinking how I should hate to have anybody's unhappiness mixed up with this happiness of ours. I do so want your pleasure in your success to be pure, not tainted with the pain of any human creature."

Verrian answered with light cynicism: "It will be tainted with the pain of the fellows who don't like me, or who haven't succeeded, and they'll take care to let me share their pain if ever they can. But if you mean that merry maiden up country, she's probably thinking, if she thinks about it at all, that she's the luckiest girl in the United States to have got out of an awful scrape so easily. At the worst, I only had fun with her in my letter. Probably she sees that she has nothing to grieve for but her own break."

"No, and you did just as you should have done; and I am glad you don't feel bitterly about it. You don't, do you?"

"Not the least."

His mother stooped over and kissed him where he lay smiling. "Well, that's good. After all, it's you I cared for. Now I can say good− night." But she lingered to tuck him in a little, from the persistence of the mother habit. "I wish you may never do anything that you will be sorry for."

"Well, I won't−−if it's a good action."

They laughed together, and she left the room, still looking back to see if there was anything more she could do for him, while he lay smiling, intelligently for what she was thinking, and patiently for what she was doing.

VII.

Even in the time which was then coming and which now is, when successful authors are almost as many as millionaires, Verrian's book brought him a pretty celebrity; and this celebrity was in a way specific. It related to the quality of his work, which was quietly artistic and psychological, whatever liveliness of incident it uttered on the surface. He belonged to the good school which is of no fashion and of every time, far both from actuality and unreality; and his recognition came from people whose recognition was worth having. With this came the wider notice which was not worth having, like the notice of Mrs. Westangle, since so well known to society reporters as a society woman, which could not be called recognition of him, because it did not involve any knowledge of his book, not even its title. She did not read any sort of books, and she assimilated him by a sort of atmospheric sense. She was sure of nothing but the attention paid him in a certain very goodish house, by people whom she heard talking in unintelligible but unmistakable praise, when she said, casually, with a liquid glitter of her sweet, small eyes, "I wish you would come down to my place, Mr. Verrian. I'm asking a few young people for Christmas week. Will you?"

"Why, thank you−−thank you very much," Verrian said, waiting to hear more in explanation of the hospitality launched at him. He had never seen Mrs. Westangle till then, or heard of her, and he had not the least notion where she lived. But she seemed to have social authority, though Verrian, in looking round at his hostess and her daughter, who stood near, letting people take leave, learned nothing from their common smile. Mrs. Westangle had glided close to him, in the way she had of getting very near without apparently having advanced by steps, and she stood gleaming and twittering up at him.

"I shall send you a little note; I won't let you forget," she said. Then she suddenly shook hands with the ladies of the house and was flashingly gone.

Verrian thought he might ask the daughter of the house, "And if I don't forget, am I engaged to spend Christmas week with her?"

The girl laughed. "If she doesn't forget, you are. But you'll have a good time. She'll know how to manage that." Other guests kept coming up to take leave, and Verrian, who did not want to go just yet, was retired to the background, where the girl's voice, thrown over her shoulder at him, reached him in the words, as gay as if they were the best of the joke, "It's on the Sound."

The inference was that Mrs. Westangle's place was on the Sound; and that was all Verrian knew about it till he got her little note. Mrs. Westangle knew how to write in a formless hand, but she did not know how to spell, and she had thought it best to have a secretary who could write well and spell correctly. Though, as far as literacy was concerned, she was such an almost incomparably ignorant woman, she had all the knowledge the best society wants, or, if she found herself out of any, she went and bought some; she was able to buy almost anything.

Verrian thanked the secretary for remembering him, in the belief that he was directly thanking Mrs. Westangle, whose widespread consciousness his happiness in accepting did not immediately reach; and in the very large house party, which he duly joined under her roof, he was aware of losing distinctiveness almost to the point of losing identity. This did not quite happen on the way to Belford, for, when he went to take his seat in the drawing−room car, a girl in the chair fronting him put out her hand with the laugh of Miss Macroyd.

"She did remember you!" she cried out. "How delightful! I don't see how she ever got onto you"−−she made the slang her own−−"in the first place, and she must have worked hard to be sure of you since."

Verrian hung up his coat and put his suit−case behind his chair, the porter having put it where he could not wheel himself vis−a−vis with the girl. "She took all the time there was," he answered. "I got my invitation only the day before yesterday, and if I had been in more demand, or had a worse conscience−−"

"Oh, do say worse conscience! It's so much more interesting," the girl broke in.

"−−I shouldn't have the pleasure of going to Seasands with you now," he concluded, and she gave her laugh. "Do I understand that simply my growing fame wouldn't have prevailed with her?"

Anything seemed to make Miss Macroyd laugh. "She couldn't have cared about that, and she wouldn't have known. You may be sure that it was a social question with her after the personal question was settled. She must have liked your looks!" Again Miss Macroyd laughed.

"On that side I'm invulnerable. It's only a literary vanity to be soothed or to be wounded that I have," Verrian said.

"Oh, there wouldn't be anything personal in her liking your looks. It would be merely deciding that personally you would do, "Miss Macroyd laughed, as always, and Verrian put on a mock seriousness in asking:

"Then I needn't be serious if there should happen to be anything so Westangular as a Mr. Westangle?"

"Not the least in the world."

"But there is something?"

"Oh, I believe so. But not probably at Seasands."

"Is that her house?"

"Yes. Every other name had been used, and she couldn't say Soundsands."

"Then where would the Mr. Westangular part more probably be found?"

"Oh, in Montana or Mesopotamia, or any of those places. Don't you know about him? How ignorant literary people can be! Why, he was the Amalgamated Clothespin. You haven't heard of that?"

She went on to tell him, with gay digressions, about the invention which enabled Westangle to buy up the other clothes−pins and merge them in his own−−to become a commercial octopus, clutching the throats of other clothespin inventors in the tentacles of the Westangle pin. "But he isn't in clothespins now. He's in mines, and banks, and steamboats, and railroads, and I don't know what all; and Mrs. Westangle, the second of her name, never was in clothespins."

Miss Macroyd laughed all through her talk, and she was in a final burst of laughing when the train slowed into Stamford. There a girl came into the car trailing her skirts with a sort of vivid debility and overturning some minor pieces of hand−baggage which her draperies swept out of their shelter beside the chairs. She had to take one of the seats which back against the wall of the state−room, where she must face the whole length of the car. She sat weakly fallen back in the chair and motionless, as if almost unconscious; but after the train had begun to stir she started up, and with a quick flinging of her veil aside turned to look out of the window. In the flying instant Verrian saw a colorless face with pinched and sunken eyes under a worn−looking forehead, and a withered mouth whose lips parted feebly.

On her part, Miss Macroyd had doubtless already noted that the girl was, with no show of expensiveness, authoritatively well gowned and personally hatted. She stared at her, and said, "What a very hunted and escaping effect."

"She does look rather−fugitive," Verrian agreed, staring too.

"One might almost fancy−−an asylum."

"Yes, or a hospital."

They continued both to stare at her, helpless for what ever different reasons to take their eyes away, and they were still interested in her when they heard her asking the conductor, "Must I change and take another train before we get to Belford? My friends thought−−"

"No, this train stops at Southfield," the conductor answered, absently biting several holes into her drawing−room ticket.

"Can she be one of us?" Miss Macroyd demanded, in a dramatic whisper.

"She might be anything," Verrian returned, trying instantly, with a whir of his inventive machinery, to phrase her. He made a sort of luxurious failure of it, and rested content with her face, which showed itself now in profile and now fronted him in full, and now was restless and now subsided in a look of delicate exhaustion. He would have said, if he would have said anything absolute, that she was a person who had something on her mind; at instants she had that hunted air, passing at other instants into that air of escape. He discussed these appearances with Miss Macroyd, but found her too frankly disputatious; and she laughed too much and too loud.

VIII.

At Southfield, where they all descended, Miss Macroyd promptly possessed herself of a groom, who came forward tentatively, touching his hat. "Miss Macroyd ?" she suggested.

"Yes, miss," the man said, and led the way round the station to the victoria which, when Miss Macroyd's maid had mounted to the place beside her, had no room; for any one else.

Verrian accounted for her activity upon the theory of her quite justifiable wish not to arrive at Seasands with a young man whom she might then have the effect of having voluntarily come all the way with; and after one or two circuits of the station it was apparent to him that he was not to have been sent for from Mrs. Westangle's, but to have been left to the chances of the local drivers and their vehicles. These were reduced to a single carryall and a frowsy horse whose rough winter coat recalled the aspect of his species in the period following the glacial epoch. The mud, as of a world−thaw, encrusted the wheels and curtains of the carryall.

Verrian seized upon it and then went into the waiting−room, where he had left his suit−case. He found the stranger there in parley with the young woman in the ticket−office about a conveyance to Mrs. Westangle's. It proved that he had secured not only the only thing of the sort, but the only present hope of any other, and in the hard case he could not hesitate with distress so interesting. It would have been brutal to drive off and leave that girl there, and it would have been a vulgar flourish to put the entire vehicle at her service. Besides, and perhaps above all, Verrian had no idea of depriving himself of such a chance as heaven seemed to offer him.

He advanced with the delicacy of the highest−bred hero he could imagine, and said, "I am going to Mrs. Westangle's, and I'm afraid I've got the only conveyance−−such as it is. If you would let me offer you half of it? Mr. Verrian," he added, at the light of acceptance instantly kindling in her face, which flushed thinly, as with an afterglow of invalidism.

"Why, thank you; I'm afraid I must, Mr. Merriam," and Verrian was aware of being vexed at her failure to catch his name; the name of Verrian ought to have been unmistakable. "The young lady in the office says there won't be another, and I'm expected promptly." She added, with a little tremor of the lip, "I don't understand why Mrs. Westangle−−" But then she stopped.

Verrian interpreted for her: "The sea−horses must have given out at Seasands. Or probably there's some mistake," and he reflected bitterly upon the selfishness of Miss Macroyd in grabbing that victoria for herself and her maid, not considering that she could not know, and has no business to ask, whether this girl was going to Mrs. Westangle's, too. "Have you a check?" he asked. "I think our driver could find room for something besides my valise. Or I could have it come−−"

"Not at all," the girl said. "I sent my trunk ahead by express."

A frowsy man, to match the frowsy horse, looked in impatiently. "Any other baggage?"

"No," Verrian answered, and he led the way out after the vanishing driver. "Our chariot is back here in hiding, Miss−−"

"Shirley," she said, and trailed before him through the door he opened.

He felt that he did not do it as a man of the world would have done it, and in putting her into the ramshackle carryall he knew that he had not the grace of the sort of man who does nothing else. But Miss Shirley seemed to have grace enough, of a feeble and broken sort, for both, and he resolved to supply his own lack with sincerity. He

therefore set his jaw firmly and made its upper angles jut sharply through his clean−shaven cheeks. It was well that Miss Shirley had some beauty to spare, too, for Verrian had scarcely enough for himself. Such distinction as he had was from a sort of intellectual tenseness which showed rather in the gaunt forms of his face than in the gray eyes, heavily lashed above and below, and looking serious but dull with their rank, black brows. He was chewing a cud of bitterness in the accusal he made himself of having forced Miss Shirley to give her name; but with that interesting personality at his side, under the same tattered and ill−scented Japanese goat−skin, he could not refuse to be glad, with all his self−blame.

"I'm afraid it's rather a long drive−for you, Miss Shirley," he ventured, with a glance at her face, which looked very little under her hat. "The driver says it's five miles round through the marshes."

"Oh, I shall not mind," she said, courageously, if not cheerfully, and he did not feel authorized further to recognize the fact that she was an invalid, or at best a convalescent.

"These wintry tree−forms are fine, though," he found himself obliged to conclude his apology, rather irrelevantly, as the wheels of the rattling, and tilting carry all crunched the surface of the road in the succession of jerks responding to the alternate walk and gallop of the horse.

"Yes, they are," Miss Shirley answered, looking around with a certain surprise, as if seeing them now for the first time. "So much variety of color; and that burnished look that some of them have." The trees, far and near, were giving their tones and lustres in the low December sun.

"Yes," he said, "it's decidedly more refined than the autumnal coloring we brag of."

"It is," she approved, as with novel conviction. "The landscape is really beautiful. So nice and flat," she added.

He took her intention, and he said, as he craned his neck out of the carryall to include the nearer roadside stretches, with their low bushes lifting into remoter trees, "It's restful in a way that neither the mountains nor the sea, quite manage."

"Oh yes," she sighed, with a kind of weariness which explained itself in what she added: "It's the kind of thing you'd like to have keep on and on." She seemed to say that more to herself than to him, and his eyes questioned her. She smiled slightly in explaining: "I suppose I find it all the more beautiful because this is my first real look into the world after six months indoors."

"Oh!" he said, and there was no doubt a prompting in his tone.

She smiled still. "Sick people are terribly, egotistical, and I suppose it's my conceit of having been the centre of the universe so lately that makes me mention it." And here she laughed a little at herself, showing a charming little peculiarity in the catch of her upper lip on her teeth. "But this is divine−−this air and this sight." She put her head out of her side of the carryall, and drank them in with her lungs and eyes.

When she leaned back again on the seat she said, "I can't get enough of it."

"But isn't this old rattletrap rather too rough for you?" he asked.

"Oh no," she said, visiting him with a furtive turn of her eyes. "It's quite ideally what invalids in easy circumstances are advised to take carriage exercise."

"Yes, it's certainly carriage exercise," Verrian admitted in the same spirit, if it was a drolling spirit. He could not help being amused by the situation in which they had been brought together, through the vigorous promptitude of

Miss Macroyd in making the victoria her own, and the easy indifference of Mrs. Westangle as to how they should get to her house. If he had been alone he might have felt the indifference as a slight, but as it was he felt it rather a favor. If Miss Shirley was feeling it a slight, she was too secret or too sweet to let it be known, and he thought that was nice of her. Still, he believed he might recognize the fact without deepening a possible hurt of hers, and he added, with no apparent relevance, "If Mrs. Westangle was not looking for us on this train, she will find that it is the unexpected which happens."

"We are certainly going to happen," the girl said, with an acceptance of the plural which deepened the intimacy of the situation, and which was not displeasing to Verrian when she added, "If our friend's vehicle holds out." Then she turned her face full upon him, with what affected him as austere resolution, in continuing, "But I can't let you suppose that you're conveying a society person, or something of that sort, to Mrs. Westangle's." His own face expressed his mystification, and she concluded, "I'm simply going there to begin my work."

He smiled provisionally in temporizing with the riddle. "You women are wonderful, nowadays, for the work you do."

"Oh, but," she protested, nervously, anxiously, "it isn't good work that I'm going to do−−I understand what you mean−−it's work for a living. I've no business to be arriving with an invited guest, but it seemed to be a question of arriving or not at the time when I was due."

IX.

Verrian stared at her now from a visage that was an entire blank, though behind it conjecture was busy, and he was asking himself whether his companion was some new kind of hair−dresser, or uncommonly cultivated manicure, or a nursery governess obeying a hurry call to take a place in Mrs. Westangle's household, or some sort of amateur housekeeper arriving to supplant a professional. But he said nothing.

Miss Shirley said, with a distress which was genuine, though he perceived a trace of amusement in it, too, "I see that I will have to go on."

"Oh, do!" he made out to utter.

"I am going to Mrs. Westangle's as a sort of mistress of the revels. The business is so new that it hasn't got its name yet, but if I fail it won't need any. I invented it on a hint I got from a girl who undertakes the floral decorations for parties. I didn't see why some one shouldn't furnish suggestions for amusements, as well as flowers. I was always rather lucky at that in my own fam−−at my father's−−" She pulled herself sharply up, as if danger lay that way. "I got an introduction to Mrs. Westangle, and she's to let me try. I am going to her simply as part of the catering, and I'm not to have any recognition in the hospitalities. So it wasn't necessary for her to send for me at the station, except as a means of having me on the ground in good season. I have to thank you for that, and−−I thank you." She ended in a sigh.

