Covering End

Henry James

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At the foot of the staircase he waited and listened, thinking he had heard her call to him from the gallery, high aloft but out of view, to which he had allowed her independent access and whence indeed, on her first going up, the sound of her appreciation had reached him in rapid movements, evident rushes and dashes, and in droll, charming cries that echoed through the place. He had afterwards, expectant and restless, been, for another look, to the house−door, and then had fidgetted back into the hall, where her voice again caught him. It was many a day since such a voice had sounded in those empty chambers, and never perhaps, in all the years, for poor Chivers, had any voice at all launched a note so friendly and so free.

"Oh no, mum, there ain't no one whatever come yet. It's quite all right, mum you can please yourself!" If he left her to range, all his pensive little economy seemed to say, wasn't it just his poor pickings? He quitted the stairs, but stopped again, with his hand to his ear, as he heard her once more appeal to him. "Lots of lovely ? Lovely *what*, mum? Little ups and downs?" he quavered aloft. "Oh, as you say, mum: as many as in a poor man's life!" She was clearly disposed, as she roamed in delight from point to point, to continue to talk, and, with his better ear and his scooped hand, he continued to listen hard. "'Dear little crooked steps'? Yes, mum; please mind 'em, mum: they be cruel in the dark corners!" She appeared to take another of her light scampers, the sign of a fresh discovery and a fresh response; at which he felt his heart warm with the success of a trust of her that might after all have been rash. Once more her voice reached him and once more he gossiped back. "Coming up too? Not if you'll kindly indulge me, mum I must be where I can watch the bell. It takes watching as well as hearing!" he dropped, as he resumed his round, to a murmur of great patience. This was taken up the next moment by the husky plaint of the signal itself, which seemed to confess equally to short wind and creaking joints. It moved, however, distinguishably, and its motion made him start much more as if he had been guilty of sleeping at his post than as if he had waited half the day. "Mercy, if I *didn't* watch !" He shuffled across the wide stone−paved hall and, losing himself beneath the great arch of the short passage to the entrance−front, hastened to admit his new visitor. He gives us thereby the use of his momentary absence for a look at the place he has left.

This is the central hall, high and square, brown and grey, flagged beneath and timbered above, of an old English country−house; an apartment in which a single survey is a perception of long and lucky continuities. It would have been difficult to find elsewhere anything at once so old and so actual, anything that had plainly come so far,

far down without, at any moment of the endless journey, losing its way. To stand there and look round was to wonder a good deal yet without arriving at an answer whether it had been most neglected or most cherished; there was such resignation in its long survival and yet such bravery in its high polish. If it had never been spoiled, this was partly, no doubt, because it had been, for a century, given up; but what it had been given up to was, after all, homely and familiar use. It had in it at the present moment indeed much of the chill of fallen fortunes; but there was no concession in its humility and no hypocrisy in its welcome. It was magnificent and shabby, and the eyes of the dozen dark old portraits seemed, in their eternal attention, to count the cracks in the pavement, the rents in the seats of the chairs and the missing tones in the Flemish tapestry. Above the tapestry, which, in its turn, was above the high oak wainscot, most of these stiff images on the side on which it principally reigned were placed; and they held up their heads to assure all comers that a tone or two was all that *was* missing, and that they had never waked up in winter dawns to any glimmer of bereavement, in the long night, of any relic or any feature. Such as it was, the company was all there; every inch of old oak, every yard of old arras, every object of ornament or of use to which these surfaces formed so rare a background. If the watchers on the walls had ever found a gap in their own rank the ancient roof, of a certainty, would have been shaken by their collective gasp. As matter of fact it was rich and firm it had almost the dignity of the vault of a church. On this Saturday afternoon in August, a hot, still day, such of the casements as freely worked in the discoloured glass of the windows stood open in one quarter to a terrace that overlooked a park and in another to a wonderful old empty court that communicated with a wonderful old empty garden. The staircase, wide and straight, mounted, full in sight, to a landing that was halfway up; and on the right, as you faced this staircase, a door opened out of the brown panelling into a glimpse of a little morning−room where, in a slanted, gilded light, there was brownness too, mixed with notes of old yellow. On the left, toward court and garden, another door stood open to the warm air. Still as you faced the staircase you had at your right, between that monument and the morning−room, the arch through which Chivers had disappeared.

His reappearance interrupts and yet in a manner, after all, quickens our intense impression; Chivers on the spot, and in this severe but spacious setting, was so perfect an image of immemorial domesticity. It would have been impossible perhaps, however, either to tell his age or to name his use: he was of the age of all the history that lurked in all the corners and of any use whatever you might be so good as still to find for him. Considerably shrunken and completely silvered, he had perpetual agreement in the droop of his kind white head and perpetual inquiry in the jerk of the idle old hands now almost covered by the sleeves of the black dress−coat which, twenty years before, must have been by a century or two the newest thing in the house and into which his years appeared to have declined very much as a shrunken family moves into a part of its habitation. This attire was completed by a white necktie that, in honour of the day, he himself had this morning done up. The humility he betrayed and the oddity he concealed were alike brought out by his juxtaposition with the gentleman he had admitted.

To admit Mr Prodmore was anywhere and at any time, as you would immediately have recognised, an immense admission. He was a personage of great presence and weight, with a large smooth face in which a small sharp meaning was planted like a single pin in the tight red toilet−cushion of a guest−chamber. He wore a blue frock−coat and a stiff white waistcoat and a high white hat that he kept on his head with a kind of protesting cock, while in his buttonhole nestled a bold prize plant on which he occasionally lowered a proprietary eye that seemed to remind it of its being born to a public career. Mr Prodmore's appearance had evidently been thought out, but it might have struck you that the old portraits took it in with a sterner stare, with a fixedness indeed in which a visitor more sensitive would have read a consciousness of his remaining, in their presence, so jauntily, so vulgarly covered. He had never a glance for them, and it would have been easy after a minute to see that this was an old story between them. Their manner, as it were, sensibly increased the coolness. This coolness became a high rigour as Mr Prodmore encountered, from the very threshold, a disappointment.

"No one here?" he indignantly demanded.

"I'm sorry to say no one has come, sir," Chivers replied; "but I've had a telegram from Captain Yule."

Mr Prodmore's apprehension flared out. "Not to say he ain't coming?"

"He was to take the 2.20 from Paddington: he certainly *should* be here!" The old man spoke as if his non−arrival were the most unaccountable thing in the world, especially for a poor person ever respectful of the mystery of causes.

"He should have been here this hour or more. And so should my fly−away daughter!"

Chivers surrounded this description of Miss Prodmore with the deep discretion of silence, and then, after a moment, evidently reflected that silence, in a world bestrewn with traps to irreverence, might be as rash as speech. "Were they coming a together, sir?"

He had scarcely mended the matter, for his visitor gave an inconsequent stare. "Together? for what do you take Miss Prodmore?" This young lady's parent glared about him again as if to alight on something else that was out of place; but the good intentions expressed in the attitude of every object might presently have been presumed to soothe his irritation. It had at any rate the effect of bridging, for poor Chivers, some of his gaps. "It *is* in a sense true that their 'coming together', as you call it, is exactly what I've made my plans for to−day: my calculation was that we should all punctually converge on this spot. Attended by her trusty maid, Miss Prodmore, who happens to be on a week's visit to her grandmother at Bellborough, was to take the 1.40 from that place. I was to drive over ten miles from the most convenient of my seats. Captain Yule" the speaker wound up his statement as with the mention of the last touch in a masterpiece of his own sketching "was finally to shake off for a few hours the peculiar occupations that engage him."

