

The Best Man

Edith Wharton

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I

DUSK had fallen, and the circle of light shed by the lamp of Governor Mornway's writing-table just rescued from the surrounding dimness his own imposing bulk, thrown back in a deep chair in the lounging attitude habitual to him at that hour.

When the Governor of Midsylvania rested he rested completely. Five minutes earlier he had been bowed over his office desk, an Atlas with the State on his shoulders; now, his working hours over, he had the air of a man who has spent his day in desultory pleasure, and means to end it in the enjoyment of a good dinner. This freedom from care threw into relief the hovering fidgetiness of his sister, Mrs. Nimick, who, just outside the circle of lamplight, haunted the warm gloom of the hearth, from which the wood fire now and then sent up an exploring flash into her face.

Mrs. Nimick's presence did not usually minister to repose; but the Governor's serenity was too deep to be easily disturbed, and he felt the calmness of a man who knows there is a mosquito in the room, but has drawn the netting close about his head. This calmness reflected itself in the accent with which he said, throwing himself back to smile up at his sister: "You know I am not going to make any appointments for a week."

It was the day after the great reform victory which had put John Mornway for the second time at the head of his State, a triumph compared with which even the mighty battle of his first election sank into insignificance, and he leaned back with the sense of unassailable placidity which follows upon successful effort.

Mrs. Nimick murmured an apology. "I didn't understand I saw in this morning's papers that the Attorney-General was reappointed."

"Oh, Fleetwood his reappointment was involved in the campaign. He's one of the principles I represent!"

Mrs. Nimick smiled a little tartly. "It seems odd to some people to think of Mr. Fleetwood in connection with principles."

The Governor's smile had no answering acerbity; the mention of his Attorney-General's name had set his blood humming with the thrill of the fight, and he wondered how it was that Fleetwood had not already been in to clasp hands with him over their triumph.

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"No," he said, good-humoredly, "two years ago Fleetwood's name didn't stand for principles of any sort; but I believed in him, and look what he's done for me! I thought he was too big a man not to see in time that statesmanship is a finer thing than practical politics, and now that I've given him a chance to make the discovery, he's on the way to becoming just such a statesman as the country needs."

"Oh, it's a great deal easier and pleasanter to believe in people," replied Mrs. Nimick, in a tone full of occult allusion, "and, of course, we all knew that Mr. Fleetwood would have a hearing before any one else."

The Governor took this imperturbably. "Well, at any rate, he isn't going to fill all the offices in the State; there will probably be one or two to spare after he has helped himself, and when the time comes I'll think over yourt;

"Oh, it's a great deal easier and pleasanter to believe in people," replied Mrs. Nimick, in a tone full of occult allusion, "and, of course, we all knew that Mr. Fleetwood would have a hearing before any one else."

The Governor took this imperturbably. "Well, at any rate, he isn't going to fill all the offices in the State; there will probably be one or two to spare after he has helped himself, and when the time comes I'll think over your man. I'll consider him."

Mrs. Nimick brightened. "It would make such a difference to Jack — it might mean anything to the poor boy to have Mr. Ashford appointed!"

The Governor held up a warning hand.

"Oh, I know, one mustn't say that, or at least you mustn't listen. You're so dreadfully afraid of nepotism. But I'm not asking for anything for Jack — I have never asked for a crust for any of us, thank Heaven! No one can point to me — " Mrs. Nimick checked herself suddenly and continued in a more impersonal tone: "But there's no harm, surely, in my saying a word for Mr. Ashford, when I know that he's actually under consideration, and I don't see why the fact that Jack is in his office should prevent my speaking."

"On the contrary," said the Governor, "it implies, on your part, a personal knowledge of Mr. Ashford's qualifications which may be of great help to me in reaching a decision."

Mrs. Nimick never quite knew how to meet him when he took that tone, and the flickering fire made her face for a moment the picture of uncertainty; then at all hazards she launched out: "Well, I have Ella's promise, at any rate."

The Governor sat upright. "Ella's promise?"

"To back me up. She thoroughly approves of him!"

The Governor smiled. "You talk as if Ella had a political salon and distributed lettres de cachet! I'm glad she approves of Ashford; but if you think my wife makes my appointments for me — " He broke off with a laugh at the superfluity of such a protest.

Mrs. Nimick reddened. "One never knows how you will take the simplest thing. What harm is there in my saying that Ella approves of Mr. Ashford? I thought you liked her to take an interest in your work."

"I like it immensely. But I shouldn't care to have it take that form."

"What form?"

"That of promising to use her influence to get people appointed. But you always talk of politics in the vocabulary of European courts. Thank Heaven, Ella has less imagination. She has her sympathies, of course, but she doesn't think they can affect the distribution of offices."

Mrs. Nimick gathered up her furs with an air at once crestfallen and resentful. "I'm sorry — I always seem to say the wrong thing. I'm sure I came with the best intentions — it's natural that your sister should want to be with you at such a happy moment."

"Of course it is, my dear," exclaimed the Governor genially, as he rose to grasp the hands with which she was nervously adjusting her wraps.

Mrs. Nimick, who lived a little way out of town, and whose visits to her brother were apparently achieved at the cost of immense effort and mysterious complications, had come to congratulate him on his victory, and to sound him regarding the nomination to a coveted post of the lawyer in whose firm her eldest son was a clerk. In the urgency of the latter errand she had rather lost sight of the former, but her face softened as the Governor,

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keeping both her hands in his, said in the voice which always seemed to put the most generous interpretation on her motives: "I was sure you would be one of the first to give me your blessing."