"It's very interesting," Verrian said, and he hoped he was not saying it in any ignoble way.

He was very presently to learn. Round a turn of the road there came a lively clacking of horses' shoes on the hard track, with the muted rumble of rubber−tired wheels, and Mrs. Westangle's victoria dashed into view. The coachman had made a signal to Verrian's driver, and the vehicles stopped side by side. The footman instantly came to the door of the carryall, touching his hat to Verrian.

"Going to Mrs. Westangle's, sir?"

"Yes."

"Mrs. Westangle's carriage. Going to the station for you, sir."

"Miss Shirley," Verrian said, " will you change?"

"Oh no," she answered, quickly, "it's better for me to go on as I am. But the carriage was sent for you. You must−−"

Verrian interrupted to ask the footman, "How far is it yet to Mrs. Westangle's?"

"About a mile, sir."

"I think I won't change for such a short distance. I'll keep on as I am," Verrian said, and he let the goatskin, which he had half lifted to free Miss Shirley for dismounting, fall back again. "Go ahead, driver."

She had been making several gasping efforts at speech, accompanied with entreating and protesting glances at Verrian in the course of his brief colloquy with the footman. Now, as the carryall lurched forward again, and the victoria wheeled and passed them on its way back, she caught her handkerchief to her face, and to Verrian's dismay sobbed into it. He let her cry, as he must, in the distressful silence which he could not be the first to break. Besides, he did not know how she was taking it all till she suddenly with threw her handkerchief and pulled down her veil. Then she spoke three heart−broken words, "How could you!" and he divined that he must have done wrong.

"What ought I to have done?" he asked, with sullen humility.

"You ought to have taken the victoria."

"How could I?"

"You ought to have done it."

"I think you ought to have done it yourself, Miss Shirley," Verrian said, feeling like the worm that turns. He added, less resentfully, "We ought both to have taken it."

"No, Mrs. Westangle might have felt, very properly, that it was presumptuous in me, whether I came alone in it or with you. Now we shall arrive together in this thing, and she will be mortified for you and vexed with me. She will blame me for it, and she will be right, for it would have been very well for me to drive up in a shabby station carryall; but an invited guest−−"

" No, indeed, she shall not blame you, Miss Shirley. I will make a point of taking the whole responsibility. I will tell her−−"

"Mr. Merriam!" she cried, in anguish. "Will you please do nothing of the kind? Do you want to make bad worse? Leave the explaining altogether to me, please. Will you promise that?"

"I will promise that−−or anything−−if you insist," Verrian sulked.

She instantly relented a little. "You mustn't think me unreasonable. But I was determined to carry my undertaking through on business principles, and you have spoiled my chance−−I know you meant it kindly or, if not spoiled, made it more difficult. Don't think me ungrateful. Mr. Merriam−−"

"My name isn't Merriam," he resented, at last, a misnomer which had annoyed him from the first.

"Oh, I am so glad! Don't tell me what it is!" she said, giving a laugh which had to go on a little before he recognized the hysterical quality in it. When she could check it she explained: "Now we are not even acquainted, and I can thank a stranger for the kindness you have shown me. I am truly grateful. Will you do me another favor?"

"Yes," Verrian assented; but he thought he had a right to ask, as though he had not promised, "What is it?"

"Not to speak of me to Mrs. Westangle unless she speaks of me first."

"That's simple. I don't know that I should have any right to speak of you."

"Oh yes, you would. She will expect you, perhaps, to laugh about the little adventure, and I would rather she began the laughing you have been so good."

"All right. But wouldn't my silence make it rather more awkward?"

"I will take care of the awkwardness, thank you. And you promise?"

"Yes, I promise."

"That is very good of you." She put her hand impulsively across the goat−skin, and gave his, with which he took it in some surprise, a quick clasp. Then they were both silent, and they got out of the carryall under Mrs. Westangle's porte−cochere without having exchanged another word. Miss Shirley did not bow to him or look at him in parting.

X.

Verrian kept seeing before his inner eyes the thin face of the girl, dimmed rather than lighted with her sick yes. When she should be stronger, there might be a pale flush in it, like sunset on snow, but Verrian had to imagine that. He did not find it difficult to imagine many things about the girl, whom, in another mood, a more judicial mood, he might have accused of provoking him to imagine them. As it was, he could not help noting to that second self which we all have about us, that her confidences, such as they were, had perhaps been too voluntary; certainly they had not been quite obligatory, and they could not be quite accounted for, except upon the theory of nerves not yet perfectly under her control. To be sure, girls said all sorts of things to one, ignorantly and innocently; but she did not seem the kind of girl who, in different circumstances, would have said anything that she did not choose or that she did not mean to say. She had been surprisingly frank, and yet, at heart, Verrian would have thought she was a very reticent person or a secret person−−that is, mentally frank and sentimentally secret; possibly she was like most women in that. What he was sure of was that the visual impression of her which he had received must have been very vivid to last so long in his consciousness; all through his preparations for going down to afternoon tea her face remained subjectively before him, and when he went down and found himself part of a laughing and chattering company in the library he still found it, in his inner sense, here, there, and yonder.

He was aware of suffering a little disappointment in Mrs. Westangle's entire failure to mention Miss Shirley, though he was aware that his disappointment was altogether unreasonable, and he more reasonably decided that if she knew anything of his arrival, or the form of it, she had too much of the making of a grande dame to be recognizant of it. He did not know from her whether she had meant to send for him at the station or not, or whether she had sent her carriage back for him when he did not arrive in it at first. Nothing was left in her manner

of such slight specialization as she had thrown into it when, at the Macroyds', she asked him down to her house party; she seemed, if there were any difference, to have acquired an additional ignorance of who and what he was, though she twittered and flittered up close to his elbow, after his impersonal welcome, and asked him if she might introduce him to the young lady who was pouring tea for her, and who, after the brief drama necessary for possessing him of a cup of it, appeared to have no more use for him than Mrs. Westangle herself had. There were more young men than young women in the room, but he imagined the usual superabundance of girlhood temporarily absent for repair of the fatigues of the journey. Every girl in the room had at least one man talking to her, and the girl who was pouring tea had one on each side of her and was trying to fix them both with an eye lifted towards each, while she struggled to keep her united gaze watchfully upon the tea−urn and those who came up with cups to be filled or refilled.

Verrian thought his fellow−guests were all amiable enough looking, though he made his reflection that they did not look, any of them, as if they would set the Sound on fire; and again he missed the companion of his arrival.

After he had got his cup of tea, he stood sipping it with a homeless air which he tried to conceal, and cast a furtive eye round the room till it rested upon the laughing face of Miss Macroyd. A young man was taking away her teacup, and Verrian at once went up and seized his place.

"How did you get here?" she asked, rather shamelessly, since she had kept him from coming in the victoria, but amusingly, since she seemed to see it as a joke, if she saw it at all.

"I walked," he answered.

"Truly?"

"No, not truly."

"But, truly, how did you? Because I sent the carriage back for you."

"That was very thoughtful of you. But I found a delightful public vehicle behind the station, and I came in that. I'm so glad to know that it wasn't Mrs. Westangle who had the trouble of sending the carriage back for me."

Miss Macroyd laughed and laughed at his resentment. "But surely you met it on the way? I gave the man a description of you. Didn't he stop for you?"

"Oh yes, but I was too proud to change by that time. Or perhaps I hated the trouble."

Miss Macroyd laughed the more; then she purposely darkened her countenance so as to suit it to her lugubrious whisper, "How did she get here?"

"What she?"

"The mysterious fugitive. Wasn't she coming here, after all?"

"After all your trouble in supposing so?" Verrian reflected a moment, and then he said, deliberately, " I don't know."

Miss Macroyd was not going to let him off like that. "You don't know how she came, or you don't know whether she was coming?"

"I didn't say."

Her laugh resounded again. "Now you are trying to be wicked, and that is very wrong for a novelist."

"But what object could I have in concealing the fact from you, Miss Macroyd?" he entreated, with mock earnestness.

"That is what I want to find out."

"What are you two laughing so about?" the voice of Mrs. Westangle twittered at Verrian's elbow, and, looking down, he found her almost touching it. She had a very long, narrow neck, and, since it was long and narrow, she had the good sense not to palliate the fact or try to dress the effect of it out of sight. She took her neck in both hands, as it were, and put it more on show, so that you had really to like it. Now it lifted her face, though she was not a tall person, well towards the level of his; to be sure, he was himself only of the middle height of men, though an aquiline profile helped him up.

He stirred the tea which he had ceased to drink, and said, "I wasn't 'laughing so about,' Mrs. Westangle. It was Miss Macroyd."

"And I was laughing so about a mysterious stranger that came up on the train with us and got out at your station."

"And I was trying to make out what was so funny in a mysterious stranger, or even in her getting out at your station."

Mrs. Westangle was not interested in the case, or else she failed to seize the joke. At any rate, she turned from them without further question and went away to another part of the room, where she semi− attached herself in like manner to another couple, and again left it for still another. This was possibly her idea of looking after her guests; but when she had looked after them a little longer in that way she left the room and let them look after themselves till dinner.

"Come, Mr. Verrian," Miss Macroyd resumed, "what is the secret? I'll never tell if you tell me."

"You won't if I don't."

"Now you are becoming merely trivial. You are ceasing even to be provoking." Miss Macroyd, in token of her displeasure, laughed no longer.

"Am I?" he questioned; thoughtfully. "Well, then, I am tempted to act upon impulse."

"Oh, do act upon impulse for once," she urged. I'm sure you'll enjoy it."

"Do you mean that I'm never impulsive?"

"I don't think you look it."

"If you had seen me an hour ago you would have said I was very impulsive. I think I may have exhausted myself in that direction, however. I feel the impulse failing me now."

XI.

His impulse really had failed him. It had been to tell Miss Macroyd about his adventure and frankly trust her with it. He had liked her at several former meetings rather increasingly, because she had seemed open and honest

beyond the most of women, but her piggish behavior at the station had been rather too open and honest, and the sense of this now opportunely intervened between him and the folly he was about to commit. Besides, he had no right to give Miss Shirley's part in his adventure away, and, since the affair was more vitally hers than his, to take it at all out of her hands. The early−falling dusk had favored an unnoticed advent for them, and there were other chances that had helped keep unknown their arrival together at Mrs. Westangle's in that squalid carryall, such as Miss Shirley's having managed instantly to slip indoors before the man came out for Verrian's suit−case, and of her having got to her own appointed place long before there was any descent of the company to the afternoon tea.

It was not for him now to undo all that and begin the laughing at the affair, which she had pathetically intimated that she would rather some one else should begin. He recoiled from his imprudence with a shock, but he had the pleasure of having mystified Miss Macroyd. He felt dismissal in the roving eye which she cast from him round the room, and he willingly let another young man replace him at her side.

Yet he was not altogether satisfied. A certain meaner self that there was in him was not pleased with his relegation even merely in his own consciousness to the championship of a girl who was going to make her living in a sort of menial way. It had better be owned for him that, in his visions of literary glory, he had figured in social triumphs which, though vague, were resplendent with the glitter of smart circles. He had been so ignorant of such circles as to suppose they would have some use for him as a brilliant young author; and though he was outwearing this illusion, he still would not have liked a girl like Julia Macroyd, whose family, if not smart, was at least chic, to know that he had come to the house with a professional mistress of the revels, until Miss Shirley should have approved herself chic, too. The notion of such an employment as hers was in itself chic, but the girl was merely a paid part of the entertainment, as yet, and had not risen above the hireling status. If she had sunk to that level from a higher rank it would be all right, but there was no evidence that she had ever been smart. Verrian would, therefore, rather not be mixed up with her−−at any rate, in the imagination of a girl like Julia Macroyd; and as he left her side he drew a long breath of relief and went and put down his teacup where he had got it.

By this time the girl who was "pouring" had exhausted one of the two original guards on whom she had been dividing her vision, and Verrian made a pretence, which she favored, that he had come up to push the man away. The man gracefully submitted to be dislodged, and Verrian remained in the enjoyment of one of the girl's distorted eyes till, yet another man coming up, she abruptly got rid of Verrian by presenting him to yet another girl. In such manoeuvres the hour of afternoon tea will pass; and the time really wore on till it was time to dress for dinner.

By the time that the guests came down to dinner they were all able to participate in the exchange of the discovery which each had made, that it was snowing outdoors, and they kept this going till one girl had the good−luck to say, "I don't see anything so astonishing in that at this time of year. Now, if it was snowing indoors, it would be different."

This relieved the tension in a general laugh, and a young man tried to contribute further to the gayety by declaring that it would not be surprising to have it snow in−doors. He had once seen the thing done in a crowded hall, one night, when somebody put up a window, and the freezing current of air congealed the respiration of the crowd, which came down in a light fall of snow−flakes. He owned that it was in Boston.

"Oh, that excuses it, then," Miss Macroyd said. But she lost the laugh which was her due in the rush which some of the others made to open a window and see whether it could be made to snow in−doors there.

"Oh, it isn't crowded enough here," the young man explained who had alleged the scientific marvel.

"And it isn't Boston," Miss Macroyd tried again on the same string, and this time she got her laugh.

The girl who had first spoken remained, at the risk of pneumonia, with her arm prettily lifted against the open sash, for a moment peering out, and then reported, in dashing it down with a shiver, "It seems to be a very soft snow."

"Then it will be rain by morning," another predicted, and the girl tried hard to think of something to say in support of the hit she had made already. But she could not, and was silent almost through the whole first course at dinner.

In spite of its being a soft snow, it continued to fall as snow and not as rain. It lent the charm of stormy cold without to the brightness and warmth within. Much later, when between waltzes some of the dancers went out on the verandas for a breath of air, they came back reporting that the wind was rising and the snow was drifting.

Upon the whole, the snow was a great success, and her guests congratulated Mrs. Westangle on having thought to have it. The felicitations included recognition of the originality of her whole scheme. She had downed the hoary superstition that people had too much of a good time on Christmas to want any good time at all in the week following; and in acting upon the well−known fact that you never wanted a holiday so much as the day after you had one, she had made a movement of the highest social importance. These were the ideas which Verrian and the young man of the in−doors snow−storm urged upon her; his name was Bushwick, and he and Verrian found that they were very good−fellows after they had rather supposed the contrary.

Mrs. Westangle received their ideas with the twittering reticence that deceived so many people when they supposed she knew what they were talking about.

XII.

At breakfast, where the guests were reasonably punctual, they were all able to observe, in the rapid succession in which they descended from their rooms, that it had stopped snowing and the sun was shining brilliantly.

"There isn't enough for sleighing," Mrs. Westangle proclaimed from the head of the table in her high twitter, "and there isn't any coasting here in this flat country for miles."

"Then what are we going to do with it?" one of the young ladies humorously pouted.

"That's what I was going to suggest," Mrs. Westangle replied. She pronounced it 'sujjest', but no one felt that it mattered. "And, of course," she continued, "you needn't any of you do it if you don't like."

"We'll all do it, Mrs. Westangle," Bushwick said. "We are unanimous in that."

"Perhaps you'll think it rather funny−−odd," she said.

"The odder the better, I think," Verrian ventured, and another man declared that nothing Mrs. Westangle would do was odd, though everything was original.

"Well, there is such a thing as being too original," she returned. Then she turned her head aside and looked down at something beside her plate and said, without lifting her eyes, "You know that in the Middle Ages there used to be flower−fights among the young nobility in Italy. The women held a tower, and the men attacked it with roses and flowers generally."

"Why, is this a speech?" Miss Macroyd interrupted.

"A speech from the throne, yes," Bushwick solemnly corrected her. "And she's got it written down, like a

queen−−haven't you, Mrs. Westangle?"

"Yes, I thought it would be more respectful."

"She coming out," Bushwick said to Verrian across the table.

"And if I got mixed up I could go back and straighten it," the hostess declared, with a good−−humored candor that took the general fancy, "and you could understand without so much explaining. We haven't got flowers enough at this season," she went on, looking down again at the paper beside her plate, "but we happen to have plenty of snowballs, and the notion is to have the women occupy a snow tower and the men attack them with snowballs."