The old man listened with his head askance to favour his good ear, but his visible attention all on a sad spot in one of the half−dozen worn rugs. "They *must* be peculiar, sir, when a gentleman comes into a property like this and goes three months without so much as a nat'ral curiosity ! I don't speak of anything but what *is* nat'ral sir; but there have *been* people here !"

"There have repeatedly been people here!" Mr Prodmore complacently interrupted.

"As you say, sir to be shown over. With the master himself never shown!" Chivers dismally commented.

"He *shall* be, so that nobody can miss him!" Mr Prodmore, for his own reassurance as well, hastened to retort.

His companion risked a tiny explanation. "It will be a mercy indeed to look on him; but I meant that he has not been taken round."

"That's what I meant too. *I'll* take him round and round: it's exactly what I've come for!" Mr Prodmore rang out; and his eyes made the lower circuit again, looking as pleased as such a pair of eyes could look with nobody as yet quite good enough either to terrify or to tickle. "He can't fail to be affected, though he *has* been up to his neck in such a different class of thing."

Chivers clearly wondered a while what class of thing it could be. Then he expressed a timid hope. "In nothing, I dare say, but what's right, sir ?"

"In everything," Mr Prodmore distinctly informed him, "that's wrong! But here he is!" that gentleman added with elation as the doorbell again sounded. Chivers, under the double agitation of the appeal and the disclosure, proceeded to the front as fast as circumstances allowed; while Mr Prodmore, left alone, would have been observed had not his solitude been so bleak to recover a degree of cheerfulness. Cheerfulness in solitude at Covering End was certainly not irresistible, but particular feelings and reasons had pitched, for their campaign, the starched, if now somewhat ruffled, tent of his large white waistcoat. If they had issued audibly from that pavilion they

would have represented to us his consciousness of the reinforcement he might bring up for attack should Captain Yule really resist the house. The sound he next heard from the front caused him none the less, for that matter, to articulate a certain drop. "Only Cora? Well," he added in a tone somewhat at variance with his 'only', "he sha'n't, at any rate, resist *her!*" This announcement would have quickened a spectator's interest in the young lady whom Chivers now introduced and followed, a young lady who straightway found herself the subject of traditionary discipline. "I've waited. What do you mean?"

Cora Prodmore, who had a great deal of colour in her cheeks and a great deal more a bold variety of kinds in the extremely high pitch of her new, smart clothes, meant, on the whole, it was easy to see, very little, and met this challenge with still less show of support either from the sources I have mentioned or from any others. A dull, fresh, honest, overdressed damsel of two−and−twenty, she was too much out of breath, too much flurried and frightened, to do more than stammer: "Waited, papa? Oh, I'm sorry!"

Her regret appeared to strike her father still more as an impertinence than as a vanity. "Would you then, if I had not had patience for you, have wished not to find me? Why the dickens are you so late?"

Agitated, embarrassed, the girl was at a loss. "I'll tell you, papa!" But she followed up her pledge with an air of vacuity and then, dropping into the nearest seat, simply closed her eyes to her danger. If she desired relief she had caught at the one way to get it. "I feel rather faint. Could I have some tea?"

Mr Prodmore considered both the idea and his daughter's substantial form. "Well, as I shall expect you to put forth *all* your powers yes!" He turned to Chivers. "Some tea."

The old man's eyes had attached themselves to Miss Prodmore's symptoms with more solicitude than those of her parent. "I did think it might be required!" Then as he gained the door of the morning−room: "I'll lay it out here."

The young lady, on his withdrawal, recovered herself sufficiently to rise again. "It was my train, papa so very awfully behind. I walked up, you know, also, from the station there's such a lovely footpath across the park."

"You've been roaming the country then alone?" Mr Prodmore inquired.

The girl protested with instant eagerness against any such picture. "Oh, dear no, not *alone!*" She spoke, absurdly, as if she had had a train of attendants; but it was an instant before she could complete the assurance. "There were ever so many people about."

"Nothing is more possible than that there should be *too* many!" said her father, speaking as for his personal convenience, but presenting that as enough. "But where, among them all," he demanded, "is your trusty maid?"

Cora's reply made up in promptitude what it lacked in felicity. "I didn't bring her." She looked at the old portraits as if to appeal to them to help her to remember why. Apparently indeed they gave a sign, for she presently went on: "She was so extremely unwell."

Mr Prodmore met this with reprobation. "Wasn't she to understand from the first that we don't permit "

"Anything of that sort?" the girl recalled it at least as a familiar law. "Oh yes, papa I *thought* she did."

"But she doesn't?" Mr Prodmore pressed the point. Poor Cora, at a loss again, appeared to wonder if the point had better be a failure of brain or of propriety, but her companion continued to press. "What on earth's the matter with her?"

She again communed with their silent witnesses. "I really don't quite know, but I think that at Granny's she eats too much."

"I'll soon put an end to *that!*" Mr Prodmore returned with decision. "You expect then to pursue your adventures quite into the night to return to Bellborough as you came?"

The girl had by this time begun a little to find her feet. "Exactly as I came, papa dear under the protection of a new friend I've just made, a lady whom I met in the train and who is also going back by the 6.19. She was, like myself, on her way to this place, and I expected to find her here."

Mr Prodmore chilled on the spot any such expectation. "What does she want at this place?"

Cora was clearly stronger for her new friend than for herself. "She wants to see it."

Mr Prodmore reflected on this complication. "To−day?" It was practically presumptuous. "To−day won't do."

"So I suggested," the girl declared. "But do you know what she said?"

"How should I know," he coldly demanded, "what a nobody says?"

But on this, as if with the returning taste of a new strength, his daughter could categorically meet him. "She's not a nobody. She's an American."

Mr Prodmore, for a moment, was struck: he embraced the place, instinctively, in a flash of calculation. "An American?"

"Yes, and she's wild "

He knew all about that. "Americans mostly *are!*"

"I mean," said Cora, "to see this place. 'Wild' was what she herself called it and I think she also said she was 'mad'."

"She gave" Mr Prodmore reviewed the affair "a fine account of herself! But she won't do."

The effect of her new acquaintance on his companion had been such that she could, after an instant, react against this sentence. "Well, when I told her that this particular day perhaps wouldn't, she said it would just *have* to."

"Have to do?" Mr Prodmore showed again, through a chink, his speculative eye. "For *what* then, with such grand airs?"

"Why, I suppose, for what Americans want."

He measured the quantity. "They want everything."

"Then I wonder," said Cora, "that she hasn't arrived."

"When she does arrive," he answered, "I'll tackle her; and I shall thank you, in future, not to take up, in trains, with indelicate women of whom you know nothing."

"Oh, I did know something," his daughter pleaded; "for I saw her yesterday at Bellborough."

Mr Prodmore contested even this freedom. "And what was she doing at Bellborough?"