"Oh, your success — no one feels it more than I do!" sighed Mrs. Nimick, always at home in the emotional key. "I keep in the background. I make no noise, I claim no credit, but whatever happens, no one shall ever prevent my rejoicing in my brother's success!"

Mrs. Nimick's felicitations were always couched in the conditional, with a side-glance at dark contingencies, and the Governor, smiling at the familiar construction, returned cheerfully: "I don't see why any one should want to deprive you of that privilege."

"They couldn't — they couldn't — " Mrs. Nimick heroically affirmed.

"Well, I'm in the saddle for another two years at any rate, so you had better put in all the rejoicing you can."

"Whatever happens — whatever happens!" cried Mrs. Nimick, melting on his bosom.

"The only thing likely to happen at present is that you will miss your train if I let you go on saying nice things to me much longer."

Mrs. Nimick at this dried her eyes, renewed her clutch on her draperies, and stood glancing sentimentally about the room while her brother rang for the carriage.

"I take away a lovely picture of you," she murmured. "It's wonderful what you've made of this hideous house."

"Ah, not I, but Ella — there she does reign undisputed," he acknowledged, following her glance about the library, which wore an air of permanent habitation, of slowly formed intimacy with its inmates, in marked contrast to the gaudy impersonality of the usual executive apartment.

"Oh, she's wonderful, quite wonderful. I see she has got those imported damask curtains she was looking at the other day at Fielding's. When I am asked how she does it all, I always say it's beyond me!" Mrs. Nimick murmured.

"It's an art like another," smiled the Governor. "Ella has been used to living in tents and she has the knack of giving them a wonderful look of permanence."

"She certainly makes the most extraordinary bargains — all the knack in the world won't take the place of such curtains and carpets."

"Are they good? I'm glad to hear it. But all the good curtains and carpets won't make a house comfortable to live in. There's where the knack comes in, you see."

He recalled with a shudder the lean Congressional years — the years before his marriage — when Mrs. Nimick had lived with him in Washington, and the daily struggle in the House had been combined with domestic conflicts almost equally recurrent. The offer of a foreign mission, though disconnecting him from active politics, had the advantage of freeing him from his sister's tutelage, and in Europe, where he remained for two years, he had met the lady who was to become his wife. Mrs. Renfield was the widow of one of the diplomatists who languish in perpetual first secretary-ship at our various embassies. Her life had given her ease without triviality, and a sense of the importance of politics seldom found in ladies of her nationality. She regarded a public life as the noblest and most engrossing of careers, and combined with great social versatility an equal gift for reading blue-books and studying debates. So sincere was the latter taste that she passed without regret from the amenities of a European life well stocked with picturesque intimacies to the rawness of the Midsylvanian capital. She helped Mornway in his fight for the Governorship as a man likes to be helped by a woman — by her tact, her good looks, her memory for faces, her knack of saying the right thing to the right person, and her capacity for obscure hard work in the background of his public activity. But, above all, she helped him by making his private life smooth and harmonious. For a man careless of personal ease, Mornway was singularly alive to the domestic amenities. Attentive service, well-ordered dinners, brightly burning fires, and a scent of flowers in the house — these material details, which had come to seem the extension of his wife's personality, the inevitable result of her nearness, were as agreeable to him after five years of marriage as in the first surprise of his introduction to them. Mrs. Nimick had kept house jerkily and vociferously; Ella performed the same task silently and imperceptibly, and the results were all in favor of the latter method. Though neither the Governor nor his wife had large means, the household, under Mrs. Mornway's guidance, took on an air of sober luxury as agreeable to her husband as it was exasperating to her sister-in-law. The domestic machinery ran without a jar. There were no upheavals, no debts, no squalid cookless hiatuses between intervals of showy hospitality; the household moved along on lines of quiet elegance and comfort, behind which only the eye of the housekeeping sex could have detected a gradually

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increasing scale of expense.

Such an eye was now projected on the Governor's surroundings, and its explorations were summed up in the tone in which Mrs. Nimick repeated from the threshold: "I always say I don't see how she does it!"

The tone did not escape the Governor, but it disturbed him no more than the buzz of a baffled insect. Poor Grace! It was not his fault if her husband was given to chimerical investments, if her sons were "unsatisfactory," and her cooks would not stay with her; but it was natural that these facts should throw into irritating contrast the ease and harmony of his own domestic life. It made him all the sorrier for his sister to know that her envy did not penetrate to the essence of his happiness, but lingered on those external signs of well-being which counted for so little in the sum total of his advantages. Poor Mrs. Nimick's life seemed doubly thin and mean when one remembered that, beneath its shabby surface, there were no compensating riches of the spirit.

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II

IT was the custodian of his own hidden treasure who at this moment broke in upon his musings. Mrs. Mornway, fresh from her afternoon walk, entered the room with that air of ease and lightness which seemed to diffuse a social warmth about her; fine, slender, pliant, so polished and modeled by an intelligent experience of life that youth seemed clumsy in her presence. She looked down at her husband and shook her head.

"You promised to keep the afternoon to yourself, and I hear Grace has been here."

"Poor Grace — she didn't stay long, and I should have been a brute not to see her."