"Why," Bushwick said, "this is the snow−fort business of our boyhood! Let's go out and fortify the ladies at once." He appealed to Verrian and made a feint of pushing his chair back. "May we use water−soaked snowballs, or must they all be soft and harmless?" he asked of Mrs. Westangle, who was now the centre of a storm of applause and question from the whole table.

She kept her head and referred again to her paper. "The missiles of the assailants are to be very soft snowballs, hardly more than mere clots, so that nobody can be hurt in the assault, but the defenders may repel the assailants with harder snowballs."

"Oh," Miss Macroyd protested, "this is consulting the weakness of our sex."

"In the fury of the onset we'll forget it," Verrian reassured her.

"Do you think you really will, Mr. Verrian?" she asked. "What is all our athletic training to go for if you do?"

Mrs. Westangle read on:

"The terms of capitulation can be arranged on the ground, whether the castle is carried or the assailing party are made prisoners by its defenders."

"Hopeless captivity in either case!" Bushwick lamented.

"Isn't it rather academic?" Miss Macroyd asked of Verrian, in a low voice.

"I'm afraid, rather," he owned.

"But why are you so serious?" she pursued.

"Am I serious?" he retorted, with a trace of exasperation; and she laughed.

Their parley was quite lost in the clamor which raged up and down the table till Mrs. Westangle ended it by saying, "There's no obligation on any one to take part in the hostilities. There won't be any conscription; it's a free fight that will be open to everybody." She folded the paper she had been reading from and put it in her lap, in default of a pocket. She went on impromptu:

"You needn't trouble about building the fort, Mr. Bushwick. I've had the farmer and his men working at the castle since daybreak, and the ladies will find it all ready for them, when they're ready to defend it, down in the meadow beyond the edge of the birchlot. The battle won't begin till eleven o'clock."

She rose, and the clamor rose again with her, and her guests crushed about her, demanding to be allowed at least to go and look at the castle immediately.

One of the men's voices asked, "May I be one of the defenders, Mrs. Westangle? I want to be on the winning side, sure."

"Oh, is this going to be a circus chariot−race?" another lamented.

"No, indeed," a girl cried, "it's to be the real thing."

It fell to Verrian, in the assortment of couples in which Mrs. Westangle's guests sallied out to view the proposed scene of action, to find himself, not too willingly, at Miss Macroyd's side. In his heart and in his mind he was defending the amusement which he instantly divined as no invention of Mrs. Westangle's, and both his heart and his mind misgave him about this first essay of Miss Shirley in her new enterprise. It was, as Miss Macroyd had suggested, academic, and at the same time it had a danger in it of being tomboyish. Golf, tennis, riding, boating, swimming−−all the vigorous sports in which women now excel−−were boldly athletic, and yet you could not feel quite that they were tomboyish. Was it because the bent of Miss Shirley was so academic that she was periling upon tomboyishness without knowing it in this primal inspiration of hers? Inwardly he resented the word academic, although outwardly he had assented to it when Miss Macroyd proposed it. To be academic would be even more fatal to Miss Shirley's ambition than to be tomboyish, and he thought with pathos of that touch about the Italian nobility in the Middle Ages, and how little it could have moved the tough fancies of that crowd of well−groomed young people at the breakfast−table when Mrs. Westangle brought it out with her ignorant acceptance of it as a social force. After all, Miss Macroyd was about the only one who could have felt it in the way it was meant, and she had chosen to smile at it. He wondered if possibly she could feel the secondary pathos of it as he did. But to make talk with her he merely asked:

"Do you intend to take part in the fray?"

"Not unless I can be one of the reserve corps that won't need to be brought up till it's all over. I've no idea of getting my hair down."

"Ah," he sighed, "you think it's going to be rude:"

"That is one of the chances. But you seem to be suffering about it, Mr. Verrian!" she said, and, of course, she laughed.

"Who? I?" he returned, in the temptation to deny it. But he resisted. "I always suffer when there's anything silly happening, as if I were doing it myself. Don't you?"

"No, thank you, I believe not. But perhaps you are doing this? One can't suppose Mrs. Westangle imagined it."

"No, I can't plead guilty. But why isn't it predicable of Mrs. Westangle?"

"You mustn't ask too much of me, Mr. Verrian. Somehow, I won't say how, it's been imagined for her. She's heard of its being done somewhere. It can't be supposed she's read of it, anywhere."

"No, I dare say not."

Miss Macroyd came out with her laugh. "I should like to know what she makes of you, Mr. Verrian, when she is alone with herself. She must have looked you up and authenticated you in her own way, but it would be as far from your way as−−well, say−−the Milky Way."

"You don't think she asked me because she met me at your house?"

"No, that wouldn't be enough, from her point of view. She means to go much further than we've ever got."

"Then a year from now she wouldn't ask me?"

"It depends upon who asks you in the mean time.

You might get to be a fad, and then she would feel that she would have to have you."

"You're not flattering me?"

"Do you find it flattering?"

"It isn't exactly my idea of the reward I've been working for. What shall I do to be a fad?"

"Well, rather degrading stunts, if you mean in the smart set. Jump about on all fours and pick up a woman's umbrella with your teeth, and bark. Anything else would be easier for you among chic people, where your brilliancy would count."

"Brilliancy? Oh, thank you! Go on."

"Now, a girl−−if you were a girl−−"

"Oh yes, if I were a girl! That will be so much more interesting."

"A girl," Miss Macroyd continued, "might do it by posing effectively for amateur photography. Or doing something original in dramatics or pantomimics or recitation−−but very original, because chic people are critical. Or if she had a gift for getting up things that would show other girls off; or suggesting amusements; but that would be rather in the line of swell people, who are not good at getting up things and are glad of help."

"I see, I see!" Verrian said, eagerly. But he walked along looking down at the snow, and not meeting the laughing glance that Miss Macroyd cast at his face. "Well?"

"I believe that's all," she said, sharply. She added, less sharply: "She couldn't afford to fail, though, at any point. The fad that fails is extinguished forever. Will these simple facts do for fiction? Or is it for somebody in real life you're asking, Mr. Verrian?"

"Oh, for fiction. And thank you very much. Oh, that's rather pretty!"

XIII.

They had come into the meadow where the snow battle was to be, and on its slope, against the dark weft of the young birch−trees, there was a mimic castle outlined in the masonry of white blocks quarried from the drifts and built up in courses like rough blocks of marble. A decoration of green from the pines that mixed with the birches had been suggested rather than executed, and was perhaps the more effective for its sketchiness.

"Yes, it's really beautiful," Miss Macroyd owned, and though she did not join her cries to those of the other girls, who stood scattered about admiring it, and laughing and chattering with the men whose applause, of course, took the jocose form, there was no doubt but she admired it. "What I can't understand is how Mrs. Westangle got the

notion of this. There's the soprano note in it, and some woman must have given it to her."

"Not contralto, possibly?" Verrian asked.

"I insist upon the soprano," she said.

But he did not notice what she said. His eyes were following a figure which seemed to be escaping up through the birches behind the snow castle and ploughing its way through the drifts; in front of the structure they had been levelled to make an easier battle−field. He knew that it was Miss Shirley, and he inferred that she had been in the castle directing the farm−−hands building it, and now, being caught by the premature arrival of the contesting forces, had fled before them and left her subordinates to finish the work. He felt, with a throe of helpless sympathy, that she was undertaking too much. It was hazardous enough to attempt the practice of her novel profession under the best of circumstances, but to keep herself in abeyance so far as not to be known at all in it, and, at the same time, to give way to her interest in it to the extent of coming out, with her infirmly established health, into that wintry weather, and superintending the preparations for the first folly she had planned, was a risk altogether too great for her.

Who in the world, "Miss Macroyd suddenly demanded, "is the person floundering about in the birch woods?"

"Perhaps the soprano," Verrian returned, hardily.

Bushwick detached himself from a group of girls near by and intercepted any response from Miss Macroyd to Verrian by calling to her before he came up, "Are you going to be one of the enemy, Miss Macroyd?"

"No, I think I will be neutral." She added, "Is there going to be any such thing as an umpire?"

"We hadn't thought of that. There could be. The office could be created; but, you know, it's the post of danger."

Verrian joined the group that Bushwick has left. He found a great scepticism as to the combat, mixed with some admiration for the castle, and he set himself to contest the prevalent feeling. What was the matter with a snow−fight? he demanded. It would be great fun. Decidedly he was going in for it. He revived the drooping sentiment in its favor, and then, flown with his success, he went from group to group and couple to couple, and animated all with his zeal, which came, he hardly knew whence; what he pretended to the others was that they were rather bound not to let Mrs. Westangle's scheme fall through. Their doubts vanished before him, and the terms of the battle were quickly arranged. He said he had read of one of those mediaeval flower−fights, and he could tell them how that was done. Where it would not fit into the snow−fight, they could trust to inspiration; every real battle was the effect of inspiration.

He came out, and some of the young women and most of the young men, who had dimly known of him as a sort of celebrity, and suspected him of being a prig, were reconciled, and accepted him for a nice fellow, and became of his opinion as to the details of the amusement before them.

It was not very Homeric, when it came off, or very mediaeval, but it was really lots of fun, or far more fun than one would have thought. The storming of the castle was very sincere, and the fortress was honestly defended. Miss Macroyd was made umpire, as she wished, and provided with a large snowball to sit on at a safe distance; as she was chosen by the men, the girls wanted to have an umpire of their own, who would be really fair, and they voted Verrian into the office. But he refused, partly because he did not care about being paired off with Miss Macroyd so conspicuously, and partly because he wished to help the fight along.

Attacks were made and repelled, and there were feats of individual and collective daring on the side of the defenders which were none the less daring because the assailants stopped to cheer them, and to disable themselves

by laughing at the fury of the foe. A detachment of the young men at last stormed the castle and so weakened its walls that they toppled inward; then the defenders, to save themselves from being buried under the avalanche, swarmed out into the open and made the entire force of the enemy prisoners.

The men pretended that this was what might have been expected from the beginning, but by this time the Berserker madness had possessed Miss Macroyd, too; she left her throne of snow and came forward shouting that it had been perfectly fair, and that the men had been really beaten, and they had no right to pretend that they had given themselves up purposely. The sex−partisanship, which is such a droll fact in women when there is any question of their general opposition to men, possessed them all, and they stood as, one girl for the reality of their triumph. This did not prevent them from declaring that the men had behaved with outrageous unfairness, and that the only one who fought with absolute sincerity from first to last was Mr. Verrian.

Neither their unity of conviction concerning the general fact nor the surprising deduction from it in Verrian's case operated to make them refuse the help of their captives in getting home. When they had bound up their tumbled hair, in some cases, and repaired the ravages of war among their feathers and furs and draperies, in other cases, they accepted the hands of the late enemy at difficult points of the path. But they ran forward when they neared the house, and they were prompt to scream upon Mrs. Westangle that there never had been such a success or such fun, and that they were almost dead, and soon as they had something to eat they were going to bed and never going to get up again.

In the details which they were able to give at luncheon, they did justice to Verrian's noble part in the whole affair, which had saved the day, not only in keeping them up to the work when they had got thinking it couldn't be carried through, but in giving the combat a validity which it would not have had without him. They had to thank him, next to Mrs. Westangle herself, whom they praised beyond any articulate expression, for thinking up such a delightful thing. They wondered how she could ever have thought of it−−such a simple thing too; and they were sure that when people heard of it they would all be wanting to have snow battles.

Mrs. Westangle took her praises as passively, if not as modestly, as Verrian received his. She made no show of disclaiming them, but she had the art, invaluable in a woman who meant to go far in the line she had chosen, of not seeming to have done anything, or of not caring whether people liked it or not. Verrian asked himself, as he watched her twittering back at those girls, and shedding equally their thanks and praises from her impermeable plumage, how she would have behaved if Miss Shirley's attempt had been an entire failure. He decided that she would have ignored the failure with the same impersonality as that with which she now ignored the success. It appeared that in one point he did her injustice, for when he went up to dress for dinner after the long stroll he took towards night he found a note under his door, by which he must infer that Mrs. Westangle had not kept the real facts of her triumph from the mistress of the revels.

> "DEAR MR. VERRIAN, I am not likely to see you, but I must thank you.
>
> M. SHIRLEY.
>
> "P. S. Don't try to answer, please."

Verrian liked, the note, he even liked the impulse which had dictated it, and he understood the impulse; but he did not like getting the note. If Miss Shirley meant business in taking up the line of life she had professed to have entered upon seriously, she had better, in the case of a young man whose acquaintance she had chanced to make, let her gratitude wait. But when did a woman ever mean business, except in the one great business?

XIV.

To have got that sillily superfluous note to Verrian without any one's knowing besides, Miss Shirley must have stolen to his door herself and slipped it under. In order to do this unsuspected and unseen, she must have found

out in some sort that would not give her away which his room was, and then watched her chance. It all argued a pervasiveness in her, after such a brief sojourn in the house, and a mastery of finesse that he did not like, though, he reflected, he was not authorized to like or dislike anything about her. He was thirty−seven years old, and he had not lived through that time, with his mother at his elbow to suggest inferences from facts, without being versed in wiles which, even when they were honest, were always wiles, and in lures which, when they were of the most gossamer tenuity, were yet of texture close enough to make the man who blundered through them aware that they had been thrown across his path. He understood, of course, that they were sometimes helplessly thrown across it, and were mere expressions of abstract woman with relation to abstract man, but that did not change their nature. He did not abhor them, but he believed he knew them, and he believed now that he detected one of them in Miss Shirley's note. Of course, one could take another view of it. One could say to one's self that she was really so fervently grateful that she could not trust some accident to bring them together in a place where she was merely a part of the catering, as she said, and he was a guest, and that she was excusable, or at least mercifully explicable, in her wish to have him know that she appreciated his goodness. Verrian had been very good, he knew that; he had saved the day for the poor thing when it was in danger of the dreariest kind of slump. She was a poor thing, as any woman was who had to make her own way, and she had been sick and was charming. Besides, she had found out his name and had probably recognized a quality of celebrity in it, unknown to the other young people with whom he found himself so strangely assorted under Mrs. Westangle's roof.

In the end, and upon the whole, Verrian would rather have liked, if the thing could have been made to happen, meeting Miss Shirley long enough to disclaim meriting her thanks, and to ascribe to the intrinsic value of her scheme the brilliant success it had achieved. This would not have been true, but it would have been encouraging to her; and in the revery which followed upon his conditional desire he had a long imaginary conversation with her, and discussed all her other plans for the revels of the week. These had not the trouble of defining themselves very distinctly in the conversation in order to win his applause, and their consideration did not carry him with Miss Shirley beyond the strictly professional ground on which they met.

She had apparently invented nothing for that evening, and the house party was left to its own resources in dancing and sitting out dances, which apparently fully sufficed it. They were all tired, and broke up early. The women took their candles and went off to bed, and the men went to the billiard−room to smoke. On the way down from his room, where he had gone to put on his smoking−jacket, Verrian met Miss Macroyd coming up, candle in hand, and received from her a tacit intimation that he might stop her for a joking good−night.

"I hope you'll sleep well on your laurels as umpire," he said.

"Oh, thank you," she returned, "and I hope your laurels won't keep you awake. It must seem to you as if it was blowing a perfect gale in them."

"What do you mean? I did nothing."

"Oh, I don't mean your promotion of the snow battle. But haven't you heard?" He stared. "You've been found out!"

"Found out?" Verrian's soul was filled with the joy of literary fame.

"Yes. You can't conceal yourself now. You're Verrian the actor."

"The actor?" Verrian frowned blackly in his disgust, so blackly that Miss Macroyd laughed aloud.

"Yes, the coming matinee idol. One of the girls recognized you as soon as you came into the house, and the name settled it, though, of course, you're supposed to be here incognito."

The mention of that name which he enjoyed in common with the actor made Verrian furious, for when the actor first appeared with it in New York Verrian had been at the pains to find out that it was not his real name, and that he had merely taken it because of the weak quality of romance in it, which Verrian himself had always disliked. But, of course, he could not vent his fury on Miss Macroyd. All he could do was to ask, "Then they have got my photograph on their dressing−tables, with candles burning before it?"