"Staying at the Blue Dragon, to see the old abbey. She says she just loves old abbeys. It seems to be the same feeling," the girl went on, "that brought her over, to−day, to see this old house."

"She 'just loves' old houses? The why the deuce didn't she accompany you properly, since she *is* so pushing, to the door?"

"Because she went off in a fly," Cora explained, "to see, first, the old hospital. She just loves old hospitals. She asked me if this isn't a show−house. I told her" the girl was anxious to disclaim responsibility "that I hadn't the least idea."

"It *is!*" Mr Prodmore cried almost with ferocity. "I wonder, on such a speech, what she thought of *you!*"

Miss Prodmore meditated with distinct humbleness. "I know. She told me."

He had looked her up and down. "That you're really a hopeless frump?"

Cora, oddly enough, seemed almost to court this description. "That I'm not, as she rather funnily called it a show−girl."

"Think of your having to be reminded by the very strangers you pick up," Mr Prodmore groaned, "of what my daughter should pre−eminently be! Your friend, all the same," he bethought himself, "is evidently loud."

"Well, when she comes," the girl again so far agreed as to reply, "you'll certainly hear her. But don't judge her, papa, till you do. She's tremendously clever," she risked "there seems to be nothing she doesn't know."

"And there seems to be nothing you do! You're *not* tremendously clever," Mr Prodmore pursued; "so you'll permit me to demand of you a slight effort of intelligence." Then, as for the benefit of the listening walls themselves, he struck the high note. "I'm expecting Captain Yule."

Cora's consciousness blinked. "The owner of this property?"

Her father's tone showed his reserves. "That's what it depends on you to make him!"

"On me?" the girl gasped.

"He came into it three months ago by the death of his great−uncle, who had lived to ninety−three, but who, having quarrelled mortally with his father, had always refused to receive either sire or son."

Our young lady bent her eyes on this page of family history, then raised them but dimly lighted. "But now, at least, doesn't he live here?"

"So little," her companion replied, "that he comes here to−day for the very first time. I've some business to discuss with him that can best be discussed on this spot; and it's a vital part of that business that you too should take points to make him welcome."

Miss Prodmore failed to ignite. "In his own house?"

"That it's *not* his own house is just the point I seek to make! The way I look at it is that it's *my* house. The way I look at it even, my dear" in his demonstration of his ways of looking Mr Prodmore literally expanded "is that

it's *our* house. The whole thing is mortgaged, as it stands, for every penny of its value; and I'm in the pleasant position do you follow me?" he trumpeted.

Cora jumped. "Of holding the mortgages?"

He caught her with a smile of approval and indeed of surprise. "You keep up with me better than I hoped. I hold every scrap of paper, and it's a precious collection."

She smothered, perceptibly, a vague female sigh, glancing over the place more attentively than she had yet done. "Do you mean that you can come down on him?"

"I don't need to 'come', my dear I *am* 'down'. *This* is down!" and the iron point of Mr Prodmore's stick fairly struck, as he rapped it, a spark from the cold pavement. "I came many weeks ago commercially speaking and haven't since budged from the place."

The girl moved a little about the hall, then turned with a spasm of courage. "Are you going to be very hard?"

If she read the eyes with which he met her she found in them, in spite of a certain accompanying show of pleasantry, her answer. "Hard with *you?*"

"No that doesn't matter. Hard with the Captain."

Mr Prodmore thought an instant. "'Hard' is a stupid, shuffling term. What do you mean by it?"

"Well, I don't understand business," Cora said; "but I think I understand *you*, papa, enough to gather that you've got, as usual, a striking advantage."

"As usual, I *have* scored; but my advantage won't be striking perhaps till I have sent the blow home. What I appeal to you, as a father, at present to do" he continued broadly to demonstrate "is to nerve my arm. I look to you to see me through."

"Through what, then?"

"Through this most important transaction. Through the speculation of which you've been the barely−dissimulated subject. I've brought you here to receive an impression, and I've brought you, even more, to make one."

The girl turned honestly flat. "But on whom?"

"On me, to begin with by not being a fool. And then, Miss, on *him*."

Erect, but as if paralysed, she had the air of facing the worst. "On Captain Yule?"

"By bringing him to the point."

"But, father," she asked in evident anguish "to *what* point?"

"The point where a gentleman *has* to."

Miss Prodmore faltered. "Go down on his knees?"

Her father considered. "No they don't do that now."

"What *do* they do?"

Mr Prodmore carried his eyes with a certain sustained majesty to a remote point. "He will know himself."

"Oh no indeed, he won't," the girl cried; "they don't *ever!*"

"Then the sooner they learn — whoever teaches 'em! — the better: the better I mean in particular," Mr Prodmore added with an intention discernibly vicious, "for the master of this house. I'll guarantee that he shall understand that," he concluded, "for I shall do my part."

She looked at him as if his part were really to be hated. "But how on earth, sir, can I ever do mine? To begin with, you know, I've never even seen him."

Mr Prodmore took out his watch; then, having consulted it, put it back with a gesture that seemed to dispose at the same time and in the same manner of the objection. "You'll see him *now* — from one moment to the other. He's remarkably handsome, remarkably young, remarkably ambitious and remarkably clever. He has one of the best and oldest names in this part of the country — a name that, far and wide here, one could do so much with that I'm simply indignant to see him do so little. I propose, my dear, to do with it all he hasn't, and I further propose, to that end, first to get hold of it. It's you, Miss Prodmore, who shall take it out of the fire."

"The fire?" — he had terrible figures.

"Out of the mud, if you prefer. You must pick it up, do you see? My plan is, in short," Mr Prodmore pursued, "that when we've brushed it off and rubbed it down a bit, blown away the dust and touched up the rust, my daughter shall gracefully bear it."

She could only oppose, now, a stiff, thick transparency that yielded a view of the course in her own veins, after all, however, mingled with a feebler fluid, of the passionate blood of the Prodmores. "And pray is it also Captain Yule's plan?"

Her father's face warned her off the ground of irony, but he replied without violence. "His plans have not yet quite matured. But nothing is more natural," he added with an ominous smile, "than that they shall do so on the sunny south wall of Miss Prodmore's best manner."

Miss Prodmore's spirit was visibly rising, and a note that might have meant warning for warning sounded in the laugh produced by this sally. "You speak of them, papa, as if they were sour little plums! You exaggerate, I think, the warmth of Miss Prodmore's nature. It has always been thought remarkably cold."

"Then you'll be so good, my dear, as to confound — it mightn't be amiss even a little to scandalize — that opinion. I've spent twenty years in giving you what your poor mother used to call advantages, and they've cost me hundreds and hundreds of pounds. It's now time that, both as a parent and as a man of business, I should get my money back. I couldn't help your temper," Mr Prodmore conceded, "nor your taste, nor even your unfortunate resemblance to the estimable, but far from ornamental woman who brought you forth; but I paid out a small fortune that you should have, damn you, don't you know? a good manner. You never show it to me, certainly; but do you mean to tell me that, at this time of day — for other persons — you *haven't* got one?"