He leaned back, filling his gaze to the brim with her charming image, which obliterated at a stroke the fretful ghost of Mrs. Nimick.

"She came to congratulate you, I suppose?"

"Yes, and to ask me to do something for Ashford."

"Ah — on account of Jack. What does she want for him?"

The Governor laughed. "She said you were in her confidence — that you were backing her up. She seemed to think your support would ensure her success."

Mrs. Mornway smiled; her smile, always full of delicate implications, seemed to caress her husband while it gently mocked his sister.

"Poor Grace! I suppose you undeceived her."

"As to your influence? I told her it was paramount where it ought to be."

"And where is that?"

"In the choice of carpets and curtains. It seems ours are almost too good."

"Thanks for the compliment! Too good for what?"

"Our station in life, I suppose. At least they seemed to bother Grace."

"Poor Grace! I've always bothered her." She paused, removing her gloves reflectively and laying her long fine hands on his shoulders as she stood behind him. "Then you don't believe in Ashford?" Feeling his slight start, she drew away her hands and raised them to detach her veil.

"What makes you think I don't believe in Ashford?" he asked.

"I asked out of curiosity. I wondered whether you had decided anything."

"No, and I don't mean to for a week. I'm dead beat, and I want to bring a fresh mind to the question. There is hardly one appointment I'm sure of except, of course, Fleetwood's."

She turned away from him, smoothing her hair in the mirror above the mantelpiece. "You're sure of that?" she asked after a moment.

"Of George Fleetwood? And poor Grace thinks you are deep in my counsels! I am as sure of re-appointing Fleetwood as I am that I have just been re-elected myself. I've never made any secret of the fact that if they wanted me back they must have him, too."

"You are tremendously generous!" she murmured.

"Generous? What a strange word to use! Fleetwood is my trump card — the one man I can count on to carry out my ideas through thick and thin."

She mused on this, smiling a little. "That's why I call you generous — when I remember how you disliked him two years ago!"

"What of that? I was prejudiced against him, I own; or rather, I had a just distrust of a man with such a past. But how splendidly he's wiped it out! What a record he has written on the new leaf he promised to turn over if I gave him the chance! Do you know," the Governor interrupted himself with a pleasantly reminiscent laugh, "I was rather annoyed with Grace when she hinted that you had promised to back up Ashford — I told her you didn't aspire to distribute patronage. But she might have reminded me — if she'd known — that it was you who persuaded me to give Fleetwood that chance."

Mrs. Mornway turned with a slight heightening of color. "Grace — how could she possibly have known?"

"She couldn't, of course, unless she'd read my weakness in my face. But why do you look so startled at my little joke?"

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"It's only that I so dislike Grace's ineradicable idea that I am a wire-puller. Why should she imagine I would help her about Ashford?"

"Oh, Grace has always been a mild and ineffectual conspirator, and she thinks every other woman is built on the same plan. But you didget Fleetwood's job for him, you know," he repeated with laughing insistence.

"I had more faith than you in human nature, that's all." She paused a moment, and then added: "Personally, you know, I have always rather disliked him."

"Oh, I never doubted your disinterestedness. But you are not going to turn against your candidate, are you?"

She hesitated. "I am not sure; circumstances alter cases. When you made Fleetwood Attorney-General two years ago he was the inevitable man for the place."

"Well — is there a better one now?"

"I don't say there is — it's not my business to look for him, at any rate. What I mean is that at that time Fleetwood was worth risking anything for — now I don't know that he is."

"But, even if he were not, what do I risk for him now? I don't see your point. Since he didn't cost me my re-election, what can he possibly cost me now I'm in?"

"He's immensely unpopular. He will cost you a great deal of popularity, and you have never pretended to despise that."

"No, nor ever sacrificed anything essential to it. Are you really asking me to offer up Fleetwood to it now?"

"I don't ask you to do anything — except to consider if he is essential. You said you were over-tired and wanted to bring a fresh mind to bear on the other appointments. Why not delay this one too?"

Mornway turned in his chair and looked at her searchingly. "This means something, Ella. What have you heard?"

"Just what you have, probably, but with more attentive ears. The very record you are so proud of has made George Fleetwood innumerable enemies in the last two years. The Lead Trust people are determined to ruin him, and if his reappointment is attacked you will not be spared."

"Attacked? In the papers, you mean?"

She paused. "You know the 'Spy' has always threatened a campaign. And he has a past, as you say."

"Which was public property long before I first appointed him. Nothing could be gained by raking up his old political history. Everybody knows he didn't come to me with clean hands, but to hurt him now the 'Spy' would have to fasten a new scandal on him, and that would not be easy."

"It would be easy to invent one!"

"Unproved accusations don't count much against a man of such proved capacity. The best answer is his record of the last two years. That is what the public looks at."

"The public looks wherever the press points. And besides, you have your own future to consider. It would be a pity to sacrifice such a career as yours for the sake of backing up even as useful a man as George Fleetwood." She paused, as if checked by his gathering frown, but went on with fresh decision: "Oh, I'm not speaking of personal ambition; I'm thinking of the good you can do. Will Fleetwood's reappointment secure the greatest good of the greatest number, if his unpopularity reacts on you to the extent of hindering your career?"