"No, I don't believe I can give you that comfort. The fact is, your acting is not much admired among the girls here, but they think you are unexpectedly nice as a private person."

"That's something. And does Mrs. Westangle think I'm the actor, too?"

"How should Mrs. Westangle know what she thinks? And if she doesn't, how should I?"

"That's true. And are you going to give me away?"

"I haven't done it yet. But isn't it best to be honest?"

"It mightn't be a success."

"The honesty?"

"My literary celebrity."

"There's that," Miss Macroyd rejoiced. "Well, so far I've merely said I was sure you were not Verrian the actor. I'll think the other part over." She went on up−stairs, with the sound of her laugh following her, and Verrian went gloomily back to the billiard−room, where he found most of the smokers conspicuously yawning. He lighted a fresh cigar, and while he smoked they dropped away one by one till only Bushwick was left.

"Some of the fellows are going Thursday," he said. "Are you going to stick it out to the bitter end?"

Till then it had not occurred to Verrian that he was not going to stay through the week, but now he said, "I don't know but I may go Thursday. Shall you?"

"I might as well stay on. I don't find much doing in real estate at Christmas. Do you?"

This was fishing, but it was better than openly taking him for that actor, and Verrian answered, unresentfully, "I don't know. I'm not in that line exactly."

"Oh, I beg your pardon," Bushwick said. "I thought I had seen your name with that of a West Side concern."

"No, I have a sort of outside connection with the publishing business."

"Oh," Bushwick returned, politely, and it would have been reassuringly if Verrian had wished not to be known as an author. The secret in which he lived in that regard was apparently safe from that young, amiable, good−looking real−estate broker. He inferred, from the absence of any allusion to the superstition of the women as to his profession, that it had not spread to Bushwick at least, and this inclined him the more to like him. They sat up talking pleasantly together about impersonal affairs till Bushwick finished his cigar. Then he started for bed, saying, "Well, good−night. I hope Mrs. Westangle won't have anything so active on the tapis for tomorrow."

"Try and sleep it off. Good−night."

XV.

Verrian remained to finish his cigar, but at the end he was not yet sleepy, and he thought he would get a book from the library, if that part of the house were still lighted, and he looked out to see. Apparently it was as brilliantly illuminated as when the company had separated there for the night, and he pushed across the foyer hall that separated the billiard−room from the drawing−zoom and library. He entered the drawing− room, and in the depths of the library, relieved against the rows of books in their glass cases, he startled Miss Shirley from a pose which she seemed to be taking there alone.

At the instant of their mutual recognition she gave a little muted shriek, and then gasped out, "I beg your pardon," while he was saying, too, "I beg your pardon."

After a tacit exchange of forgiveness, he said, "I am afraid I startled you. I was just coming for a book to read myself asleep with. I−−"

"Not at all," she returned. "I was just−−" Then she did not say what, and he asked:

"Making some studies?"

"Yes," she owned, with reluctant promptness.

"I mustn't ask what," he suggested, and he made an effort to smile away what seemed a painful perturbation in her as he went forward to look at the book−shelves, from which, till then, she had not slipped aside.

"I'm in your way," she said, and he answered, "Not at all." He added to the other sentence he had spoken, "If it's going to be as good as what you gave us today−−"

"You are very kind." She hesitated, and then she said, abruptly: "What I did to−day owed everything to you, Mr. Verrian," and while he desisted from searching the book−shelves, she stood looking anxiously at him, with the pulse in her neck visibly throbbing. Her agitation was really painful, but Verrian did not attribute it to her finding herself there alone with him at midnight; for though the other guests had all gone to bed, the house was awake in some of the servants, and an elderly woman came in presently bringing a breadth of silvery gauze, which she held up, asking if it was that.

"Not exactly, but it will do nicely, Mrs. Stager. Would you mind getting me the very pale−blue piece that electric blue?"

"I'm looking for something good and dull," Verrian said, when the woman was gone.

"Travels are good, or narratives, for sleeping on," she said, with a breathless effort for calm. "I found," she panted, "in my own insomnia, that merely the broken−up look of a page of dialogue in a novel racked my nerves so that I couldn't sleep. But narratives were beautifully soothing."

"Thank you," he responded; "that's a good idea." And stooping, with his hands on his knees, he ranged back and forth along the shelves. "But Mrs. Westangle's library doesn't seem to be very rich in narrative."

He had not his mind on the search perhaps, and perhaps she knew it. She presently said, "I wish I dared ask you a favor−−I mean your advice, Mr. Verrian."

He lifted himself from his stooping posture and looked at her, smiling. "Would that take much courage?" His

smile was a little mocking; he was thinking that a girl who would hurry that note to him, and would personally see that it did not fail to reach him, would have the courage for much more.

She did not reply directly. "I should have to explain, but I know you won't tell. This is going to be my piece de resistance, my grand stunt. I'm going to bring it off the last night." She stopped long enough for Verrian to revise his resolution of going away with the fellows who were leaving the middle of the week, and to decide on staying to the end. "I am going to call it Seeing Ghosts."

"That's good," Verrian said, provisionally.

"Yes, I might say I was surprised at my thinking it up."

"That would be one form of modesty."

"Yes," she said, with a wan smile she had, "and then again it mightn't be another." She went on, abruptly, "As many as like can take part in the performance. It's to be given out, and distinctly understood beforehand, that the ghost isn't a veridical phantom, but just an honest, made−up, every−day spook. It may change its pose from time to time, or its drapery, but the setting is to be always the same, and the people who take their turns in seeing it are to be explicitly reassured, one after another, that there's nothing in it, you know. The fun will be in seeing how each one takes it, after they know what it really is."

"Then you're going to give us a study of temperaments."

"Yes," she assented. And after a moment, given to letting the notion get quite home with her, she asked, vividly, "Would you let me use it?"

"The phrase? Why, certainly. But wouldn't it be rather too psychological? I think just Seeing Ghosts would be better."

"Better than Seeing Ghosts: A Study of Temperaments? Perhaps it would. It would be simpler."

"And in this house you need all the simplicity you can get," he suggested.

She smiled, intelligently but reticently. "My idea is that every one somehow really believes in ghosts−−I know I do−−and so fully expects to see one that any sort of make−up will affect them for the moment just as if they did see one. I thought−−that perhaps−−I don't know how to say it without seeming to make use of you−−"

"Oh, do make use of me, Miss Shirley!"

"That you could give me some hints about the setting, with your knowledge of the stage−−" She stopped, having rushed forward to that point, while he continued to look steadily at her without answering her. She faced him courageously, but not convincingly.

"Did you think that I was an actor?" he asked, finally.

"Mrs. Westangle seemed to think you were."

"But did you?"

"I'm sure I didn't mean−−I beg your pardon−−"

"It's all right. If I were an actor I shouldn't be ashamed of it. But I was merely curious to know whether you shared the prevalent superstition. I'm afraid I can't help you from a knowledge of the stage, but if I can be of use, from a sort of amateur interest in psychology, with an affair like this I shall be only too glad."

"Thank you," she said, somewhat faintly, with an effect of dismay disproportionate to the occasion.

She sank into a chair before which she had been standing, and she looked as if she were going to swoon.

He started towards her with an alarmed "Miss Shirley.

She put out a hand weakly to stay him. "Don't!" she entreated. "I'm a little−−I shall be all right in a moment."

"Can't I get you something−−call some one?"

"Not for the world!" she commanded, and she pulled herself together and stood up. "But I think I'll stop for to−night. I'm glad my idea strikes you favorably. It's merely−− Oh, you found it, Mrs. Stager!" She broke off to address the woman who had now come back and was holding up the trailing breadths of the electric−blue gauze. "Isn't it lovely?" She gave herself time to adore the drapery, with its changes of meteoric lucence, before she rose and took it. She went with it to the background in the library, where, against the glass door of the cases, she involved herself in it and stood shimmering. A thrill pierced to Verrian's heart; she was indeed wraithlike, so that he hated to have her call, "How will that do ?"

Mrs. Stager modestly referred the question to him by her silence. "I will answer for its doing, if it does for the others as it's done for me."

She laughed. "And you doubly knew what it was. Yes, I think it will go." She took another pose, and then another. "What do you think of it, Mrs. Stager?" she called to the woman standing respectfully abeyant at one side.

"It's awful. I don't know but I'll be afraid to go to my room."

"Sit down, and I'll go to your room with you when I'm through. I won't be long, now."

She tried different gauzes, which she had lying on one of the chairs, and crowned herself with triumph in the applauses of her two spectators, rejoicing with a glee that Verrian found childlike and winning. "If they're all like you, it will be the greatest success!"

"They'll all be like me, and more," he said, "I'm really very severe."

"Are you a severe person?" she asked, coming forward to him. "Ought people to be afraid of you?"

"Yes, people with bad consciences. I'm rattier afraid of myself for that reason."

"Have you got a bad conscience?" she asked, letting her eyes rest on his.

"Yes. I can't make my conduct square with my ideal of conduct."

"I know what that is!" she sighed. "Do you expect to be punished for it?"

"I expect to be got even with."

"Yes, one is. I've noticed that myself. But I didn't suppose that actors−− Oh, I forgot! I beg your pardon again, Mr. Verrian. Oh−− Goodnight!" She faced him evanescently in going out, with the woman after her, but, whether she did so more in fear or more in defiance, she left him standing motionless in his doubt, and she did nothing to solve his doubt when she came quickly back alone, before he was aware of having moved, to say, "Mr. Verrian, I want to−−I have to−−tell you that−− I didn't think you were the actor." Then she was finally gone, and Verrian had nothing for it but to go up to his room with the book he found he had in his hand and must have had there all the time.

If he had read it, the book would not have eased him off to sleep, but he did not even try, to read it. He had no wish to sleep. The waking dream in which he lost himself was more interesting than any vision of slumber could have been, and he had no desire to end it. In that he could still be talking with the girl whose mystery appealed to him so pleasingly. It was none the less pleasing because, at what might be called her first blushes, she did not strike him as altogether ingenuous, but only able to discipline herself into a final sincerity from a consciousness which had been taught wisdom by experience.

She was still a scarcely recovered invalid, and it was pathetic that she should be commencing the struggle of life with strength so little proportioned to the demand upon it; and the calling she had taken up was of a fantasticality in some aspects which was equally pathetic. But all the undertakings of women, he mused, were piteous, not only because women were unequal to the struggle at the best, but because they were hampered always with themselves, with their sex, their femininity, and the necessity of getting it out of the way before they could really begin to fight. Whatever they attempted it must be in relation to the man's world in which livings were made; but the immemorial conditions were almost wholly unchanged. A woman approached this world as a woman, with the inborn instinct of tempting it as a woman, to win it to love her and make her a wife and mother; and although she might stoically overcome the temptation at last, it might recur at any moment and overcome her. This was perpetually weakening and imperilling her, and she must feel it at the encounter with each man she met. She must feel the tacit and even unconscious irony of his attitude towards her in her enterprise, and the finer her make the crueller and the more humiliating and disheartening this must be.

Of course, this Miss Shirley felt Verrian's irony, which he had guarded from any expression with genuine compassion for her. She must feel that to his knowledge of life she and her experiment had an absurdity which would not pass, whatever their success might be. If she meant business, and business only, they ought to have met as two men would have met, but he knew that they had not done so, and she must have known it. All that was plain sailing enough, but beyond this lay a sea of conjecture in which he found himself without helm or compass. Why, should she have acted a fib about his being an actor, and why, after the end, should she have added an end, in which she returned to own that she had been fibbing? For that was what it came to; and though Verrian tasted a delicious pleasure in the womanish feat by which she overcame her womanishness, he could not puzzle out her motive. He was not sure that he wished to puzzle it out. To remain with illimitable guesses at his choice was more agreeable, for the present at least, and he was not aware of having lapsed from them when he woke so late as to be one of the breakfasters whose plates were kept for them after the others were gone.

XVI.

It was the first time that Verrian had come down late, and it was his novel experience to find himself in charge of Mrs. Stager at breakfast, instead of the butler and the butler's man, who had hitherto served him at the earlier hour. There were others, somewhat remote from him, at table, who were ending when he was beginning, and when they had joked themselves out of the room and away from Mrs. Stager's ministrations he was left alone to her. He had instantly appreciated a quality of motherliness in her attitude towards him, and now he was sensible of a kindly intimacy to which he rather helplessly addressed himself.

"Well, Mrs. Stager, did you see a ghost on your way to bed?"

"I don't know as I really expected to," she said. "Won't you have a few more of the buckwheats?"

"Do you think I'd better? I believe I won't. They're very tempting. Miss Shirley makes a very good ghost," he suggested.

Mrs. Stager would not at first commit herself further than to say in bringing him the butter, "She's just up from a long fit of sickness." She impulsively added, "She ain't hardly strong enough to be doing what she is, I tell her."

"I understood she had been ill," Verrian said. "We drove over from the station together, the other day."

"Yes," Mrs. Stager admitted. "Kind of a nervous breakdown, I believe. But she's got an awful spirit. Mrs. Westangle don't want her to do all she is doing."

Verrian looked at her in surprise. He had not expected that of the India−rubber nature he had attributed to Mrs. Westangle. In view of Mrs. Stager's privity to the unimagined kindliness of his hostess, he relaxed himself in a further interest in Miss Shirley, as if it would now be safe. "She's done splendidly, so far," he said, meaning the girl. "I'm glad Mrs. Westangle appreciates her work."

"I guess," Mrs. Stager said, "that if it hadn't been for you at the snow− fight−− She got back from getting ready for it, that morning, almost down sick, she was afraid so it was going to fail."

"I didn't do anything," Verrian said, putting the praise from him.

Mrs. Stager lowered her voice in an octave of deeper confidentiability. "You got the note? I put it under, and I didn't know."

"Oh yes, I got it," Verrian said, sensible of a relief, which he would not assign to any definite reason, in knowing that Miss Shirley had not herself put it under his door. But he now had to take up another burden in the question whether Miss Shirley were of an origin so much above that of her confidant that she could have a patrician fearlessness in making use of her, or were so near Mrs. Stager's level of life that she would naturally turn to her for counsel and help. Miss Shirley had the accent, the manners, and the frank courage of a lady; but those things could be learned; they were got up for the stage every day.

Verrian was roused from the muse he found he had fallen into by hearing Mrs. Stager ask, "Won't you have some more coffee?"

"No, thank you," he said. And now he rose from the table, on which he dreamily dropped his napkin, and got his hat and coat and went out for a walk. He had not studied the art of fiction so long, in the many private failures that had preceded his one public success, without being made to observe that life sometimes dealt in the accidents and coincidences which his criticism condemned as too habitually the resource of the novelist. Hitherto he had disdained them for this reason; but since his serial story was off his hands, and he was beginning to look about him for fresh material, he had doubted more than once whether his severity was not the effect of an unjustifiable prejudice.

It struck him now, in turning the corner of the woodlot above the meadow where the snow−battle had taken place, and suddenly finding himself face to face with Miss Shirley, that nature was in one of her uninventive moods and was helping herself out from the old stock−in−trade of fiction. All the same, he felt a glow of pleasure, which was also a glow of pity; for while Miss Shirley looked, as always, interesting, she look tired, too, with a sort of desperate air which did not otherwise account for itself. She had given, at sight of him, a little start, and a little "Oh!" dropped from her lips, as if it had been jostled from them. She made haste to go on, with something like the voluntary hardiness of the courage that plucks itself from the primary emotion of fear, "You are going down to try

the skating?"

"Do I look it, without skates?"

"You may be going to try the sliding," she returned. "I'm afraid there won't be much of either for long. This soft air is going to make havoc of my plans for to−morrow."

"That's too bad of it. Why not hope for a hard freeze to−night? You might as well. The weather has been known to change its mind. You might even change your plans."