This pulled our young lady perceptibly up; there was a directness in the argument that was like the ache of old pinches. "If you mean by 'other persons' persons who are particularly civil — well, Captain Yule may not see his way to be one of them. He may not *think* — don't you see? — that I've a good manner."

"Do your duty, miss, and never mind what he thinks!" Her father's conception of her duty momentarily sharpened. "Don't look at him like a sick turkey, and he'll be sure to think right."

The colour that sprang into Cora's face at this rude comparison was such, unfortunately, as perhaps a little to justify it. Yet she retained, in spite of her emotion, some remnant of presence of mind. "I remember your saying once, some time ago, that that was just what he would be sure *not* to do: I mean when he began to go in for his dreadful ideas "

Mr Prodmore took her boldly up. "About the 'radical programme', the 'social revolution', the spoliation of everyone and the destruction of everything? Why, you stupid thing, I've worked round to a complete agreement with him. The taking from those who have by those who haven't "

"Well?" said the girl, with some impatience, as he sought the right way of expressing his notion.

"What is it but to receive, from consenting hands, the principal treasure of the rich? If I'm rich my daughter is my largest property, and I freely make her over. I shall, in other words, forgive my young friend his low opinions if he renounces them for *you*."

Cora, at this, started as with a glimpse of delight. "He won't renounce them! He *sha'n't*!"

Her father appeared still to enjoy the ingenious way he had put it, so that he had good humour to spare. "If you suggest that you're in political sympathy with him, you mean then that you'll take him as he *is?*"

"I won't take him at all!" she protested with her head very high; but she had no sooner uttered the words than the sound of the approach of wheels caused her dignity to drop. "A fly? it must be *he!* " She turned right and left, for a retreat or an escape, but her father had already caught her by the wrist. "Surely," she pitifully panted, "you don't want me to bounce on him *thus?*"

Mr Prodmore, as he held her, estimated the effect. "Your frock won't do with what it cost me?"

"It's not my frock, papa it's his thinking I've come here for him to see me!"

He let her go and, as she moved away, had another look for the social value of the view of her stout back. It appeared to determine him, for, with a touch of mercy, he passed his word. "He doesn't think it, and he sha'n't know it."

The girl had made for the door of the morning−room, before reaching which she flirted breathlessly round. "But he knows you want me to hook him!"

Mr Prodmore was already in the parliamentary attitude the occasion had suggested to him for the reception of his visitor. "The way to 'hook' him will be not to be hopelessly vulgar. He doesn't know that you know anything." The house−bell clinked, and he waved his companion away. "Await us there with tea, and mind you toe the mark!"

Chivers, at this moment, summoned by the bell, reappeared in the morning−room doorway, and Cora's dismay brushed him as he sidled past her and off into the passage to the front. Then, from the threshold of her refuge, she launched a last appeal. "Don't *kill* me, father: give me time!" With which she dashed into the room, closing the door with a bang.

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Mr Prodmore, in Chivers's absence, remained staring as if at a sudden image of something rather fine. His child had left with him the sense of a quick irradiation, and he failed to see why, at the worst, such lightnings as she was thus able to dart shouldn't strike somewhere. If he had spoken to her of her best manner perhaps *that* was her best manner. He heard steps and voices, however, and immediately invited to his aid his own, which was simply magnificent. Chivers, returning, announced solemnly "Captain Yule!" and ushered in a tall young man in a darkish tweed suit and a red necktie, attached in a sailor's knot, who, as he entered, removed a soft brown hat. Mr Prodmore, at this, immediately saluted him by uncovering. "Delighted at last to see you here!"

It was the young man who first, in his comparative simplicity, put out a hand. "If I've not come before, Mr Prodmore, it was very frankly speaking from the dread of seeing *you!*" His speech contradicted, to some extent, his gesture, but Clement Yule's was an aspect in which contradictions were rather remarkably at home. Erect and slender, but as strong as he was straight, he was set up, as the phrase is, like a soldier and yet finished, in certain details matters of expression and suggestion only indeed like a man in whom sensibility had been recklessly cultivated. He was hard and fine, just as he was sharp and gentle, just as he was frank and shy, just as he was serious and young, just as he looked, though you could never have imitated it, distinctly 'kept up' and yet considerably reduced. His features were thoroughly regular, but his complete shaving might have been designed to show that they were, after all, not absurd. The face Mr Prodmore offered him fairly glowed, on this new showing, with instant pride of possession, and there was that in Captain Yule's whole air which justified such a sentiment without consciously rewarding it.

"Ah, surely," said the elder man, "my presence is not without a motive!"

"It's just the motive," Captain Yule returned, "that makes me wince at it! Certainly I've no illusions," he added, "about the ground of our meeting. Your thorough knowledge of what you're about has placed me at your mercy you hold me in the hollow of your hand."

It was vivid in every inch that Mr Prodmore's was a nature to expand in the warmth, or even in the chill, of any tribute to his financial subtlety. "Well, I won't, on my side, deny that when, in general, I go in deep I don't go in for nothing. I make it pay double!" he smiled.

"You make it pay so well 'double' surely doesn't do you justice! that, if I've understood you, you can do quite as you like with this preposterous place. Haven't you brought me down exactly that I may *see* you do it?"

"I've certainly brought you down that you may open your eyes!" This, apparently, however, was not what Mr Prodmore himself had arrived to do with his own. These fine points of expression literally contracted with intensity. "Of course, you know, you can always clear the property. You can pay off the mortgages."

Captain Yule, by this time, had, as he had not done at first, looked up and down, round about and well over the scene, taking in, though at a mere glance, it might have seemed, more particularly, the row, high up, of strenuous ancestors. But Mr Prodmore's last words rang none the less on his ear, and he met them with mild amusement. "Pay off ? What can I pay off with?"

"You can always raise money."

"What can I raise it on?"

Mr Prodmore looked massively gay. "On your great political future."

"Oh, I've not taken for the short run at least the lucrative line," the young man said, "and I know what you think of *that*."

Mr Prodmore's blandness confessed, by its instant increase, to this impeachment. There was always the glory of intimacy in Yule's knowing what he thought. "I hold that you keep, in public, very dangerous company; but I also hold that you're extravagant mainly because you've nothing at stake. A man has the right opinions," he developed with pleasant confidence, "as soon as he has something to lose by having the wrong. Haven't I already hinted to you how to set your political house in order? You drop into the lower regions because you keep the best rooms empty. You're a firebrand, in other words my dear Captain, simply because you're a bachelor. That's one of the early complaints we all pass through, but it's soon over, and the treatment for it quite simple. I have your remedy."

The young man's eyes, wandering again about the house, might have been those of an auditor of the fiddling before the rise of the curtain. "A remedy worse than the disease?"

"There's nothing worse, that I've ever heard of," Mr Prodmore sharply replied, "than your particular fix. Least of all a heap of gold "

"A heap of gold?" His visitor idly settled, as if the curtain were going up.

Mr Prodmore raised it bravely. "In the lap of a fine fresh lass! Give pledges to fortune, as somebody says *then* we'll talk. You want money that's what you want. Well, marry it!"

Clement Yule, for a little, never stirred, save that his eyes yet again strayed vaguely. At last they stopped with a smile. "Of course I could do that in a moment!"