The Governor's brow cleared and he rose with a smile. "My dear, your reasoning is admirable, but we must leave my career to take care of itself. Whatever I may be to-morrow, I am Governor of Midsylvania to-day, and my business as Governor is to appoint as Attorney-General the best man I can find for the place — and that man is George Fleetwood, unless you have a better one to propose." She met this with perfect good-humor. "No, I have told you already that that is not my business. But I have a candidate of my own for another office, so Grace was not quite wrong, after all."

"Well, who is your candidate, and for what office? I only hope you don't want to change cooks!"

"Oh, I do that without your authority, and you never even know it has been done." She hesitated, and then said with a bright directness: "I want you to do something for poor Gregg."

"Gregg? Rufus Gregg?" He stared. "What an extraordinary request! What can I do for a man I've had to kick out for dishonesty?"

"Not much, perhaps; I know it's difficult. But, after all, it was your kicking him out that ruined him."

"It was his dishonesty that ruined him. He was getting a good salary as my stenographer, and if he hadn't sold those letters to the 'Spy' he would have been getting it still."

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She wavered. "After all, nothing was proved — he always denied it."

"Good heavens, Ella! Have you ever doubted his guilt?"

"No — no; I don't mean that. But, of course, his wife and children believe in him, and think you were cruel, and he has been out of work so long that they are starving."

"Send them some money, then; I wonder you thought it necessary to ask."

"I shouldn't have thought it so, but money is not what I want. Mrs. Gregg is proud, and it is hard to help her in that way. Couldn't you give him work of some kind — just a little post in a corner?"

"My dear child, the little posts in the corner are just the ones where honesty is essential. A footpad doesn't wait under a street-lamp! Besides, how can I recommend a man whom I have dismissed for theft? I won't say a word to hinder his getting a place, but on my conscience I can't give him one."

She paused and turned toward the door silently, though without any show of resentment; but on the threshold she lingered long enough to say: "Yet you gave Fleetwood his chance!"

"Fleetwood? You class Fleetwood with Gregg? The best man in the State with a little beggarly thieving nonentity? It's evident enough you're new at wire-pulling, or you would show more skill at it!"

She met this with a laugh. "I'm not likely to have much practice if my first attempt is such a failure. Well, I will see if Mrs. Gregg will let me help her a little — I suppose there is nothing else to be done."

"Nothing that we can do. If Gregg wants a place he had better get one on the staff of the 'Spy.' He served them better than he did me."

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III

THE Governor stared at the card with a frown. Half an hour had elapsed since his wife had gone upstairs to dress for the big dinner from which official duties excused him, and he was still lingering over the fire before preparing for his own solitary meal. He expected no one that evening but his old friend Hadley Shackwell, with whom it was his long-established habit to talk over his defeats and victories in the first lull after the conflict; and Shackwell was not likely to turn up till nine o'clock. The unwonted stillness of the room, and the knowledge that he had a quiet evening before him, filled the Governor with a luxurious sense of repose. The world seemed to him a good place to be in, and his complacency was shadowed only by the fear that he had perhaps been a trifle over-harsh in refusing his wife's plea for the stenographer. There seemed, therefore, a certain fitness in the appearance of the man's card, and the Governor with a sigh gave orders that Gregg should be shown in.

Gregg was still the soft-stepping scoundrel who invited the toe of honesty, and Mornway, as he entered, was conscious of a sharp revulsion of feeling. But it was impossible to evade the interview, and he sat silent while the man stated his case.

Mrs. Mornway had represented the stenographer as being in desperate straits, and ready to accept any job that could be found, but though his appearance might have seemed to corroborate her account, he evidently took a less hopeless view of his case, and the Governor found with surprise that he had fixed his eye on a clerkship in one of the Government offices, a post which had been half promised him before the incident of the letters. His plea was that the Governor's charge, though unproved, had so injured his reputation that he could only hope to clear himself by getting some sort of small job under the Administration. After that, it would be easy for him to obtain any employment he wanted.

He met Mornway's refusal with civility, but remarked after a moment: "I hadn't expected this, Governor. Mrs. Mornway led me to think that something might be arranged."

The Governor's tone was brief. "Mrs. Mornway is sorry for your wife and children, and for their sake would be glad to find work for you, but she could not have led you to think that there was any chance of your getting a clerkship."

"Well, that's just it; she said she thought she could manage it."

"You have misinterpreted my wife's interest in your family. Mrs. Mornway has nothing to do with the distribution of Government offices." The Governor broke off, annoyed to find himself asseverating for the second time so obvious a fact.

There was a moment's silence; then Gregg said, still in a perfectly equable tone: "You've always been hard on me, Governor, but I don't bear malice. You accused me of selling those letters to the 'Spy' — "

The Governor made an impatient gesture.

"You couldn't prove your case," Gregg went on imperturbably, "but you were right in one respect. I was on confidential terms with the 'Spy.'" He paused and glanced at Mornway, whose face remained immovable. "I'm on the same terms with them still, and I'm ready to let you have the benefit of it if you'll give me the chance to retrieve my good name."

In spite of his irritation the Governor could not repress a smile.

"In other words, you will do a dirty trick for me if I undertake to convince people that you are the soul of honor."

Gregg smiled also.

"There are always two ways of putting a thing. Why not call it a plain case of give and take? I want something and can pay for it."

"Not in any coin I have a use for," said Mornway, pushing back his chair.