"No, I can't do that. I can't think of anything else. It's to bridge over the day that's left before Seeing Ghosts. If it does freeze, you'll come to Mrs. Westangle's afternoon tea on the pond?"

"I certainly shall. How is it to be worked?"

"She's to have her table on a platform, with runners, in a bower of evergreen boughs, and be pushed about, and the people are to skate up for the tea. There are to be tea and chocolate, and two girls to pour, just as in real life. It isn't a very dazzling idea, but I thought it might do; and Mrs. Westangle is so good−natured. Now, if the thermometer will do its part!"

"I am sure it will," Verrian said, but a glance at the gray sky did not confirm him in his prophetic venture. The snow was sodden under foot; a breath from the south stirred the pines to an Aeolian response and moved the stiff, dry leaves of the scrub−oaks. A sapsucker was marking an accurate circle of dots round the throat of a tall young maple, and enjoying his work in a low, guttural soliloquy, seemingly, yet, dismayingly, suggestive of spring.

"It's lovely, anyway," she said, following his glance with an upward turn of her face.

"Yes, it's beautiful. I think this sort of winter day is about the best the whole year can do. But I will sacrifice the chance of another like it to your skating−tea, Miss Shirley."

He did not know why he should have made this speech to her, but apparently she did, and she said, "You're always coming to my help, Mr. Verrian."

"Don't mention it!"

"I won't, then," she said, with a smile that showed her thin face at its thinnest and left her lip caught on her teeth till she brought it down voluntarily. It was a small but full lip and pretty, and this trick of it had a fascination. She added, gravely, "I don't believe you will like my ice−tea."

"I haven't any active hostility to it. You can't always be striking twelve−−twelve midnight−−as you will be in Seeing Ghosts. But your ice− tea will do very well for striking five. I'm rather elaborate!"

"Not too elaborate to hide your real opinion. I wonder what you do think of my own elaboration−−I mean of my scheme."

"Yes?"

They had moved on, at his turning to walk with her, so as not to keep her standing in the snow, and now she said, looking over her shoulder at him, "I've decided that it won't do to let the ghost have all the glory. I don't think it will be fair to let the people merely be scared, even when they've been warned that they're to see a ghost and told it isn't real."

She seemed to refer the point to him, and he said, provisionally, "I don't know what more they can ask."

"They can ask questions. I'm going to let each person speak to the ghost, if not scared dumb, and ask it just what they please; and I'm going to answer their questions if I can."

"Won't it be something of an intellectual strain?"

"Yes, it will. But it will be fun, too, a little, and it will help the thing to go off. What do you think?"

"I think it's fine. Are you going to give it out, so that they can be studying up their questions?"

"No, their questions have got to be impromptu. Or, at least, the first one has. Of course, after the scheme has once been given away, the ghost−seers will be more or less prepared, and the ghost will have to stand it."

"I think it's great. Are you going to let me have a chance with a question?"

"Are you going to see a ghost?"

"To be sure I am. May I really ask it what I please?"

"If you're honest."

"Oh, I shall be honest−−"

He stopped breathlessly, but she did not seem called upon to supply any meaning for his abruptness. "I'm awfully glad you like the idea," she said, "I have had to think the whole thing out for myself, and I haven't been quite certain that the question−asking wasn't rather silly, or, at least, sillier than the rest. Thank you so much, Mr. Verrian."

"I've thought of my question," he began again, as abruptly as he had stopped before. "May I ask it now?"

Cries of laughter came up from the meadow below, and the voices seemed coming nearer.

"Oh, I mustn't be seen!" Miss Shirley lamented. "Oh, dear! If I'm seen the whole thing is given away. What shall I do?" She whirled about and ran down the road towards a path that entered the wood.

He ran after her. "My question is, May I come to see you when you get back to town?"

"Yes, certainly. But don't come now! You mustn't be seen with me! I'm not supposed to be in the house at all."

If Verrian's present mood had been more analytic, it might have occurred to him that the element of mystery which Miss Shirley seemed to cherish in regard to herself personally was something that she could dramatically apply with peculiar advantage to the phantasmal part she was to take in her projected entertainment. But he was reduced from the exercise of his analytic powers to a passivity in which he was chiefly conscious of her pathetic fascination. This seemed to emanate from her frail prettiness no less than from the sort of fearful daring with which she was pushing her whole enterprise through; it came as much from her undecided blondness−−from her dust−colored hair, for instance−−as from the entreating look of her pinched eyes, only just lighting their convalescent fires, and from the weakness that showed, with the grace, in her run through the wintry woods, where he watched her till the underbrush thickened behind her and hid her from him. Altogether his impression was very complex, but he did not get so far even as the realization of this, in his mental turmoil, as he turned with a deep sigh and walked meditatively homeward through the incipient thaw.

It did not rain at night, as it seemed so likely to do, and by morning the cloudiness of the sky had so far thinned that the sun looked mildly through it without more than softening the frozen surface of the pond, so that Mrs. Westangle's ice−tea (as everybody called it, by a common inspiration, or by whatever circuitous adoption of Verrian's phrase) came off with great success. People from other houses were there, and they all said that they wondered how she came to have such a brilliant idea, and they kept her there till nearly dark. Then the retarded rain began, in a fine drizzle, and her house guests were forced homeward, but not too soon to get a good, long rest before dressing for dinner. She was praised for her understanding with the weather, and for her meteorological forecast as much as for her invention in imagining such a delightful and original thing as an ice−tea, which no one else had ever thought of. Some of the women appealed to Verrian to say if he had ever heard of anything like it; and they felt that Mrs. Westangle was certainly arriving, and by no beaten track.

None of the others put it in these terms, of course; it was merely a consensus of feeling with them, and what was more articulate was dropped among the ironies with which Miss Macroyd more confidentially celebrated the event. Out of hearing of the others, in slowly following them with Verrian, she recurred to their talk. "Yes, it's only a question of money enough for Newport, after this. She's chic now, and after a season there she will be smart. But oh, dear! How came she to be chic? Can you imagine?"

Verrian did not feel bound to a categorical answer, and in his private reflections he dealt with another question. This was how far Miss Shirley was culpable in the fraud she was letting Mrs. Westangle practise on her innocent guests. It was a distasteful question, and he did not find it much more agreeable when it subdivided itself into the question of necessity on her part, and of a not very clearly realized situation on Mrs. Westangle's. The girl had a right to sell her ideas, and perhaps the woman thought they were her own when she had paid for them. There could be that view of it all. The furtive nature of Miss Shirley's presence in the house might very well be a condition of that grand event she was preparing. It was all very mysterious.

XVII.

It rained throughout the evening, with a wailing of the wind in the gables, and a weeping and a sobbing of the water from the eaves that Mrs. Westangle's guests, securely housed from the storm, made the most of for weirdness. There had been a little dancing, which gave way to so much sitting−out that the volunteer music abruptly ceased as if in dudgeon, and there was nothing left but weirdness to bring young hearts together. Weirdness can do a good deal with girls lounging in low chairs, and young men on rugs round a glowing hearth at their feet; and every one told some strange thing that had happened at first hand, or second or third hand, either to himself or herself, or to their fathers or brothers or grandmothers or old servants. They were stimulated in eking out these experiences not only by the wildness of the rain without, but by the mystery of being shut off from the library into the drawing−room and hall while the preparations for the following night were beginning. But weirdness is not inexhaustible, even when shared on such propitious terms between a group of young people rapidly advanced in intimacy by a week's stay under the same roof, and at the first yawn a gay dispersion of the votaries ended it all.

The yawn came from Bushwick, who boldly owned, when his guilt was brought home to him, that he was sleepy, and then as he expected to be scared out of a year's growth the next night, and not be able to sleep for a week afterwards, he was now going to bed. He shook hands with Mrs. Westangle for good−night. The latest to follow him was Verrian, who, strangely alert, and as far from drowsiness as he had ever known himself, was yet more roused by realizing that Mrs. Westangle was not letting his hand go at once, but, unless it was mere absent−mindedness, was conveying through it the wish to keep him. She fluttered a little more closely up to him, and twittered out, "Miss Shirley wants me to let you know that she has told me about your coming together, and everything."

"Oh, I'm very glad," Verrian said, not sure that it was the right thing.

"I don't know why she feels so, but she has a right to do as she pleases about it. She's not a guest."

"No," Verrian assented.

"It happens very well, though, for the ghost−seeing that people don't know she's here. After that I shall tell them. In fact, she wants me to, for she must be on the lookout for other engagements. I am going to do everything I can for her, and if you hear of anything−−"

Verrian bowed, with a sense of something offensive in her words which he could not logically feel, since it was a matter of business and was put squarely on a business basis. "I should be very glad," he said, noncommittally.

"She was sure from the first," Mrs. Westangle went on, as if there were some relation between the fact and her request, "that you were not the actor. She knew you were a writer."

"Oh, indeed!" Verrian said.

"I thought that if you were writing for the newspapers you might know how to help her−"

"I'm not a newspaper writer," Verrian answered, with a resentment which she seemed to feel, for she said, with a sort of apology in her tone:

"Oh! Well, I don't suppose it matters. She doesn't know I'm speaking to you about that; it just came into my head. I like to help in a worthy object, you know. I hope you'll have a good night's rest."

She turned and looked round with the air of distraction which she had after speaking to any one, and which Verrian fancied came as much from a paucity as from a multiplicity of suggestion in her brain, and so left him standing. But she came back to say, "Of course, it's all between ourselves till after to−morrow night, Mr. Verrian."

"Oh, certainly," he replied, and went vaguely off in the direction of the billiard−room. It was light and warm there, though the place was empty, and he decided upon a cigar as a proximate or immediate solution. He sat smoking before the fire till the tobacco's substance had half turned into a wraith of ash, and not really thinking of anything very definitely, except the question whether he should be able to sleep after he went to bed, when he heard a creeping step on the floor. He turned quickly, with a certain expectance in his nerves, and saw nothing more ghostly than Bushwick standing at the corner of the table and apparently hesitating how to speak to him.

He said, "Hello!" and at this Bushwick said:

"Look here!"

"Well?" Verrian asked, looking at him.

"How does it happen you're up so late, after everybody else is wrapped in slumber?"

"I might ask the same of you."

"Well, I found I wasn't making it a case of sleep, exactly, and so I got up."

"Well, I hadn't gone to bed for much the same reason. Why couldn't you sleep? A real−estate broker ought to have a clean conscience."

"So ought a publisher, for that matter. What do you think of this ghost− dance, anyway?"

"It might be amusing−−if it fails." Verrian was tempted to add the condition by the opportunity for a cynicism which he did not feel. It is one of the privileges of youth to be cynical, whether or no.

Bushwick sat down before the fire and rubbed his shins with his two hands unrestfully, drawing in a long breath between his teeth. "These things get on to my nerves sometimes. I shouldn't want the ghost−dance to fail."

"On Mrs. Westangle's account?"

"I guess Mrs. Westangle could stand it. Look here!" It was rather a customary phrase of his, Verrian noted. As he now used it he looked alertly round at Verrian, with his hands still on his shins. "What's the use of our beating round the bush?"

Verrian delayed his answer long enough to decide against the aimless pun of asking, "What Bushwick?" and merely asked, "What bush?"

"The bush where the milk in the cocoanut grows. You don't pretend that you believe Mrs. Westangle has been getting up all these fairy stunts?"

Verrian returned to his cigar, from which the ashen wraith dropped into his lap. "I guess you'll have to be a little clearer." But as Bushwick continued silently looking at him, the thing could not be left at this point, and he was obliged to ask of his own initiative, "How much do you know?"

Bushwick leaned back in his chair, with his eyes still on Verrian's profile. "As much as Miss Macroyd could tell me."

"Ah, I'm still in the dark," Verrian politely regretted, but not with a tacit wish to wring Miss Macroyd's neck, which he would not have known how to account for.

"Well, she says that Mrs. Westangle has a professional assistant who's doing the whole job for her, and that she came down on the same train with herself and you."

"Did she say that she grabbed the whole victoria for herself and maid at the station?" Verrian demanded, in a burst of rage, "and left us to get here the best way we could?"

Bushwick grinned. "She supposed there were other carriages, and when she found there weren't she hurried the victoria back for you."

"You think she believes all that? I'm glad she has the decency to be ashamed of her behavior."

"I'm not defending her. Miss Macroyd knows how to take care of herself."

The matter rather dropped for the moment, in which Bushwick filled a pipe he took from his pocket and lighted it. After the first few whiffs he took it from his mouth, and, with a droll look across at Verrian, said, "Who was your fair friend?"

If Verrian was going to talk of this thing, he was not going to do it with the burden of any sort of reserve or contrivance on his soul. "This afternoon?" Bushwick nodded; and Verrian added, "That was she." Then he went on, wrathfully: "She's a girl who has to make her living, and she's doing it in a new way that she's invented for herself. She has supposed that the stupid rich, or the lazy rich, who want to entertain people may be willing to pay for ideas, and she proposes to supply the ideas for a money consideration. She's not a guest in the house, and she won't take herself on a society basis at all. I don't know what her history is, and I don't care. She's a lady by

training, and, if she had the accent, I should say she was from the South, for she has the enterprise of the South that comes North and tries to make its living. It's all inexpressibly none of my business, but I happen to be knowing to so much of the case, and if you're knowing to anything else, Mr. Bushwick, I want you to get it straight. That's why I'm talking of it, and not because I think you've any right to know anything about it."

"Thank you," Bushwick returned, unruffled. "It's about what Miss Macroyd told me. That's the reason I don't want the ghost−dance to fail."

Verrian did not notice him. He found it more important to say: "She's so loyal to Mrs. Westangle that she wouldn't have wished, in Mrs. Westangle's interest, to have her presence, or her agency in what is going on, known; but, of course, if Mrs. Westangle chooses to, tell it, that's her affair."

"She would have had to tell it, sooner or later, Mrs. Westangle would; and she only told it to Miss Macroyd this afternoon on compulsion, after Miss Macroyd and I had seen you in the wood−road, and Mrs. Westangle had to account for the young lady's presence there in your company. Then Miss Macroyd had to tell me; but I assure you, my dear fellow, the matter hasn't gone any further."

"Oh, it's quite indifferent to me," Verrian retorted. "I'm nothing but a dispassionate witness of the situation."

"Of course," Bushwick assented, and then he added, with a bonhomie really so amiable that a man with even an unreasonable grudge could hardly resist it, "If you call it dispassionate."

Verrian could not help laughing. "Well, passionate, then. I don't know why it should be so confoundedly vexatious. But somehow I would have chosen Miss Macroyd−− Is shy specially dear to you?"

"Not the least!"

"I would have chosen her as the last person to have the business, which is so inexpressibly none of my business−−"

"Or mine, as I think you remarked," Bushwick interposed.

"Come out through," Verrian concluded, accepting his interposition with a bow.

"I see what you mean," Bushwick said, after a moment's thought. "But, really, I don't think it's likely to go further. If you want to know, I believe Miss Macroyd feels the distinction of being in the secret so much that she'll prefer to hint round till Mrs. Westangle gives the thing away. She had to tell me, because I was there with her when she saw you with the young lady, to keep me from going with my curiosity to you. Come, I do think she's honest about it."

"Don't you think they're rather more dangerous when they're honest?"

"Well, only when they're obliged to be. Cheer up! I don't believe Miss Macroyd is one to spoil sport."

"Oh, I think I shall live through it," Verrian said, rather stiffening again. But he relaxed, in rising from his chair, and said, "Well, good− night, old fellow. I believe I shall go to bed now."

"You won't wait for me till my pipe's out?"

"No, I think not. I seem to be just making it, and if I waited I might lose my grip." He offered Bushwick a friendly hand.

"Do you suppose it's been my soothing conversation? I'm like the actor that the doctor advised to go and see himself act. I can't talk myself sleepy."

"You might try it," Verrian said, going out.

XVIII.