"It's even just my own danger from you," his companion returned. "I perfectly recognise that *any* woman would now jump "

"I don't like jumping women," Captain Yule threw in; "but that perhaps is a detail. It's more to the point that I've yet to see the woman whom, by an advance of my own "

"You'd care to keep in the really attractive position ?"

"Which can never, of course, be anything" Yule took his friend up again "but that of waiting quietly."

"Never, never anything!" Mr Prodmore, most assentingly, banished all other thought. "But I haven't asked you, you know, to make an advance."

"You've only asked me to receive one?"

Mr Prodmore waited a little. "Well, I've asked you I asked you a month ago to think it all over."

"I *have* thought it all over," Clement Yule said; "and the strange sequel seems to be that my eyes have got accustomed to my darkness. I seem to make out, in the gloom of my meditation, that, at the worst, I can let the whole thing slide."

"The property?" Mr Prodmore jerked back as if it were about to start.

"Isn't it the property," his visitor inquired, "that positively throws me up? If I can afford neither to live on it nor to disencumber it, I can at least let it save its own bacon and pay its own debts. I can say to you simply: 'Take it, my dear sir, and the devil take *you* '!"

Mr Prodmore gave a quick, strained smile. "You wouldn't be so shockingly rude!"

"Why not if I'm a firebrand and a keeper of low company and a general nuisance? Sacrifice for sacrifice, that might very well be the least!"

This was put with such emphasis that Mr Prodmore was for a moment arrested. He could stop very short, however, and yet talk as still going. "How do you know, if you haven't compared them? It's just to make the comparison in all the proper circumstances that you're here at this hour." He took, with a large, though vague, exhibitory gesture, a few turns about. "Now that you stretch yourself for an hour's relaxation and rocked, as it were, by my friendly hand in the ancient cradle of your race, can you seriously entertain the idea of parting with such a venerable family relic?"

It was evident that, as he decorously embraced the scene, the young man, in spite of this dissuasive tone, *was* entertaining ideas. It might have appeared at the moment to a spectator in whom fancy was at all alert that the place, becoming in a manner conscious of the question, felt itself on its honour, and that its honour could make no compromise. It met Clement Yule with no grimace of invitation, with no attenuation of its rich old sadness. It was as if the two hard spirits, the grim *genius loci* and the quick modern conscience, stood an instant confronted. "The cradle of my race bears, for me, Mr Prodmore, a striking resemblance to its tomb." The sigh that dropped from him, however, was not quite void of tenderness. It might, for that matter, have been a long, sad creak, portending collapse, of some immemorial support of the Yules. "Heavens, how melancholy !"

Mr Prodmore, somewhat ambiguously, took up the sound. "Melancholy?" he just balanced. That well might be, even a little *should* be yet agreement might depreciate.

"Musty, mouldy;" then with a poke of his stick at a gap in the stuff with which an old chair was covered, "mangy!" Captain Yule responded. "Is this the character throughout?"

Mr Prodmore fixed a minute the tell−tale tatter. "You must judge for yourself you must go over the house." He hesitated again; then his indecision vanished the right line was clear. "It does look a bit run down, but I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll do it up for you neatly: I'll throw *that* in!"

His young friend turned on him an eye that, though markedly enlivened by his offer, was somehow only the more inscrutable. "Will you put in the electric light?"

Mr Prodmore's own twinkle at this touch of a spring he had not expected to work was, on the other hand, temporarily veiled. "Well, if you'll meet me half way! We're dealing here" he backed up his gravity "with fancy−values. Don't you feel," he appealed, "as you take it all in, a kind of a something−or−other down your back?"

Clement Yule gazed a while at one of the pompous quarterings in the faded old glass that, in tones as of late autumn, crowned with armorial figures the top of the great hall−window; then with abruptness he turned away. "Perhaps I *don't* take it all in; but what I do feel is since you mention it a sort of stiffening of the spine! The whole thing is too queer too cold too cruel."

"Cruel?" Mr Prodmore's demur was virtuous.

"Like the face of some stuck−up distant relation who won't speak first. I see in the stare of the old dragon, I taste in his very breath, all the helpless mortality he has tucked away!"

"Lord, sir you *have* fancies!" Mr Prodmore was almost scandalised.

But the young man's fancies only multiplied as he moved, not at all critical, but altogether nervous, from object to object. "I don't know what's the matter but there *is* more here than meets the eye." He tried as for his amusement or his relief to figure it out. "I miss the old presences. I feel the old absences. I hear the old voices. I see the old ghosts."

This last was a profession that offered some common ground. "The old ghosts, Captain Yule," his companion promptly replied, "are worth so much a dozen, and with no reduction, I must remind you with the price indeed rather raised for the quantity taken!" Feeling then apparently that he had cleared the air a little by this sally, Mr Prodmore proceeded to pat his interlocutor on a back that he by no means wished to cause to be put to the wall. "Look about you, at any rate, a little more." He crossed with his toes well out the line that divides encouragement from patronage. "Do make yourself at home."

"Thank you very much, Mr Prodmore. May I light a cigarette?" his visitor asked.

"In your own house, Captain?"

"That's just the question: it seems so much less my own house than before I had come into it!" The Captain offered Mr Prodmore a cigarette which that gentleman, also taking a light from him, accepted; then he lit his own and began to smoke. "As I understand you," he went on, "you *lump* your two conditions? I mean I must accept both or neither?"

Mr Prodmore threw back his shoulders with a high recognition of the long stride represented by this question. "You *will* accept both, for, by doing so, you'll clear the property at a stroke. The way I put it is see? that if you'll stand for Gossage you'll get returned for Gossage."

"And if I get returned for Gossage I shall marry your daughter. Accordingly," the young man pursued, "if I marry your daughter "

"I'll burn up, before your eyes," said this young lady's proprietor, "every scratch of your pen. It will be a bonfire of signatures. There won't be a penny to pay there'll only be a position to take. You'll take it with peculiar grace."

"Peculiar, Mr Prodmore very!"

The young man had assented more than he desired, but he was not deterred by it from completing the picture. "You'll settle down here in comfort and honour."

Clement Yule took several steps; the effect of his host was the reverse of soothing; yet the latter watched his irritation as if it were the working of a charm. "Are you very sure of the 'honour' if I turn my political coat?"

"You'll only be turning it back again to the way it was always worn. Gossage will receive you with open arms and press you to a heaving Tory bosom. That bosom" Mr Prodmore followed himself up "has never heaved but to sound Conservative principles. The cradle, as I've called it or at least the rich, warm coverlet of your race, Gossage was the political property, so to speak, of generations of your family. Stand therefore in the good old interest and you'll stand like a lion."

"I'm afraid you mean," Captain Yule laughed, "that I must first roar like one."

"Oh, *I'll* do the roaring!" and Mr Prodmore shook his mane. "Leave that to me."

"Then why the deuce don't you stand yourself?"

Mr Prodmore knew so familiarly why! "Because I'm not a remarkably handsome young man with the grand old home and the right old name. Because I'm a different sort of matter altogether. But if I haven't these advantages," he went on, "you'll do justice to my natural desire that my daughter at least shall have them."