Gregg hesitated; then he said: "Perhaps you don't mean to reappoint Fleetwood." The Governor was silent, and he continued: "If you do, don't kick me out a second time. I'm not threatening you — I'm speaking as a friend. Mrs. Mornway has been kind to my wife, and I'd like to help her."

The Governor rose, gripping his chair-back sternly. "You will be kind enough to leave my wife's name out of the discussion. I supposed you knew me well enough to know that I don't buy newspaper secrets at any price, least

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of all at that of the public money!"

Gregg, who had risen also, stood a few feet off, looking at him inscrutably.

"Is that final, Governor?"

"Quite final."

"Well, good evening, then."

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IV

SHACKWELL and the Governor sat over the evening embers. It was after ten o'clock, and the servant had carried away the coffee and liqueurs, leaving the two men to their cigars. Mornway had once more lapsed into his arm-chair, and sat with out-stretched feet, gazing comfortably at his friend.

Shackwell was a small dry man of fifty, with a face as sallow and freckled as a winter pear, a limp mustache, and shrewd, melancholy eyes.

"I am glad you have given yourself a day's rest," he said, looking at the Governor.

"Well, I don't know that I needed it. There's such exhilaration in victory that I never felt fresher."

"Ah, but the fight's just beginning."

"I know — but I'm ready for it. You mean the campaign against Fleetwood. I understand there is to be a big row. Well, he and I are used to rows."

Shackwell paused, surveying his cigar. "You knew the 'Spy' meant to lead the attack?"

"Yes. I was offered a glimpse of the documents this afternoon."

Shackwell started up. "You didn't refuse?"

Mornway related the incident of Gregg's visit. "I could hardly buy my information at that price," he said, "and, besides, it is really Fleetwood's business this time. I suppose he has heard the report, but it doesn't seem to bother him. I rather thought he would have looked in to-day to talk things over, but I haven't seen him."

Shackwell continued to twist his cigar through his sallow fingers without remembering to light it. "You're determined to reappoint Fleetwood?" he asked at length.

The Governor caught him up. "You're the fourth person who has asked me that to-day! You haven't lost faith in him, have you, Hadley?"

"Not an atom!" said the other with emphasis.

"Well, then, what are you all thinking of, to suppose I can be frightened by a little newspaper talk? Besides, if Fleetwood is not afraid, why should I be?"

"Because you'll be involved in it with him."

The Governor laughed. "What have they got against me now?"

Shackwell, standing up, confronted his friend solemnly. "This — that Fleetwood bought his appointment two years ago."

"Ah — bought it of me? Why didn't it come out at the time?"

"Because it wasn't known then. It has only been found out lately."

"Known — found out? This is magnificent! What was my price, and what did I do with the money?"

Shackwell glanced about the room, and his eyes returned to Mornway's face.

"Look here, John, Fleetwood is not the only man in the world."

"The only man?"

"The only Attorney-General. 'The 'Spy' has the Lead Trust behind it and means to put up a savage fight. Mud sticks, and —"

"Hadley, is this a conspiracy? You're saying to me just what Ella said this afternoon."

At the mention of Mrs. Mornway's name a silence fell between the two men and the Governor moved uneasily in his chair.

"You are not advising me to chuck Fleetwood because the 'Spy' is going to accuse me of having sold him his first appointment?" he said at length.

Shackwell drew a deep breath. "You say yourself that Mrs. Mornway gave you the same advice this afternoon."

"Well, what of that? Do you imagine that my wife distrib —" The Governor broke off with an exasperated laugh.

Shackwell, leaning against the mantelpiece, looked down into the embers. "I didn't say the 'Spy' meant to accuse you of having sold the office."

Mornway stood up slowly, his eyes on his friend's averted face. The ashes dropped from his cigar, scattering a

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white trail across the carpet which had excited Mrs. Nimick's envy.

"The office is in my gift. If I didn't sell it, who did?" he demanded.

Shackwell laid a hand on his arm. "For heaven's sake, John — "

"Who did, who did?" the Governor violently repeated.

The two men faced each other in the closely curtained silence of the dim luxurious room. Shackwell's eyes again wandered, as if summoning the walls to reply. Then he said, "I have positive information that the 'Spy' will say nothing if you don't appoint Fleetwood."

"And what will it say if I do appoint him?"

"That he bought his first appointment from your wife."

The Governor stood silent, immovable, while the blood crept slowly from his strong neck to his lowering brows. Once he laughed, then he set his lips and continued to gaze into the fire. After a while he looked at his cigar and shook the freshly formed cone of ashes carefully upon the hearth. He had just turned again to Shackwell when the door opened and the butler announced: "Mr. Fleetwood."

The room swam about Shackwell, and when he recovered himself, Mornway, with outstretched hand, was advancing quietly to meet his guest.

Fleetwood was a smaller man than the Governor. He was erect and compact, with a face full of dry energy, which seemed to press forward with the spring of his prominent features, as though it were the weapon with which he cleared his way through the world. He was in evening dress, scrupulously appointed, but pale and nervous. Of the two men, it was Mornway who was the more composed.

"I thought I should have seen you before this," he said.

Fleetwood returned his grasp and shook hands with Shackwell.

"I knew you needed to be let alone. I didn't mean to come to— night, but I wanted to say a word to you."

At this, Shackwell, who had fallen into the background, made a motion of leave-taking, but the Governor arrested it.