The men who had talked of going away on Thursday seemed to have found it practicable to stay. At any rate, they were all there on the Saturday night for the ghost−seeing, and, of course, none of the women had gone. What was more remarkable, in a house rather full of girls, nobody was sick; or, at least, everybody was well enough to be at dinner, and, after dinner, at the dance, which impatiently, if a little ironically, preceded the supernatural part of the evening's amusement. It was the decorum of a woman who might have been expected not to have it that Mrs. Westangle had arranged that the evening's amusement should not pass the bound between Saturday night and Sunday morning. The supper was to be later, but that was like other eating and drinking on the Sabbath; and it was to be a cold supper.

At half−past ten the dancing stopped in the foyer and the drawing−room, and by eleven the guests were all seated fronting the closed doors of the library. There were not so many of them but that in the handsome space there was interval enough to lend a desired distance to the apparitions; and when the doors were slid aside it was applausively found that there was a veil of gauze falling from the roof to the floor, which promised its aid in heightening the coming mystery. This was again heightened by the universal ignorance as to how the apparitions were to make their advents and on what terms.

It was with an access of a certain nervous anxiety that Verrian found himself next Miss Macroyd, whose frank good−fellowship first expressed itself in a pleasure at the chance which he did not share, and then extended to a confidential sympathy for the success of the enterprise which he did not believe she felt. She laughed, but 'sotto voce', in bending her head close to his and whispering, "I hope she'll be equal to her 'mise en scene'. It's really very nice. So simple." Besides the gauze veil, there was no preparation except in the stretch of black drapery which hid the book−shelves at the farther wall of the library.

"Mrs. Westangle's note is always simplicity," Verrian returned.

"Oh yes, indeed! And you wish to keep up the Westangle convention?"

"I don't see any reason for dropping it."

"Oh, none in the world," she mocked.

He determined to push her, since she had tried to push him, and he asked, "What reason could there be?"

"Now, Mr. Verrian, asking a woman for a reason! I shall begin to think some one else wrote your book, too! Perhaps she'll take up supplying ideas to authors as well as hostesses. Of course, I mean Mrs. Westangle."

Verrian wished he had not tried to push Miss Macroyd, and he was still grinding his teeth in a vain endeavor to get out some fit retort between them, when he saw Bushwick shuffling to his feet, in the front row of the spectators, and heard him beginning a sort of speech.

"Ladies and gentlemen: Mrs. Westangle has chosen me, because a real− estate broker is sometimes an auctioneer, and may be supposed to have the gift of oratory, to make known the conditions on which you may interview the ghosts which you are going to see. Anybody may do it who will comply with the conditions. In the first place, you

have got to be serious, and to think up something that you would really like to know about your past, present, or future. Remember, this is no joking matter, and the only difference between the ghost that you will see here and a real materialization under professional auspices is that the ghost won't charge you anything. Of course, if any lady or gentleman−−especially lady−−wishes to contribute to any charitable object, after a satisfactory interview with the ghost, a hat will be found at the hall−door for the purpose, and Mrs. Westangle will choose the object: I have put in a special plea for my own firm, at a season when the real−estate business is not at its best." By this time Bushwick had his audience laughing, perhaps the more easily because they were all more or less in a hysterical mood, which, whether we own it or not, is always induced by an approximation to the supernatural. He frowned and said, "NO laughing!" and then they laughed the more. When he had waited for them to be quiet he went on gravely, "The conditions are simply these: Each person who chooses may interview the ghost, keeping a respectful distance, but not so far off but that the ghost can distinctly hear a stage whisper. The question put must be seriously meant, and it must be the question which the questioner would prefer to have answered above everything else at the time being. Certain questions will be absolutely ruled out, such as, 'Does Maria love me?' or, 'Has Reuben ever been engaged before?' The laughter interrupted the speaker again, and Verrian hung his head in rage and shame; this stupid ass was spoiling the hope of anything beautiful in the spectacle and turning it into a gross burlesque. Somehow he felt that the girl who had invented it had meant, in the last analysis, something serious, and it was in her behalf that he would have liked to choke Bushwick. All the time he believed that Miss Macroyd, whose laugh sounded above the others, was somehow enjoying his indignation and divining its reason.

"Other questions, touching intemperance or divorce, the questioner will feel must not be asked; though it isn't necessary to more than suggest this, I hope; it will be left entirely to the good taste and good feeling of the−−party. We all know what the temptations of South Dakota and the rum fiend are, and that to err is human, and forgive divine." He paused, having failed to get a laugh, but got it by asking, confidentially, "Where was I? Oh!"−−he caught himself up−−" I remember. Those of you who are in the habit of seeing ghosts need not be told that a ghost never speaks first; and those who have never met an apparition before, but are in the habit of going to the theatre, will recall the fact that in W. Shakespeare's beautiful play of 'Hamlet' the play could not have gone on after the first scene if Horatio had not spoken to the ghost of Hamlet's father and taken the chances of being snubbed. Here there are no chances of that kind; the chances are that you'll wish the ghost had not been entreated: I think that is the phrase."

In the laugh that followed a girl on Miss Macroyd's other hand audibly asked her, "Oh, isn't he too funny?"

"Delicious!" Miss Macroyd agreed. Verrian felt she said it to vex him,.

"Now, there's just one other point," Bushwick resumed, "and then I have done. Only one question can be allowed to each person, but if the questioner is a lady she can ask a question and a half, provided she is not satisfied with the answer. In this case, however, she will only get half an answer. Now I have done, and if my arguments have convinced any one within the sound of my voice that our ghost really means business, I shall feel fully repaid for the pains and expense of getting up these few impromptu remarks, to which I have endeavored to give a humorous character, in order that you may all laugh your laugh out, and no unseemly mirth may interrupt the subsequent proceedings. We will now have a little music, and those who can recall my words will be allowed to sing them."

In the giggling and chatter which ensued the chords softly played passed into ears that might as well have been deaf; but at last there was a general quiescence of expectation, in which every one's eyes were strained to pierce through the gauze curtain to the sombre drapery beyond. The wait was so long that the tension relaxed and a whispering began, and Verrian felt a sickness of pity for the girl who was probably going to make a failure of it. He asked himself what could have happened to her. Had she lost courage? Or had her physical strength, not yet fully renewed, given way under the stress? Or had she, in sheer disgust for the turn the affair had been given by that brute Bushwick, thrown up the whole business? He looked round for Mrs. Westangle; she was not there; he conjectured−−he could only conjecture−−that she was absent conferring with Miss Shirley and trying to save the

day.

A long, deeply sighed "Oh−h−h−h!" shuddering from many lips made him turn abruptly, and he saw, glimmering against the pall at the bottom of the darkened library, a figure vaguely white, in which he recognized a pose, a gesture familiar to him. For the others the figure was It, but for him it was preciously She. It was she, and she was going to carry it through; she was going to triumph, and not fail. A lump came into his 96 throat, and a mist blurred his eyes, which, when it cleared again, left him staring at nothing.

A girl's young voice uttered the common feeling, "Why, is that all?"

"It is, till some one asks the ghost a question; then it will reappear," Bushwick rose to say. "Will Miss Andrews kindly step forward and ask the question nearest her heart?"

"Oh no!" the girl answered, with a sincerity that left no one quite free to laugh.

"Some other lady, then?" Bushwick suggested. No one moved, and he added, "This is a difficulty which had been foreseen. Some gentleman will step forward and put the question next his heart." Again no one offered to go forward, and there was some muted laughter, which Bushwick checked. "This difficulty had been foreseen, too. I see that I shall have to make the first move, and all that I shall require of the audience is that I shall not be supposed to be in collusion with the illusion. I hope that after my experience, whatever it is, some young woman of courage will follow."

He passed into the foyer, and from that came into the library, where he showed against the dark background in an attitude of entreaty slightly burlesqued. The ghost reappeared.

"Shall I marry the woman I am thinking of?" he asked.

The phantom seemed to hesitate; it wavered like a pale reflection cast against the pall. Then, in the tones which Verrian knew, the answer came:

"Ask her. She will tell you."

The phantom had scored a hit, and the applause was silenced with difficulty; but Verrian felt that Miss Shirley had lost ground. It could not have been for the easy cleverness of such a retort that she had planned the affair. Yet, why not? He was taking it too seriously. It was merely business with her.

"And I haven't even the right to half a question more!" Bushwick lamented, in a dramatized dejection, and crossed slowly back from the library to his place.

"Why, haven't you got enough?" one of the men asked, amidst the gay clamor of the women.

The ghost was gone again, and its evanescence was discussed with ready wonder. Another of the men went round to tempt his fate, and the phantom suddenly reappeared so near him that he got a laugh by his start of dismay. "I forgot what I was going to ask, he faltered.

"I know what it was," the apparition answered. "You had better sell."

"But they say it will go to a hundred!" the man protested.

"No back−−talk, Rogers!" Bushwick interposed. "That was the understanding.

"But we didn't understand," one of the girls said, coming to the rescue, "that the ghost was going to answer questions that were not asked. That would give us all away."

"Then the only thing is for you to go and ask before it gets a chance to answer," Bushwick said.

"Well, I will," the girl returned. And she swept round into the library, where she encountered the phantom with a little whoop as it started into sight before her. "I'm not going to be scared out of it!" she said, defiantly. "It's simply this: Did the person I suspect really take the ring."

The answer came, "Look on the floor under your dressing−table!"

"Well, if I find it there," the girl addressed the company, "I'm a spiritualist from this time forth." And she came back to her place, where she remained for some time explaining to those near how she had lately lost her ring and suspected her maid, whom she had dismissed.

Upon the whole, the effect was serious. The women, having once started, needed no more urging. One after another they confronted and questioned the oracle with increasing sincerity.

Miss Macroyd asked Verrian, "Hadn't you better take your chance and stop this flow of fatuity, Mr. Verrian?"

"I'm afraid I should be fatuous, too," he said. "But you?"

"Oh, thank you, I don't believe in ghosts, though this seems to be a very pretty one−−very graceful, I mean. I suppose a graceful woman would be graceful even when a disembodied spirit. I should think she would be getting a little tried with all this questioning; but perhaps we're only reading the fatigue into her. The ghost may be merely overdone."

"It might easily be that," Verrian assented.

"Oh, may I ask it something now?" a girl's voice appealed to Bushwick. It was the voice of that Miss Andrews who had spoken first, and first refused to question the ghost. She was the youngest of Mrs. Westangle's guests, and Verrian had liked her, with a sense of something precious in the prolongation of a child's unconsciousness into the consciousness of girlhood which he found in her. She was always likelier than not to say the thing she thought and felt, whether it was silly and absurd, or whether, as also happened, there was a touch of inspired significance in it, as there is apt to be in the talk of children. She was laughed at, but she was liked, and the freshness of her soul was pleasant to the girls who were putting on the world as hard as they could. She could be trusted to do and say the unexpected. But she was considered a little morbid, and certainly she had an exaltation of the nerves that was at times almost beyond her control.

"Oh, dear!" Miss Macroyd whispered. "What is that strange simpleton going to do, I wonder?"

Verrian did not feel obliged to answer a question not addressed to him, but he, too, wondered and doubted.

The girl, having got her courage together, fluttered with it from her place round to the ghost's in a haste that expressed a fear that it might escape her if she delayed to put it to the test. The phantom was already there, as if it had waited her in the curiosity that followed her. They were taking each other seriously, the girl and the ghost, and if the ghost had been a veridical phantom, in which she could have believed with her whole soul, the girl could not have entreated it more earnestly, more simply.

She bent forward, in her slim, tall figure, with her hands outstretched, and with her tender voice breaking at times in her entreaty. "Oh, I don't know how to begin," she said, quite as if she and the phantom were alone together,

and she had forgotten its supernatural awfulness in a sense of its human quality. "But you will understand, won't you! You'll think it very strange, and it is very unlike the others; but if I'm going to be serious−−"

The white figure stood motionless; but Verrian interpreted its quiet as a kindly intelligence, and the girl made a fresh start in a note a little more piteous than before. "It's about the−−the truth. Do you think if sometimes we don't tell it exactly, but we wish we had very, very much, it will come round somehow the same as if we had told it?"

"I don't understand," the phantom answered. "Say it again−−or differently."

"Can our repentance undo it, or make the falsehood over into the truth?"

"Never!" the ghost answered, with a passion that thrilled to Verrian's heart.

"Oh, dear!" the girl said; and then, as if she had been going to continue, she stopped.

"You've still got your half−question, Miss Andrews," Bushwick interposed.

"Even if we didn't mean it to deceive harmfully?" the girl pursued. "If it was just on impulse, something we couldn't seem to help, and we didn't see it in its true light at the time−−"

The ghost made no answer. It stood motionless.

"It is offended," Bushwick said, without knowing the Shakespearian words. "You've asked it three times half a question, Miss Andrews. Now, Mr. Verrian, it's your turn. You can ask it just one−quarter of a question. Miss Andrews has used up the rest of your share."

Verrian rose awkwardly and stood a long moment before his chair. Then he dropped back again, saying, dryly, "I don't think I want to ask it anything."

The phantom sank straight down as if sinking through the floor, but lay there like a white shawl trailed along the bottom of the dark curtain.

"And is that all?" Miss Macroyd asked Verrian. "I was just getting up my courage to go forward. But now, I suppose−−"

"Oh, dear!" Miss Andrews called out. "Perhaps it's fainted. Hadn't we better−−"

There were formless cries from the women, and the men made a crooked rush forward, in which Verrian did not join. He remained where he had risen, with Miss Macroyd beside him.

"Perhaps it's only a coup de theatre!" she said, with her laugh. "Better wait."

Bushwick was gathering the prostrate figure up. "She has fainted!" he called. "Get some water, somebody!"

XIX.

The early Monday morning train which brought Verrian up to town was so very early that he could sit down to breakfast with his mother only a little later than their usual hour.

She had called joyfully to him from her room, when she heard the rattling of his key as he let himself into the apartment, and, after an exchange of greetings, shouted back and forth before they saw each other, they could come at once to the history of his absence over their coffee. "You must have had a very good time, to stay so long. After you wrote that you would not be back Thursday, I expected it would be Saturday till I got your telegram. But I'm glad you stayed. You certainly needed the rest."

"Yes, if those things are ever a rest." He looked down at his cup while he stirred the coffee in it, and she studied his attitude, since she could not see his face fully, for the secret of any vital change that might have come upon him. It could be that in the interval since she had seen him he had seen the woman who was to take him from her. She was always preparing herself for that, knowing that it must come almost as certainly as death, and knowing that with all her preparation she should not be ready for it. "I've got rather a long story to tell you and rather a strange story," he said, lifting his head and looking round, but not so impersonally that his mother did not know well enough to say to the Swedish serving−woman:

"You needn't stay, Margit. I'll give Mr. Philip his breakfast. Well!" she added, when they were alone.

"Well," he returned, with a smile that she knew he was forcing, "I have seen the girl that wrote that letter."

"Not Jerusha Brown?"

"Not Jerusha Brown, but the girl all the same."

"Now go on, Philip, and don't miss a single word!" she commanded him, with an imperious breathlessness. "You know I won't hurry you or interrupt you, but you must−−you really must−tell me everything. Don't leave out the slightest detail."

"I won't," he said. But she was aware, from time to time, that she was keeping her word better than he was keeping his, in his account of meeting Miss Shirley and all the following events.

"You can imagine," he said, "what a sensation the swooning made, and the commotion that followed it."

"Yes, I can imagine that," she answered. But she was yet so faithful that she would not ask him to go on.

He continued, unasked, "I don't know just how, now, to account for its coming into my head that it was Miss Andrews who was my unknown correspondent. I suppose I've always unconsciously expected to meet that girl, and Miss Andrews's hypothetical case was psychologically so parallel−−"

"Yes, yes!"

"And I've sometimes been afraid that I judged it too harshly−−that it was a mere girlish freak without any sort of serious import."

"I was sometimes afraid so, Philip. But−−"

"And I don't believe now that the hypothetical case brought any intolerable stress of conscience upon Miss Shirley, or that she fainted from any cause but exhaustion from the general ordeal. She was still weak from the sickness she had been through−−too weak to bear the strain of the work she had taken up. Of course, the catastrophe gave the whole surface situation away, and I must say that those rather banal young people behaved very humanely about it. There was nothing but interest of the nicest kind, and, if she is going on with her career, it will be easy enough for her to find engagements after this."