Clement Yule watched himself smoke a minute. "Doing justice to natural desires is just what, of late, I've tried to make a study of. But I confess I don't quite grasp the deep attraction you appear to discover in so large a surrender of your interests."

"My surrenders are my own affair," Mr Prodmore rang out, "and as for my interests, as I never, on principle, give anything for nothing, I dare say I may be trusted to know them when I see them. You come high I don't for a moment deny it; but when I look at you, in this pleasant, intimate away, my dear boy if you'll allow me so to describe things I recognise one of those cases, unmistakeable when really met, in which one must put down one's money. There's not an article in the whole shop, if you don't mind the comparison, that strikes me as better value. I intend you shall be, Captain," Mr Prodmore wound up in a frank, bold burst, "the true comfort of my life!"

The young man was as hushed for a little as if an organ−tone were still in the air. "May I inquire," he at last returned, "if Miss Prodmore's ideas of comfort are as well defined and in her case, I may add, as touchingly modest as her father's? Is she a responsible party of this ingenious arrangement?"

Mr Prodmore rendered homage his appreciation was marked to the elevated character of his young friend's scruple. "Miss Prodmore, Captain Yule, may be perhaps best described as a large smooth sheet of blank, though gilt−edged, paper. No image of any tie but the true and perfect filial has yet, I can answer for it, formed itself on the considerable expanse. But for that image to be projected "

"I've only, in person, to appear?" Yule asked with an embarrassment that he tried to laugh off.

"And, naturally, in person," Mr Prodmore intelligently assented, "do yourself, as well as the young lady, justice. Do you remember what you said when I first, in London, laid the matter before you?"

Clement Yule did remember, but his amusement increased. "I think I said it struck me I should first take a look at what do you call it? the *corpus delicti*."

"You should first see for yourself what you had really come into? I was not only eager for that," said Mr Prodmore, "but I'm willing to go further: I'm quite ready to hear you say that you think you should also first see the young lady."

Captain Yule continued to laugh. "There *is* something in that then, since you mention it!"

"I think you'll find that there's everything." Mr Prodmore again looked at his watch. "Which will you take first?"

"First?"

"The young lady or the house?"

His companion, at this, unmistakeably started. "Do you mean your daughter's *here?*"

Mr Prodmore glowed with consciousness. "In the morning−room."

"Waiting for me?"

The tone showed a consternation that Mr Prodmore's was alert to soothe. "Ah, as long, you know, as you like!"

Yule's alarm, however, was not assuaged: it appeared to grow as he stared, much discomposed, yet sharply thinking, at the door to which his friend had pointed. "Oh, longer than *this*, please!" Then as he turned away: "Do you mean she knows ?"

"That she's here on view?" Mr Prodmore hung fire a moment, but was equal to the occasion. "She knows nothing whatever. She's as unconscious as the rose on its stem!"

His companion was visibly relieved. "That's right let her remain so! I'll first take the house," said Clement Yule.

"Shall I go round *with* you?" Mr Prodmore asked.

The young man's reflection was brief. "Thank you. I'd rather, on the whole, go round alone."

The old servant who had admitted the gentlemen came back at this crisis from the morning−room, looking from under a bent brow and with much limpid earnestness from one of them to the other. The one he first addressed had evidently, though quite unaware of it, inspired him with a sympathy from which he now took a hint. "There's tea on, sir!" he persuasively jerked as he passed the younger man.

The elder answered. "Then I'll join my daughter." He gained the morning−room door, whence he repeated with an appropriate gesture that of offering proudly, with light, firm fingers, a flower of his own celebrated raising his happy formula of Miss Prodmore's state. "The rose on its stem!" Scattering petals, diffusing fragrance, he thus passed out.

Chivers, meanwhile, had rather pointlessly settled once more in its place some small object that had not strayed; to whom Clement Yule, absently watching him, abruptly broke out. "I say, my friend, what colour is the rose?"

The old man looked up with a dimness that presently glimmered. "The rose, sir?" He turned to the open door and the shining day. "Rather a brilliant "

"A brilliant ?" Yule was interested.

"Kind of old−fashioned red." Chivers smiled with the pride of being thus able to testify, but the next instant his smile went out. "It's the only one left on the old west wall."

His visitor's mirth, at this, quickly enough revived. "My dear fellow, I'm not alluding to the sole ornament of the garden, but to the young lady at present in the morning−room. Do you happen to have noticed if she's pretty?"

Chivers stood queerly rueful. "Laws, sir it's a matter I mostly notice; but isn't it, at the same time, sir, a matter like of taste?"

"Pre−eminently. That's just why I appeal with such confidence to yours."

The old man acknowledged with a flush of real embarrassment a responsibility he had so little invited. "Well, sir mine was always a sort of fancy for something more merry−like."

"She isn't merry−like then, poor Miss Prodmore?" Captain Yule's attention, however, dropped before the answer came, and he turned off the subject with an "Ah, if you come to that, neither am I! But it doesn't signify," he went on. "What are *you?*" he more sociably demanded.

Chivers clearly had to think a bit. "Well, sir, I'm not quite *that*. Whatever has there been to make me, sir?" he asked in dim extenuation.

"How in the world do *I* know? I mean to whom do you belong?"

Chivers seemed to scan impartially the whole field. "If you could just only *tell* me, sir! I quite seem to waste away for some one to take an order of."

Clement Yule, by this time, had become aware he was amusing. "Who pays your wages?"

"No one at all, sir," said the old man very simply.

His friend, fumbling an instant in a waistcoat pocket, produced something that his hand, in obedience to a little peremptory gesture and by a trick of which he had unlearned, through scant custom, the neatness, though the propriety was instinctive, placed itself in a shy practical relation to. "Then there's a sovereign. And I haven't many!" the young man, turning away resignedly, threw after it.

Chivers, for an instant, intensely studied him. "Ah, then, shouldn't it stay in the family?"

Clement Yule wheeled round, first stuck, then, at the sight of the figure made by his companion in this offer, visibly touched. "I think it does, old boy."

Chivers kept his eyes on him now. "I've served your house, sir."

"How long?"

"All my life."

So, for a time, they faced each other, and something in Chivers made Yule at last speak. "Then I won't give *you* up!"

"Indeed, sir, I hope you won't give up anything."

The Captain took up his hat. "It remains to be seen." He looked over the place again; his eyes wandered to the open door. "Is that the garden?"

"It *was!*" and the old man's sigh was like the creak of the wheel of time. "Shall I show you how it used to be?"

"It's just as it *is*, alas, that I happen to require it!" Captain Yule reached the door and stood looking beyond. "Don't come," he then said; "I want to think." With which he walked out.