"We haven't any secrets from Hadley, have we, Fleetwood?"

"Certainly not. I am glad to have him stay. I have simply come to say that I have been thinking over my future arrangements, and that I find it will not be possible for me to continue in office."

There was a long pause, during which Shackwell kept his eyes on Mornway. The Governor had turned pale, but when he spoke his voice was full and firm.

"This is sudden," he said.

Fleetwood stood leaning against a high chair-back, fretting its carved ornaments with restless fingers. "It is sudden — yes. I — there are a variety of reasons."

"Is one of them the fact that you are afraid of what the 'Spy' is going to say?"

The Attorney-General flushed deeply and moved away a few steps. "I'm sick of mud-throwing," he muttered.

"George Fleetwood!" Mornway exclaimed. He had advanced toward his friend, and the two stood confronting each other, already oblivious of Shackwell's presence.

"It's not only that, of course. I've been frightfully hard- worked. My health has given way — "

"Since yesterday?"

Fleetwood forced a smile. "My dear fellow, what a slave- driver you are! Hasn't a man the right to take a rest?"

"Not a soldier on the eve of battle. You have never failed me before."

"I don't want to fail you now. But it isn't the eve of battle — you're in, and that's the main thing."

"The main thing at present is that you promised to stay in with me, and that I must have your real reason for breaking your word."

Fleetwood made a deprecatory movement. "My dear Governor, if you only knew it, I'm doing you a service in backing out."

"A service — why?"

"Because I'm hated — because the Lead Trust wants my blood, and will have yours too if you appoint me."

"Ah, that's the real reason, then — you're afraid of the 'Spy'?"

"Afraid — ?"

The Governor continued to speak with dry deliberation. "Evidently, then, you know what they mean to say."

The Best Man

Fleetwood laughed. "One needn't do that to be sure it will be abominable!"

"Who cares how abominable it is if it isn't true?"

Fleetwood shrugged his shoulders and was silent. Shackwell, from a distant seat, uttered a faint protesting sound, but no one heeded him. The Governor stood squarely before Fleetwood, his hands in his pockets. "It is true, then?" he demanded.

"What is true?"

"What the 'Spy' means to say — that you bought my wife's influence to get your first appointment."

In the silence Shackwell started suddenly to his feet. A sound of carriage-wheels had disturbed the quiet street. They paused and then rolled up the semicircle to the door of the Executive Mansion.

"John!" Shackwell warned him.

The Governor turned impatiently; there was the sound of a servant's steps in the hall, followed by the opening and closing of the outer door.

"Your wife — Mrs. Mornway!" Shackwell cried.

Another step, accompanied by a soft rustle of skirts, was advancing toward the library.

"My wife? Let her come!" said the Governor.

The Best Man

V

She stood before them in her bright evening dress, with an arrested brilliancy of aspect like the sparkle of a fountain suddenly caught in ice. Her look moved rapidly from one to the other; then she came forward, while Shackwell slipped behind her to close the door.

"What has happened?" she said.

Shackwell began to speak, but the Governor interposed calmly:

"Fleetwood has come to tell me that he does not wish to remain in office."

"Ah!" she murmured.

There was another silence. Fleetwood broke it by saying: "It is getting late. If you want to see me to-morrow —"

The Governor looked from his face to Ella's. "Yes; go now," he said.

Shackwell moved in Fleetwood's wake to the door. Mrs. Mornway stood with her head high, smiling slightly. She shook hands with each of the men in turn; then she moved toward the sofa and laid aside her shining cloak. All her gestures were calm and noble, but as she raised her hand to unclasp the cloak her husband uttered a sudden exclamation.

"Where did you get that bracelet? I don't remember it."

"This?" She looked at him with astonishment. "It belonged to my mother. I don't often wear it."

"Ah — I shall suspect everything now," he groaned.

He turned away and flung himself with bowed head in the chair behind his writing-table. He wanted to collect himself, to question her, to get to the bottom of the hideous abyss over which his imagination hung. But what was the use? What did the facts matter? He had only to put his memories together — they led him straight to the truth. Every incident of the day seemed to point a leering finger in the same direction, from Mrs. Nimick's allusion to the imported damask curtains to Gregg's confident appeal for rehabilitation.

"If you imagine that my wife distributes patronage —" he heard himself repeating inanely, and the walls seemed to reverberate with the laughter which his sister and Gregg had suppressed. He heard Ella rise from the sofa and lifted his head sharply.

"Sit still!" he commanded. She sank back without speaking, and he hid his face again. The past months, the past years, were dancing a witches' dance about him. He remembered a hundred significant things. . . . Oh, God, he cried to himself, if only she does not lie about it! Suddenly he recalled having pitied Mrs. Nimick because she could not penetrate to the essence of his happiness. Those were the very words he had used! He heard himself laugh aloud. The clock struck — it went on striking interminably. At length he heard his wife rise again and say with sudden authority: "John, you must speak."

Authority — she spoke to him with authority! He laughed again, and through his laugh he heard the senseless rattle of the words, "If you imagine that my wife distributes patronage . . ."

He looked up haggardly and saw her standing before him. If only she would not lie about it! He said: "You see what has happened."

"I suppose some one has told you about the 'Spy.'"

"Who told you? Gregg?" he interposed.

"Yes," she said quietly.

"That was why you wanted —?"