"Why shouldn't she go on?" his mother asked, with a suspicion which she kept well out of sight.

"Well, as well as she could explain afterwards, the catastrophe took her work out of the category of business and made her acceptance in it a matter of sentiment."

"She explained it to you herself?"

"Yes, the general sympathy had penetrated to Mrs. Westangle, though I don't say that she had been more than negatively indifferent to Miss Shirley's claim on her before. As it was, she sent for me to her room the next morning, and I found Miss Shirley alone there. She said Mrs. Westangle would be down in a moment."

Now, indeed, Mrs. Verrian could not govern herself from saying, "I don't like it, Philip."

"I knew you wouldn't. It was what I said to myself at the time. You were so present with me that I seemed to have you there chaperoning the interview." His mother shrugged, and he went on: "She said she wished to tell me something first, and then she said, "I want to do it while I have the courage, if it's courage; perhaps it's just desperation. I am Jerusha Brown."

His mother began, "But you said−−" and then stopped herself.

"I know that I said she wasn't, but she explained, while I sat there rather mum, that there was really another girl, and that the other girl's name was really Jerusha Brown. She was the daughter of the postmaster in the village where Miss Shirley was passing the summer. In fact, Miss Shirley was boarding in the postmaster's family, and the girls had become very friendly. They were reading my story together, and talking about it, and trying to guess how it would come out, just as the letter said, and they simultaneously hit upon the notion of writing to me. It seemed to them that it would be a good joke−−I'm not defending it, mother, and I must say Miss Shirley didn't defend it, either−−to work upon my feelings in the way they tried, and they didn't realize what they had done till Armiger's letter came. It almost drove them wild, she said; but they had a lucid interval, and they took the letter to the girl's father and told him what they had done. He was awfully severe with them for their foolishness, and said they must write to Armiger at once and confess the fact. Then they said they had written already, and showed him the second letter, and explained they had decided to let Miss Brawn write it in her person alone for the reason she gave in it. But Miss Shirley told him she was ready to take her full share of the blame, and, if anything came of it, she authorized him to put the whole blame on her."

Verrian made a pause which his mother took for invitation or permission to ask, "And was he satisfied with that?"

"I don't know. I wasn't, and it's only just to Miss Shirley to say that she wasn't, either. She didn't try to justify it to me; she merely said she was so frightened that she couldn't have done anything. She may have realized more than the Brown girl what they had done."

"The postmaster, did he regard it as anything worse than foolishness?"

"I don't believe he did. At any rate, he was satisfied with what his daughter had done in owning up."

"Well, I always liked that girl's letter. And did they show him your letter?"

"It seems that they did."

"And what did he say about that?"

"I suppose, what I deserved. Miss Shirley wouldn't say, explicitly. He wanted to answer it, but they wouldn't let him. I don't know but I should feel better if he had. I haven't been proud of that letter of mine as time has gone on, mother; I think I behaved very narrow−mindedly, very personally in it."

"You behaved justly."

"Justly? I thought you had your doubts of that. At any rate, I had when it came to hearing the girl accusing herself as if she had been guilty of some monstrous wickedness, and I realized that I had made her feel so."

"She threw herself on your pity!"

"No, she didn't, mother. Don't make it impossible for me to tell you just how it was."

"I won't. Go on."

"I don't say she was manly about it; that couldn't be, but she was certainly not throwing herself on my pity, unless−−unless−−"

"What?"

"Unless you call it so for her to say that she wanted to own up to me, because she could have no rest till she had done so; she couldn't put it behind her till she had acknowledged it; she couldn't work; she couldn't get well."

He saw his mother trying to consider it fairly, and in response he renewed his own resolution not to make himself the girl's advocate with her, but to continue the dispassionate historian of the case. At the same time his memory was filled with the vision of how she had done and said the things he was telling, with what pathos, with what grace, with what beauty in her appeal. He saw the tears that came into her eyes at times and that she indignantly repressed as she hurried on in the confession which she was voluntarily making, for there was no outward stress upon her to say anything. He felt again the charm of the situation, the sort of warmth and intimacy, but he resolved not to let that feeling offset the impartiality of his story.

"No, I don't say she threw herself on your mercy," his mother said, finally. "She needn't have told you anything."

"Except for the reason she gave−−that she couldn't make a start for herself till she had done so. And she has got her own way to make; she is poor. Of course, you may say her motive was an obsession, and not a reason."

"There's reality in it, whatever it is; it's a genuine motive," Mrs. Verrian conceded.

"I think so," Verrian said, in a voice which he tried to keep from sounding too grateful.

Apparently his mother did not find it so. She asked, "What had been the matter with her, did she say?"

"In her long sickness? Oh! A nervous fever of some sort."

"From worrying about that experience?"

Verrian reluctantly admitted, "She said it made her want to die. I don't suppose we can quite realize−−"

"We needn't believe everything she said to realize that she suffered. But girls exaggerate their sufferings. I suppose you told her not to think of it any more?"

Verrian gave an odd laugh. "Well, not unconditionally. I tried to give her my point of view. And I stipulated that she should tell Jerusha Brown all about it, and keep her from having a nervous fever, too."

"That was right. You must see that even cowardice couldn't excuse her selfishness in letting that girl take all the chances."

"And I'm afraid I was not very unselfish myself in my stipulations," Verrian said, with another laugh. "I think that I wanted to stand well with the postmaster."

There was a note of cynical ease in this which Mrs. Verrian found morally some octaves lower than the pitch of her son's habitual seriousness in what concerned himself, but she could not make it a censure to him. "And you were able to reassure her, so that she needn't think of it any more?"

"What would you have wished me to do?" he returned, dryly. "Don't you think she had suffered enough?"

"Oh, in this sort of thing it doesn't seem the question of suffering. If there's wrong done the penalty doesn't right it."

The notion struck Verrian's artistic sense. "That's true. That would make the 'donnee' of a strong story. Or a play. It's a drama of fate. It's Greek. But I thought we lived under another dispensation."

"Will she try to get more of the kind of thing she was doing for Mrs. Westangle at once? Or has she some people?"

"No; only friends, as I understand."

"Where is she from? Up country?"

"No, she's from the South."

"I don't like Southerners!"

"I know you don't, mother. But you must honor the way they work and get on when they come North and begin doing for themselves. Besides, Miss Shirley's family went South after the war−−"

"Oh, not even a REAL Southerner!"

"Mother!"

"I know! I'm not fair. I ought to beg her pardon. And I ought to be glad it's all over. Shall you see her again?"

"It might happen. But I don't know how or when. We parted friends, but we parted strangers, so far as any prevision of the future is concerned," Verrian said.

His mother drew a long breath, which she tried to render inaudible. "And the girl that asked her the strange questions, did you see her again?"

"Oh yes. She had a curious fascination. I should like to tell you about her. Do you think there's such a thing as a girl's being too innocent?"

"It isn't so common as not being innocent enough."

"But it's more difficult?"

"I hope you'll never find it so, my son," Mrs. Verrian said. And for the first time she was intentionally personal. "Go on."

"About Miss Andrews?"

"Whichever you please."

"She waylaid me in the afternoon, as I was coming home from a walk, and wanted to talk with me about Miss Shirley."

"I suppose Miss Shirley was the day's heroine after what had happened?"

"The half−day's, or quarter−day's heroine, perhaps. She left on the church train for town yesterday morning soon after I saw her. Miss Andrews seemed to think I was an authority on the subject, and she approached me with a large−eyed awe that was very amusing, though it was affecting, too. I suppose that girls must have many worships for other girls before they have any worship for a man. This girl couldn't separate Miss Shirley, on the lookout for another engagement, from the psychical part she had played. She raved about her; she thought she was beautiful, and she wanted to know all about her and how she could help her. Miss Andrews's parents are rich but respectable, I understand, and she's an only child. I came in for a share of her awe; she had found out that I was not only not Verrian the actor, but an author of the same name, and she had read my story with passionate interest, but apparently in that unliterary way of many people without noticing who wrote it; she seemed to have thought it was Harding Davis or Henry James; she wasn't clear which. But it was a good deal to have had her read it at all in that house; I don't believe anybody else had, except Miss Shirley and Miss Macroyd."

Mrs. Verrian deferred a matter that would ordinarily have interested her supremely to an immediate curiosity. "And how came she to think you would know so much about Miss Shirley?"

Verrian frowned. "I think from Miss Macroyd. Miss Macroyd seems to have taken a grandmotherly concern in my affairs through the whole week. Perhaps she resented having behaved so piggishly at the station the day we came, and meant to take it out of Miss Shirley and myself. She had seen us together in the woods, one day, and she must have told it about. Mrs. Westangle wouldn't have spoken of us together, because she never speaks of anything unless it is going to count; and there was no one else who knew of our acquaintance."

"Why, my son, if you went walking in the woods with the girl, any one might have seen you."

"I didn't. It was quite by accident that we met there. Miss Shirley was anxious to keep her presence in the house a secret from everybody."

Mrs. Verrian would not take any but the open way, with this. She would not deal indirectly, with it, or in any wise covertly or surreptitiously. "It seems to me that Miss Shirley has rather a fondness for secrecy," she said.

"I think she has," Verrian admitted. "Though, in this case, it was essential to the success of her final scheme. But she is a curious study. I suppose that timidity is at the bottom of all fondness for secrecy, isn't it?"

"I don't know. She doesn't seem to be timid in everything."

"Say it out, mother!" Verrian challenged her with a smile. "You're not timid, anyway!"

"She had the courage to join in that letter, but not the courage to own her part in it. She was brave enough to confess that she had been sick of a nervous fever from the answer you wrote to the Brown girl, but she wouldn't have been brave enough to confess anything at all if she had believed she would be physically or morally strong enough to keep it."

"Perhaps nobody−−nobody but you, mother−−is brave in the right time and place."

She knew that this was not meant in irony. "I am glad you say that, Philip."

"It's only your due. But aren't you a little too hard upon cowards, at times? For the sort of person she is, if you infer the sort from the worst appearance she has made in the whole business, I think she has done pretty well."

"Why had she left the Brown girl to take all your resentment alone for the last six or eight months?"

"She may have thought that she was getting her share of the punishment in the fever my resentment brought on?"

"Philip, do you really believe that her fever, if she had one, came from that?"

"I think she believes it, and there's no doubt but she was badly scared."

"Oh, there's no doubt of that!"

"But come, mother, why should we take her at the worst? Of course, she has a complex nature. I see that as clearly as you do. I don't believe we look at her diversely, in the smallest particular. But why shouldn't a complex nature be credited with the same impulses towards the truth as a single nature? Why shouldn't we allow that Miss Shirley had the same wish to set herself right with me as Miss Andrews would have had in her place?"

"I dare say she wished to set herself right with you, but not from the same wish that Miss Andrews would have had. Miss Andrews would not have wished you to know the truth for her own sake. Her motive would have been direct−straight."

"Yes; and we will describe her as a straight line, and Miss Shirley as a waving line. Why shouldn't the waving line, at its highest points, touch the same altitude as the straight line?"

"It wouldn't touch it all the time, and in character, or nature, as you call it, that is the great thing. It's at the lowest points that the waving line is dangerous."

"Well, I don't deny that. But I'm anxious to be just to a person who hasn't experienced a great deal of mercy for what, after all, wasn't such a very heinous thing as I used to think it. You must allow that she wasn't obliged to tell me anything about herself."

"Yes, she was, Philip. As I said before, she hadn't the physical or moral strength to keep it from you when she was brought face to face with you. Besides−−" Mrs. Verrian hesitated.

"Out with it, mother! We, at least, won't have any concealments."

"She may have thought, she could clinch it in that way."

"Clinch what?"

"You know. Is she pretty?"

"She's−−interesting."

"That can always be managed. Is she tall?"

"NO, I think she's rather out of style there; she's rather petite."

"And what's her face like?"

"Well, she has no particular complexion, but it's not thick. Her eyes are the best of her, though there isn't much of them. They're the 'waters on a starry night' sort, very sweet and glimmering. She has a kind of ground−colored hair and a nice little chin. Her mouth helps her eyes out; it looks best when she speaks; it's pathetic in the play of the lips."

"I see," Mrs. Verrian said.

XX.

The following week Verrian and his mother were at a show of paintings, in the gallery at the rear of a dealer's shop, and while they were bending together to look at a picture he heard himself called to in a girlish voice, "Oh, Mr. Verrian!" as if his being there was the greatest wonder in the world.

His mother and he lifted themselves to encounter a tall, slim girl, who was stretching her hand towards him, and who now cried out, joyously, "Oh, Mr. Verrian, I thought it must be you, but I was afraid it wasn't as soon as I spoke. Oh, I'm so glad to see you; I want so much to have you know my mother−−Mr. Verrian," she said, presenting him.

"And I you mine," Verrian responded, in a violent ellipse, and introduced his own mother, who took in the fact of Miss Andrews's tall thinness, topped with a wide, white hat and waving white plumes, and her little face, irregular and somewhat gaunt, but with a charm in the lips and eyes which took the elder woman's heart with pathos. She made talk with Mrs. Andrews, who affected one as having the materials of social severity in her costume and manner.

"Oh, I didn't believe I should ever see you again," the girl broke out impulsively upon Verrian. "Oh, I wanted to ask you so about Miss Shirley. Have you seen her since you got back?"

"No," Verrian said, "I haven't seen her."

"Oh, I thought perhaps you had. I've been to the address that Mrs. Westangle gave me, but she isn't there any more; she's gone up into Harlem somewhere, and I haven't been able to call again. Oh, I do feel so anxious about her. Oh, I do hope she isn't ill. Do you think she is?"

"I don't believe so," Verrian began. But she swept over his prostrate remark.

"Oh, Mr. Verrian, don't you think she's wonderful? I've been telling mother about it, and I don't feel at all the way she does. Do you?"

"How does she feel? I must know that before I say."

"Why, of course! I hadn't told you! She thinks it was a make−up between Miss Shirley and that Mr. Bushwick. But I say it couldn't have been. Do you think it could?"

Verrian found the suggestion so distasteful, for a reason which he did not quite seize himself, that he answered, resentfully, "It could have been, but I don't think it was."

"I will tell her what you say. Oh, may I tell her what you say?"

"I don't see why you shouldn't. It isn't very important, either way, is it?"

"Oh, don't you think so? Not if it involved pretending what wasn't true?"

She bent towards him in such anxious demand that he could not help smiling.

"The whole thing was a pretence, wasn't it?" he suggested.

"Yes, but that would have been a pretence that we didn't know of."

"It would be incriminating to that extent, certainly," Verrian owned, ironically. He found the question of Miss Shirley's blame for the collusion as distasteful as the supposition of the collusion, but there was a fascination in the innocence before him, and he could not help playing with it.

Sometimes Miss Andrews apparently knew that he was playing with her innocence, and sometimes she did not. But in either case she seemed to like being his jest, from which she snatched a fearful joy. She was willing to prolong the experience, and she drifted with him from picture to picture, and kept the talk recurrently to Miss Shirley and the phenomena of Seeing Ghosts.

Her mother and Mrs. Verrian evidently got on together better than either of them at first expected. When it came to their parting, through Mrs. Andrews's saying that she must be going, she shook hands with Mrs. Verrian and said to Philip, "I am so glad to have met you, Mr. Verrian. Will you come and see us?"

"Yes, thank you," he answered, taking the hand she now offered him, and then taking Miss Andrews's hand, while the girl's eyes glowed with pleasure. "I shall be very glad."

"Oh, shall you?" she said, with her transparent sincerity. "And you won't forget Thursdays! But any day at five we have tea."

"Thank you," Verrian said. I might forget the Thursdays, but I couldn't forget all the days of the week."

Miss Andrews laughed and blushed at once. "Then we shall expect you every day."

"Well, every day but Thursday," he promised.

When the mother and daughter had gone Mrs. Verrian said, "She is a great admirer of yours, Philip. She's read your story, and I suspect she wants an opportunity to talk with you about it."