Chivers, left alone, appeared to wonder at it, and his wonder, like that of most old people, lay near his lips. "What does he want, poor dear, to think about?" This speculation, however, was immediately checked by a high, clear voice that preceded the appearance on the stairs, before she had reached the middlemost landing, of the wonderful

figure of a lady, a lady who, with the almost trumpeted cheer of her peremptory but friendly call "Housekeeper, Butler, old Family Servant!" fairly waked the sleeping echoes. Chivers gazed up at her in quick remembrance, half dismayed, half dazzled, of a duty neglected. She appeared now; she shone at him out of the upper dusk; reaching the middle, she had begun to descend, with beautiful laughter and rustling garments; and though she was alone she gave him the sense of coming in a crowd and with music. "Oh, I should have told him of *her!*"

3

She was indeed an apparition, a presence requiring announcement and explanation just in the degree in which it seemed to show itself in a relation quite of its own to all social preliminaries. It evidently either assumed them to be already over or wished to forestall them altogether; what was clear at any rate was that it allowed them scant existence. She was young, tall, radiant, lovely, and dressed in a manner determined at once, obviously, by the fact and by the humour of her journey it might have proclaimed her so a pilgrim or so set her up as a priestess. Most journeys, for this lady, at all events, were clearly a brush of Paris. "Did you think I had got snapped down in an old box like that poor girl what's her name? the one who was poking round too in the celebrated poem? You dear, delightful man, why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you, mum ?"

"Well, that you're so perfectly perfect! You're ever so much better than anyone has ever said. Why, in the name of common sense, has nobody ever said *anything?* You're everything in the world you ought to be, and not the shade of a shade of anything you oughtn't!"

It was a higher character to be turned out with than poor Chivers had ever dreamed. "Well, mum, I try!" he gaped.

"Oh no, you don't that's just your charm! *I* try," cried his friend, "but you do nothing: here you simply *are* you can't help it!"

He stood overwhelmed. "Me, mum?"

She took him in at the eyes she could take everything at once. "Yes, you too, you positive old picture! I've seen the old masters but you're the old master!"

"The master I?" He fairly fell back.

"'The good and faithful servant' Rembrandt van Rhyn: with three stars. *That's* what you are!" Nothing would have been more droll to a spectator than her manner of meeting his humbleness, or more charming indeed than the practical sweetness of her want of imagination of it. "The house is a vision of beauty, and you're simply worthy of the house. I can't say more for you!"

"I find it a bit of a strain, mum," Chivers candidly replied, "to keep up fairly to call it with what you *do* say."

"That's just what everyone finds it!" she broke into the happiest laugh. "Yet I haven't come here to suffer in silence, you know to suffer, I mean, from envy and despair." She was in constant movement from side to side, observing, comparing, returning, taking notes while she gossiped and gossiping, too, for remembrance. The

intention of remembrance even had in it, however, some prevision of failure or some alloy of irritation. "You're so fatally right and so deadly complete, all the same, that I can really scarcely bear it: with every fascinating feature that I had already heard of and thought I was prepared for, and ever so many other that, strange to say, I hadn't and wasn't, and that you just spring right *at* me like a series of things going off. What do you call it," she asked "a royal salute, a hundred guns?"

Her enthusiasm had a bewildering form, but it had by this time warmed the air, and the old man rubbed his hands as over a fire to which the bellows had been applied. "I saw as soon as you arrived, mum, that you were looking for more things than ever *I* heard tell of!"

"Oh, I had got you by heart," she returned, "from books and drawings and photos; I had you in my pocket when I came: so, you see, as soon as you were so good as to give me my head and let me loose, I knew my way about. It's all here, every inch of it," she competently continued, "and now at last I can do what I want!"

A light of consternation, at this, just glimmered in Chivers's face. "And pray, mum, what might that be?"

"Why, take you right back with me to Missoura Top."

This answer seemed to fix his bewilderment, but he was there for the general convenience. "Do I understand you, mum, that you require to take *me?*"

Her particular convenience, on the spot, embraced him, so new and delightful a sense had he suddenly read into her words. "Do you mean to say you'd come as the old Family Servant? Then *do,* you nice real thing: it's just what I'm dying for an old Family Servant! You're somebody's else, yes but everything over here, is somebody's else, and I want, too, a first−rate second−hand one, all ready made, as you are, but not too much done up. You're the best I've seen yet, and I wish I could have you packed put up in paper and bran as I shall have my old pot there." She whisked about, remembering, recovering, eager: "Don't let me *forget* my precious pot!" Excited, with quick transitions, she quite sociably appealed to her companion, who shuffled sympathetically to where, out of harm, the object had been placed on a table. "Don't you just love old crockery? That's awfully sweet old Chelsea."

He took up the piece with tenderness, though, in his general agitation, not perhaps with all the caution with which, for daily service, he handled ancient frailties. He at any rate turned on this fresh subject an interested, puzzled eye. "Where is it I've known this very bit though not to say, as *you* do, by name?" Suddenly it came to him. "In the pew−opener's front parlour!"

"No," his interlocutress cried, "in the pew−opener's best bedroom: on the old chest of drawers, you know with those ducks of brass handles. I've got the handles too I mean the whole thing; and the brass fender and fire−irons, and the chair her grandmother died in. Not in the fly," she added "it was such a bore that they have to be sent."

Chivers, with the pot still in his hands, fairly rocked in the high wind of so much confidence and such great transactions. He had nothing for these, however, but approval. "You did right to take this out, mum, when the fly went to the stables. Them flymen do be cruel rash with anything that's delicate." Of the delicacy of the vessel it now rested with him to deposit safely again he was by this time so appreciatively aware that in returning with it to its safe niche he stumbled into some obscure trap literally laid for him by his nervousness. It was the matter of a few seconds, of a false movement, a knock of the elbow, a gasp, a shriek, a complete little crash. There was the pot on the pavement, in several pieces, and the clumsy cup−bearer blue with fear. "Mercy *on* us, mum I've brought shame on my old grey hairs!"

The little shriek of his companion had smothered itself in the utterance, and the next minute, with the ruin between them, they were contrastedly face to face. The charming woman, who had already found more voices in the air than anyone had found before, could, in the happy play of this power, find a poetry in her accident. "Oh, but the way you *take* it!" she laughed "you're too quaint to live!" She looked at him as if he alone had suffered as if his suffering indeed positively added to his charm. "The way you said that now it's just the very 'type'! That's all I want of you now to *be* the very type. It's what you are, you poor dear thing for you *can't* help it; and it's what everything and everyone else is, over here; so that you had just better all make up your minds to it and not try to shirk it. There was a type in the train with me the 'awfully nice girl' of all the English novels, the 'simple maiden in her flower' of who is it? your great poet. *She* couldn't help it either in fact I wouldn't have *let* her!" With this, while Chivers picked up his fragments, his lady had a happy recall. His face, as he stood there with the shapeless elements of his humiliation fairly rattling again in his hands, was a reflection of her extraordinary manner of enlarging the subject, or rather, more beneficently perhaps, the space that contained it. "By the way, the girl was coming right here. Has she come?"

Chivers crept solemnly away, as if to bury his dead, which he consigned, with dumb rites, to a situation of honourable publicity; then, as he came back, he replied without elation: "Miss Prodmore is here, mum. She's having her tea."

This, for his friend, was a confirmatory touch to be fitted with eagerness into the picture. "Yes, that's exactly it they're always having their tea!"

"With Mr Prodmore in the morning−room," the old man supplemented. "Captain Yule's in the garden."

"Captain Yule?"

"The new master. He's also just arrived."

The wonderful lady gave an immediate "Oh!" to the effect of which her silence for another moment seemed to add. "She didn't tell me about *him*."

"Well, mum," said Chivers, "it do be a strange thing to tell. He had never like, mum so much as seen the place."