"Why I wanted you to help him? Yes."

"Oh, God! . . . He wouldn't take money?"

"No, he wouldn't take money."

He sat silent, looking at her, noting with a morbid minuteness the exquisite finish of her dress, that finish which seemed so much a part of herself that it had never before struck him as a merely purchasable accessory. He knew so little what a woman's dresses cost! For a moment he lost himself in vague calculations; finally, he said: "What did you do it for?"

"Do what?"

The Best Man

"Take money from Fleetwood."

She paused a moment and then said: "If you will let me explain — "

And then he saw that, all along, he had thought she would be able to disprove it! A smothering blackness closed in on him, and he had a physical struggle for breath. Then he forced himself to his feet and said: "He was your lover?"

"Oh, no, no, no!" she cried with conviction. He hardly knew whether the shadow lifted or deepened; the fact that he instantly believed her seemed only to increase his bewilderment. Presently he found that she was still speaking, and he began to listen to her, catching a phrase now and then through the deafening clamor of his thoughts.

It amounted to this — that just after her husband's first election, when Fleetwood's claims for the Attorney-Generalship were being vainly pressed by a group of his political backers, Mrs. Mornway had chanced to sit next to him once or twice at dinner. One day, on the strength of these meetings, he had called and asked her frankly if she would not help him with her husband. He had made a clean breast of his past, but had said that, under a man like Mornway, he felt he could wipe out his political sins and purify himself while he served the party. She knew the party needed his brains, and she believed in him — she was sure he would keep his word. She would have spoken in his favor in any case — she would have used all her influence to overcome her husband's prejudice — and it was by a mere accident that, in the course of one of their talks, he happened to give her a "tip" (his past connections were still useful for such purposes), a "tip" which, in the first invading pressure of debt after Mornway's election, she had not had the courage to refuse. Fleetwood had made some money for her — yes, about thirty thousand dollars. She had repaid what he had lent her, and there had been no further transactions of the kind between them. But it appeared that Gregg, before his dismissal, had got hold of an old check-book which gave a hint of the story, and had pieced the rest together with the help of a clerk in Fleetwood's office. The "Spy" was in possession of the facts, but did not mean to use them if Fleetwood was not reappointed, the Lead Trust having no personal grudge against Mornway.

Her story ended there, and she sat silent while he continued to look at her. So much had perished in the wreck of his faith that he did not attach much value to what remained. It scarcely mattered that he believed her when the truth was so sordid. There had been, after all, nothing to envy him for but what Mrs. Nimick had seen; the core of his life was as mean and miserable as his sister's. . . .

His wife rose at length, pale but still calm. She had a kind of external dignity which she wore like one of her rich dresses. It seemed as little a part of her now as the finery of which his gaze contemptuously reckoned the cost.

"John — " she said, laying her hand on his shoulder.

He looked up wearily. "You had better go to bed," he interjected.

"Don't look at me in that way. I am prepared for your being angry with me — I made a dreadful mistake and must bear my punishment: any punishment you choose to inflict. But you must think of yourself first — you must spare yourself. Why should you be so horribly unhappy? Don't you see that since Mr. Fleetwood has behaved so well we are quite safe? And I swear to you I have paid back every penny of the money."

VI

THREE days later Shackwell was summoned by telephone to the Governor's office in the Capitol. There had been, in the interval, no communication between the two men, and the papers had been silent or non-committal.

In the lobby Shackwell met Fleetwood leaving the building. For a moment the Attorney-General seemed about to speak; then he nodded and passed on, leaving to Shackwell the impression of a face more than ever thrust forward like a weapon.

The Governor sat behind his desk in the clear autumn sunlight. In contrast to Fleetwood he seemed relaxed and unwieldy, and the face he turned to his friend had a gray look of convalescence. Shackwell wondered, with a start of apprehension, if he and Fleetwood had been together.

He relieved himself of his overcoat without speaking, and when he turned again toward Mornway he was surprised to find the latter watching him with a smile.

"It's good to see you, Hadley," the Governor said.

"I waited to be sent for; I knew you'd let me know when you wanted me," Shackwell replied.

"I didn't send for you on purpose. If I had, I might have asked your advice, and I didn't want to ask anybody's advice but my own." The Governor spoke steadily, but in a voice a trifle too well disciplined to be natural. "I've had a three days' conference with myself," he continued, "and now that everything is settled I want you to do me a favor."

"Yes?" Shackwell assented. The private issues of the affair were still wrapped in mystery to him, but he had never had a moment's doubt as to its public solution, and he had no difficulty in conjecturing the nature of the service he was to render. His heart ached for Mornway, but he was glad the inevitable step was to be taken without further delay.

"Everything is settled," the Governor repeated, "and I want you to notify the press that I have decided to reappoint Fleetwood."

Shackwell bounded from his seat. "Good heavens!" he ejaculated.

"To reappoint Fleetwood," the Governor repeated, "because at the present juncture of affairs he is the only man for the place. The work we began together is not finished, and I can't finish it without him. Remember the vistas opened by the Lead Trust investigation — he knows where they lead and no one else does. We must put that inquiry through, no matter what it costs us, and that is why I have sent for you to take this letter to the 'Spy.'"

Shackwell's hand drew back from the proffered envelope.

"You say you don't want my advice, but you can't expect me to go on such an errand with my eyes shut. What on earth are you driving at? Of course Fleetwood will persist in refusing."