"You mean Mrs. Andrews?"

"Yes. I suppose the daughter hasn't waited for an opportunity. The mother had read that publisher's paragraph about your invalid, and wanted to know if you had ever heard from her again. Women are personal in their literary interests."

Philip asked, in dismay, "You didn't give it away did you, mother?"

"Certainly not, my dear. You have brought me up too carefully."

"Of course. I didn't imagine you had."

Then, as they could not pretend to look at the pictures any longer, they went away, too. Their issue into the open air seemed fraught with novel emotion for Mrs. Verrian. "Well, now," she said, "I have seen the woman I would be willing my son should marry."

"Child, you mean," Philip said, not pretending that he did not know she meant Miss Andrews.

"That girl," his mother returned, "is innocence itself. Oh, Philip, dear, do marry her!"

"Well, I don't know. If her mother is behaving as sagely with her as you are with me the chances are that she won't let me. Besides, I don't know that I want to marry quite so much innocence."

"She is conscience incarnate," his mother uttered, perfervidly. "You could put your very soul in her keeping."

"Then you would be out of a job, mother."

"Oh, I am not worthy of the job, my dear. I have always felt that. I am too complex, and sometimes I can't see the right alone, as she could."

Philip was silent a moment while he lost the personal point of view. "I suspect we don't see the right when we see it alone. We ought to see the wrong, too."

"Ah, Philip, don't let your fancy go after that girl!"

"Miss Andrews? I thought−−"

"Don't you be complex, my dear. You know I mean Miss Shirley. What has become of her, I wonder. I heard Miss Andrews asking you."

"I wasn't able to tell her. Do you want me to try telling you?"

"I would rather you never could."

Philip laughed sardonically. "Now, I shall forget Thursdays and all the other days, too. You are a very unwise parent, mother."

They laughed with each other at each other, and treated her enthusiasm for Miss Andrews as the joke it partly was. Mrs. Verrian did not follow him up about her idol, and a week or so later she was able to affect a decent surprise when he came in at the end of an afternoon and declined the cup of tea she proposed on the ground that he had been taking a cup of tea with the Andrewses. "You have really been there?"

"Didn't you expect me to keep my promise?"

"But I was afraid I had put a stumbling−block in the way."

"Oh, I found I could turn the consciousness you created in me into literary material, and so I was rather eager to go. I have got a point for my new story out of it. I shall have my fellow suffer all I didn't suffer in meeting the girl he knows his mother wants him to marry. I got on very well with those ladies. Mrs. Andrews is the mother of

innocence, but she isn't innocence. She managed to talk of my story without asking about the person who wanted to anticipate the conclusion. That was what you call complex. She was insincere; it was the only thing she wanted to talk about."

"I don't believe it, Philip. But what did Miss Andrews talk about?"

"Well, she is rather an optimistic conscience. She talked about books and plays that some people do not think are quite proper. I have a notion that, where the point involved isn't a fact of her own experience, she is not very severe about it. You think that would be quite safe for me?"

"Philip, I don't like your making fun of her!"

"Oh, she wasn't insipid; she was only limpid. I really like her, and, as for reverencing her, of course I feel that in a way she is sacred." He added, after a breath, " Too sacred. We none of us can expect to marry Eve before the Fall now; perhaps we have got over wanting to."

"You are very perverse, my dear. But you will get over that."

"Don't take away my last defence, mother."

Verrian began to go rather regularly to the Andrews house, or, at least, he was accused of doing it by Miss Macroyd when, very irregularly, he went one day to see her. "How did you know it?" he asked.

"I didn't say I knew it. I only wished to know it. Now I am satisfied. I met another friend of yours on Sunday." She paused for him to ask who; but he did not ask. "I see you are dying to know what friend: Mr. Bushwick."

"Oh, he's a good−fellow. I wonder I don't run across him."

"Perhaps that's because you never call on Miss Shirley." Miss Macroyd waited for this to take effect, but he kept a glacial surface towards her, and she went on:

"They were walking together in the park at noon. I suppose they had been to church together."

Verrian manifested no more than a polite interest in the fact. He managed so well that he confirmed Miss Macroyd in a tacit conjecture. She went on: " Miss Shirley was looking quite blooming for her. But so was he, for that matter. Why don't you ask if they inquired for you?"

"I thought you would tell me without."

"I will tell you if he did. He was very cordial in his inquiries; and I had to pretend, to gratify him, that you were very well. I implied that you came here every Tuesday, but your Thursdays were dedicated to Miss Andrews."

"You are a clever woman, Miss Macroyd. I should never have thought of so much to say on such an uninteresting subject. And Miss Shirley showed no curiosity?"

"Ah, she is a clever woman, too. She showed the prettiest kind of curiosity−−so perfectly managed. She has a studio−−I don't know just how she puts it to use−−with a painter girl in one of those studio apartment houses on the West Side: The Veronese, I believe. You must go and see her; I'll let you have next Tuesday off; Tuesday's her day, too."

"You are generosity itself, Miss Macroyd."

"Yes, there's nothing mean about me," she returned, in slang rather older than she ordinarily used. "If you're not here next Tuesday I shall know where you are."

"Then I must take a good many Tuesdays off, unless I want to give myself away."

"Oh, don't do that, Mr. Verrian! Please! Or else I can't let you have any Tuesday off."

XXI.

Upon the whole, Verrian thought he would go to see Miss Shirley the next Tuesday, but he did not say so to Miss Macroyd. Now that he knew where the girl was, all the peculiar interest she had inspired in him renewed itself. It was so vivid that he could not pay his usual Thursday call at Miss Andrews's, and it filled his mind to the exclusion of the new story he had begun to write. He loafed his mornings away at his club, and he lunched there, leaving his mother to lunch alone, and was dreamily preoccupied in the evenings which he spent at home, sitting at his desk, with the paper before him, unable to coax the thoughts from his brain to its alluring blank, but restive under any attempts of hers to talk with him.

In his desperation he would have gone to the theatre, but the fact that the ass who rightfully called himself Verrian was playing at one of them blocked his way, through his indignation, to all of them. By Saturday afternoon the tedious time had to be done something with, and he decided to go and see what the ass was like.

He went early, and found himself in the end seat of a long row of many rows of women, who were prolonging the time of keeping their hats on till custom obliged them to take them off. He gave so much notice to the woman next him as to see that she was deeply veiled as well as widely hatted, and then he lapsed into a dreary muse, which was broken by the first strains of the overture. Then he diverted himself by looking round at all those ranks of women lifting their arms to take out them hat−pins and dropping them to pin their hats to the seat−backs in front of them, or to secure them somehow in their laps. Upon the whole, he thought the manoeuvre graceful and pleasing; he imagined a consolation in it for the women, who, if they were forced by public opinion to put off their charming hats, would know how charmingly they did it. Each turned a little, either her body or her head, and looked in any case out of the corner of her eyes; and he was phrasing it all for a scene in his story, when he looked round at his neighbor to see how she had managed, or was managing, with her veil. At the same moment she looked at him, and their eyes met.

"Mr. Verrian!"

"Miss Shirley!"

The stress of their voices fell upon different parts of the sentences they uttered, but did not commit either of them to a special role.

"How very strange we should meet here!" she said, with pleasure in her voice. "Do you know, I have been wanting to come all winter to see this man, on account of his name? And to think that I should meet the other Mr. Verrian as soon as I yielded to the temptation."

"I have just yielded myself," Verrian said. "I hope you don't feel punished for yielding."

"Oh, dear, no! It seems a reward."

She did not say why it seemed so, and he suggested, "The privilege of comparing the histrionic and the literary Verrian?"

"Could there be any comparison?" she came back, gayly.

"I don't know. I haven't seen the histrionic Verrian yet."

They were laughing when the curtain rose, and the histrionic Verrian had his innings for a long, long first act. When the curtain fell she turned to the literary Verrian and said, "Well?"

"He lasted a good while," Verrian returned.

"Yes. Didn't he?" She looked at the little watch in her wristlet. "A whole hour! Do you know, Mr. Verrian, I am going to seem very rude. I am going to leave you to settle this question of superiority; I know you'll be impartial. I have an appointment−−with the dressmaker, to be specific−−at half−past four, and it's half−past three now, and I couldn't well leave in the middle of the next act. So I will say good−bye now−−"

"Don't!" he entreated. "I couldn't bear to be left alone with this dreadful double of mine. Let me go out with you."

"Can I accept such self−sacrifice? Well!"

She had put on her hat and risen, and he now stepped out of his place to let her pass and then followed her. At the street entrance he suggested, "A hansom, or a simple trolley?"

"I don't know," she murmured, meditatively, looking up the street as if that would settle it. "If it's only half−past three now, I should have time to get home more naturally."

"Oh! And will you let me walk with you?"

"Why, if you're going that way."

"I will say when I know which way it is."

They started on their walk so blithely that they did not sadden in the retrospect of their joint experiences at Mrs. Westangle's. By the time they reached the park gate at Columbus Circle they had come so distinctly to the end of their retrospect that she made an offer of letting him leave her, a very tacit offer, but unmistakable, if he chose to take it. He interpreted her hesitation as he chose. "No," he said, "it won't be any longer if we go up through the park."

She drew in her breath softly, smoothing down her muff with her right hand while she kept her left in it. "And it will certainly be pleasanter." When they were well up the path, in that part of it where it deflects from the drive without approaching the street too closely, and achieves something of seclusion, she said:

"Your speaking of him just now makes me want to tell you something, Mr. Verrian. You would hear of it very soon, anyway, and I feel that it is always best to be very frank with you; but you'll regard it as a secret till it comes out."

The currents that had been playing so warmly in and out of Verrian's heart turned suddenly cold. He said, with joyless mocking, "You know, I'm used to keeping your secrets. I−−shall feel honored, I'm sure, if you trust me with another."

"Yes," she returned, pathetically, "you have always been faithful−−even in your wounds." It was their joint tribute to the painful past, and they had paid no other. She was looking away from him, but he knew she was aware of his hanging his head. "That's all over now," she uttered, passionately. "What I wanted to say−−to tell you−−is that I

am engaged to Mr. Bushwick."

He could have answered that she had no need to tell him. The cold currents in and out of his heart stiffened frozenly and ceased to flow; his heart itself stood still for an eternal instant. It was in this instant that he said, "He is a fine fellow." Afterwards, amid the wild bounding of his recovered pulse, he could add, "I congratulate him; I congratulate you both."

"Thank you," she said. "No one knows as I do how good he is−−has been, all through." Probably she had not meant to convey any reproach to Verrian by Bushwick's praise, but he felt reproach in it. "It only happened last week. You do wish me happy, don't you? No one knows what a winter I have had till now. Everything seeming to fail−−"

She choked, and did not say more. He said, aimlessly, "I am sorry−−"

"Let me sit down a moment," she begged. And she dropped upon the bench at which she faltered, and rested there, as if from the exhaustion of running. When she could get her breath she began again: "There is something else I want to tell you."

She stopped. And he asked, to prompt her, "Yes?"

"Thank you," she answered, piteously. And she added, with superficial inconsequence, "I shall always think you were very cruel."

He did not pretend not to know what she meant, and he said, "I shall always think so, too. I tried to revenge myself for the hurt your harmless hoax did my vanity. Of course, I made believe at the time that I was doing an act of justice, but I never was able to brave it out afterwards."

"But you were−−you were doing an act of justice. I deserved what you said, but I didn't deserve what has followed. I meant no harm−−it was a silly prank, and I have suffered for it as if it were a crime, and the consequences are not ended yet. I should think that, if there is a moral government of the universe, the Judge of all the earth would know when to hold his hand. And now the worst of it is to come yet." She caught Verrian's arm, as if for help.

"Don't−−don't!" he besought her. "What will people think?"

"Yes, Yes!" she owned, releasing him and withdrawing to the other end of the seat.

"But it almost drives me wild. What shall I do? You ought to know. It is your fault. You have frightened me out of daring to tell the truth."

Had he, indeed, done that? Verrian asked himself, and it seemed to him that he had done something like it. If it was so, he must help her over her fear now. He answered, bluntly, harshly: "You must tell him all about it−−"

"But if he won't believe me? Do you think he will believe me? Would you believe me?"

"You have nothing to do with that. There is nothing for you but to tell him the whole story. You mustn't share such a secret with any one but your husband. When you tell him it will cease to be my secret."

"Yes, yes."

"Well, then, you must tell him, unless−−"

"Yes," she prompted.

Then they were both silent, looking intensely into each other's eyes. In that moment all else of life seemed to melt and swim away from Verrian and leave him stranded upon an awful eminence confronting her.

"Hello, hello!" a gay voice called, as if calling to them both. "What are you two conspiring?" Bushwick, as suddenly as if he had fallen from the sky or started up from the earth, stood before them, and gave a hand to each−−his right to Verrian, his left to Miss Shirley. "How are you, Verrian ? How are you, Miss Shirley?" He mocked her in the formality of his address. "I've been shadowing you ever since you came into the park, but I thought I wouldn't interrupt till you seemed to have got through your conversation. May I ask what it was all about? It seemed very absorbing, from a respectful distance."

"Very absorbing, indeed," Miss Shirley said, making room for him between them. "Sit down and let me tell you. You're to be a partner in the secret."

"Silent partner," Bushwick suggested.

"I hope you'll always be silent," the girl shared in his drolling. She began and told the whole story to the last detail, sparing neither herself nor Verrian, who listened as if he were some one else not concerned, and kept saying to himself, "what courage!" Bushwick listened as mutely, with a face that, to Verrian's eye, seemed to harden from its light jocosity into a severity he had not seen in it before. "It was something," she ended towards Bushwick, with a catch in her breath, "that you had to know."

"Yes," he answered, tonelessly.

"And now−−she attempted a little forlorn playfulness−−"don't you think he gave me what I deserved?"

Bushwick rose up and took her hand under his arm, keeping his left hand upon hers.

"He! Who?"

"Mr. Verrian."

"I don't know any Mr. Verrian. Come, you'll take cold here."

He turned his back on Verrian, who fancied a tremor in her hat, as if she would look round at him; but then, as if she divined Bushwick's intention, she did not look round, and together they left him.

It was days before Verrian could confess himself of the fact to his mother, who listened with the justice instinctive in her. She still had not spoken when he ended, and he said, "I have thought it all over, and I feel that he did right. He did the only thing that a man in love with her could do. And I don't wonder he's in love with her. Yes"−−he stayed his mother, imperatively−−"and such a man as he, though he ground me in the dirt and stamped on me, I will say, it, is worthy of any woman. He can believe in a woman, and that's the first thing that's needed to make a woman like her, true. I don't envy his job." He was speaking self− contradictorily, irrelevantly, illogically, as a man thinks. He went on in that way, getting himself all out. "She isn't single−hearted, but she's faithful. She'll never betray him now. She's never given him any reason to distrust her. She's the kind that can keep on straight with any one she's begun. straight with. She told him all that before me be cause she wanted me to know−−to realize−−that she had told him. It took courage."

Mrs. Verrian had thought of generalizing, but she seized a single point. "Perhaps not so much courage as you think. You mustn't let such bravado impose upon you, Philip. I've no doubt she knew her ground."

"She took the chance of his casting her off."

"She knew he wouldn't. She knew him, and she knew you. She knew that if he cast her off−−"

"Mother! Don't say it! I can't bear it!"

His mother did not say it, or anything more, then. Late at night she came to him. "Are you asleep, Philip?"

"Asleep? I!"

"I didn't suppose you were. But I have had a note to−day which I must answer. Mrs. Andrews has asked us to dinner on Saturday. Philip, if you could see that sweet girl as I do, in all her goodness and sincerity−−"

"I think I do, mother. And I wouldn't be guilty of her unhappiness for the world. You must decline."

Well, perhaps you are right." Mrs. Verrian went away, softly, sighing. As she sealed her reply to Mrs. Andrews, she sighed again, and made the reflection which a mother seldom makes with regard to her son, before his marriage, that men do not love women for their goodness.