Mornway smiled. "He did persist — for three hours. But when he left here just now he had given me his word to accept."

Shackwell groaned. "Then I am dealing with two madmen instead of one."

The Governor laughed. "My poor Hadley, you're worse than I expected. I thought you would understand me."

"Understand you? How can I, in heaven's name, when I don't understand the situation?"

"The situation — the situation?" Mornway repeated slowly. "Whose? His or mine? I don't either — I haven't had time to think of them."

"What on earth have you been thinking of then?"

The Governor rose, with a gesture toward the window, through which, below the slope of the Capitol grounds, the roofs and steeples of the city spread their smoky mass to the mild air.

"Of all that is left," he said. "Of everything except Fleetwood and myself."

"Ah — " Shackwell murmured.

Mornway turned back and sank into his seat. "Don't you see that was all I had to turn to? The State — the country — it's big enough, in all conscience, to fill a good deal of a void! My own walls had grown too cramped for me, so I just stepped outside. You have no idea how it simplified matters at once. All I had to do was to say to myself: 'Go ahead, and do the best you can for the country.' The personal issue simply didn't exist."

"Yes — and then?"

The Best Man

"Then I turned over for three days this question of the Attorney-Generalship. I couldn't see that it was changed — how should my feelings have affected it? Fleetwood hasn't betrayed the State. There isn't a scar on his public record — he is still the best man for the place. My business is to appoint the best man I can find, and I can't find any one as good as Fleetwood."

"But — but — your wife?" Shackwell stammered.

The Governor looked up with surprise. Shackwell could almost have sworn that he had indeed forgotten the private issue.

"My wife is ready to face the consequences," he said.

Shackwell returned to his former attitude of incredulity.

"But Fleetwood? Fleetwood has no right to sacrifice — "

"To sacrifice my wife to the State? Oh, let us beware of big words. Fleetwood was inclined to use them at first, but I managed to restore his sense of proportion. I showed him that our private lives are only a few feet square anyhow, and that really, to breathe freely, one must get out of them into the open." He paused and broke out with sudden violence, "My God, Hadley, didn't you see that Fleetwood had to obey me?"

"Yes — I see that," said Shackwell, with reviving obstinacy. "But if you've reached such a height and pulled him up to your side it seems to me that from that standpoint you ought to get an even clearer view of the madness of your position. You say you have decided to sacrifice your own feelings and your wife's — though I'm not so sure of your right to dispose of her voice in the matter; but what if you sacrifice the party and the State as well, in this transcendental attempt to distinguish between private and public honor? You'll have to answer that before you can get me to carry this letter."

The Governor did not blanch under the attack.

"I think the letter will answer you," he said calmly.

"The letter?"

"Yes. It's something more than a notification of Fleetwood's reappointment." Mornway paused and looked steadily at his friend. "You're afraid of an investigation — an impeachment? Well, the letter anticipates that."

"How, in heaven's name?"

"By a plain statement of the facts. My wife has told me that she did borrow of Fleetwood. He speculated for her and made a considerable sum, out of which she repaid his loan. The 'Spy's' accusation is true. If it can be proved that my wife induced me to appoint Fleetwood, it may be argued that she sold him the appointment. But it can't be proved, and the 'Spy' won't waste its breath in trying to, because my statement will take the sting out of its innuendoes. I propose to anticipate its attack by setting forth the facts in its columns, and asking the public to decide between us. On one side is the private fact that my wife, without my knowledge, borrowed money from Fleetwood just before I appointed him to an important post; on the other side is his public record and mine. I want people to see both sides and judge between them, not in the red glare of a newspaper denunciation, but in the plain daylight of common-sense. Charges against the private morality of a public man are usually made in such a glare of headlines and cloud of mud-throwing that the voice he lifts up in his defence can not make itself heard. In this case I want the public to hear what I have to say before the yelping begins. My letter will take the wind out of the 'Spy's' sails, and if the verdict goes against me, the case will have been decided on its own merits, and not at the dictation of the writers of scare heads. Even if I don't gain my end, it will be a good thing, for once, for the public to consider dispassionately how far a private calamity should be allowed to affect a career of public usefulness, and the next man who goes through what I am undergoing may have cause to thank me if no one else does."

Shackwell sat silent for a moment, with the ring of the last words in his ears.

Suddenly he rose and held out his hand. "Give me the letter," he said.

The Governor caught him up with a kindling eye. "It's all right, then? You see, and you'll take it?"

Shackwell met his glance with one of melancholy interrogation. "I think I see a magnificent suicide, but it's the kind of way I shouldn't mind dying myself."

He pulled himself silently into his coat and put the letter into one of its pockets, but as he was turning to the door the Governor called after him cheerfully: "By the way, Hadley, aren't you and Mrs. Shackwell giving a big dinner to-morrow?"

Shackwell paused with a start. "I believe we are — why?"

"Because, if there is room for two more, my wife and I would like to be invited."

The Best Man

Shackwell nodded his assent and turned away without answering. As he came out of the lobby into the clear sunset radiance he saw a victoria drive up the long sweep to the Capitol and pause before the central portion. He descended the steps, and Mrs. Mornway leaned from her furs to greet him.

"I have called for my husband," she said, smiling.

"Can you tell me if any one is with him? He promised to get away in time for a little turn in the Park before dinner."