"Before to−day his very own?" This too, for the visitor, was an impression among impressions, and, like most of her others, it ended after an instant as a laugh. "Well, I hope he likes it!"

"I haven't seen many, mum," Chivers boldly declared, "that like it as much as *you*."

She made with her handsome head a motion that appeared to signify still deeper things than he had caught. Her beautiful wandering eyes played high and low, like the flight of an imprisoned swallow, then, as she sank upon a seat, dropped at last as if the creature were bruised with its limits. "I should like it still better if it were *my* very own!"

"Well, mum," Chivers sighed, "if it wasn't against my duty I could wish indeed it were! But the Captain, mum," he conscientiously added, "is the lawful heir."

It was a wonder what she found in whatever he said; he touched with every word the spring of her friendly joy. "That's another of your lovely old things I adore your lawful heirs!" She appeared to have, about everything that came up, a general lucid vision that almost glorified the particular case. "He has come to take possession?"

Chivers accepted, for the credit of the house, this sustaining suggestion. "He's a−taking of it now."

This evoked, for his companion, an instantaneous show. "What does he do and how does he do it? Can't I *see?*" She was all impatience, but she dropped to disappointment as her guide looked blank. "There's no grand fuss ?"

"I scarce think him, mum," Chivers with propriety hastened to respond, "the gentleman to make any about anything."

She had to resign herself, but she smiled as she thought. "Well, perhaps I like them better when they don't!" She had clearly a great range of taste, and it all came out in the wistfulness with which, before the notice apparently served on her, she prepared to make way. "I also" she lingered and sighed "have taken possession!"

Poor Chivers really rose to her. "It was you, mum," he smiled, "took it first!"

She sadly shook her head. "Ah, but for a poor little hour! *He's* for life."

The old man gave up, after a little, with equal depression, the pretence of dealing with such realities. "For mine, mum, I do at least hope."

She made again the circuit of the great place, picking up without interest the jacket she had on her previous entrance laid down. "I shall think of you, you know, here together." She vaguely looked about her as for anything else to take; then abruptly, with her eyes again on Chivers: "Do you suppose he'll be kind to you?"

His hand, in his trousers−pocket, seemed to turn the matter over. "He has already been, mum."

"Then be sure to be so to *him!*" she replied with some emphasis. The house−bell sounded as she spoke, giving her quickly another thought. "Is that his bell?"

Chivers was hardly less struck. "I must see whose!" and hurrying, on this, to the front, he presently again vanished.

His companion, left alone, stood a minute with an air in which happy possession was oddly and charmingly mingled with desperate surrender; so much as to have left you in doubt if the next of her lively motions were curiosity or disgust. Impressed, in her divided state, with a small framed plaque of enamel, she impulsively detached it from the wall and examined it with hungry tenderness. Her hovering thought was so vivid that you might almost have traced it in sound. "Why, bless me if it isn't Limoges! I wish awfully I were a *bad* woman: then, I do devoutly hope, I'd just quietly take it!" It testified to the force of this temptation that on hearing a sound behind her she started like a guilty thing; recovering herself, however, and just, of course, not to appear at fault keeping the object familiarly in her hand as she jumped to a recognition of the gentleman who, coming in from the garden, had stopped in the open doorway. She gathered indeed from his being there a positive advantage, the full confidence of which was already in her charming tone. "Oh, Captain Yule, I'm delighted to meet you! It's such a comfort to ask you if I *may!*"

His surprise kept him an instant dumb, but the effort not too closely to betray it appeared in his persuasive inflection. "If you 'may', madam ?"

"Why, just *be* here, don't you know? and poke round!" She presented such a course as almost vulgarly natural. "Don't tell me I can't now, because I already *have*: I've been upstairs and downstairs and in my lady's chamber I won't answer for it even perhaps that I've not been in my lord's! I got round your lovely servant if you don't look out I'll grab him. If you don't look out, you know, I'll grab everything." She gave fair notice and went on with amazing serenity; she gathered positive gaiety from his frank stupefaction. "That's what I came over for just to lay your country waste, Your house is a wild old dream; and besides," she dropped, oddly and quaintly, into real responsible judgement "you've got some quite good things. Oh yes, you *have* several: don't coyly pretend you

haven't!" Her familiarity took these flying leaps, and she alighted, as her victim must have phrased it to himself, without turning a hair. "Don't you *know* you have? Just look at that!" She thrust her enamel before him, but he took it and held it so blankly, with an attention so absorbed in the mere woman, that at the sight of his manner her zeal for his interest and her pity for his detachment again flashed out. "Don't you know *anything?* Why, it's Limoges!"

Clement Yule simply broke into a laugh though his laugh indeed was comprehensive. "It seems absurd, but I'm not in the least acquainted with my house. I've never happened to see it."

She seized his arm. "Then do let me show it to you!"

"I shall be delighted." His laughter had redoubled in a way that spoke of his previous tension; yet his tone, as he saw Chivers return breathless from the front, showed that he had responded sincerely enough to desire a clear field. "Who in the world's there?"

The old man was full of it. "A party!"

"A party?"

Chivers confessed to the worst. "Over from Gossage to see the house."

The worst, however, clearly, was quite good enough for their companion, who embraced the incident with sudden enthusiasm. "Oh, let *me* show it!" But before either of the men could reply she had, addressing herself to Chivers, one of those droll drops that betrayed the quickness of her wit and the freedom of her fancy. "Dear me, I forgot *you* get the tips! But, you dear old creature," she went on, "I'll get them too, and I'll simply make them over to you." She again pressed Yule pressed him into this service. "Perhaps they'll be bigger for me!"

He continued to be highly amused. "I should think they'd be enormous for you! But I *should* like," he added with more concentration "I should like extremely, you know, to go over with you alone."

She was held a moment. "Just you and me?"

"Just you and me as you kindly proposed."

She stood reminded; but, throwing it off, she had her first inconsequence. "That must be for after !"

"Ah, but not too late." He looked at his watch. "I go back to−night."

"Laws, sir!" Chivers irrepressibly groaned.

"You want to keep him?" the stranger asked. Captain Yule turned away at the question, but her look went after him, and she found herself, somehow, instantly answered. "Then I'll help you," she said to Chivers; "and the oftener we go over the better."

Something further, on this, quite immaterial, but quite adequate, passed, while the young man's back was turned, between the two others; in consequence of which Chivers again appealed to his master. "Shall I show them straight in, sir?"

His master, still detached, replied without looking at him. "By all means if there's money in it!" This was jocose, but there would have been, for an observer, an increase of hope in the old man's departing step. The lady had exerted an influence.

She continued, for that matter, with a start of genial remembrance, to exert one in his absence. "Oh, and I promised to show it to Miss Prodmore!" Her conscience, with a kind smile for the young person she named, put the question to Clement Yule. "Won't you call her?"

The coldness of his quick response made it practically none. "'Call' her? Dear lady, I don't *know* her!"

"You must, then she's wonderful." The face with which he met this drew from the dear lady a sharper look; but, for the aid of her good−nature, Cora Prodmore, at the moment she spoke, presented herself in the doorway of the morning−room. "See? She's charming!" The girl, with a glare of recognition, dashed across the open as if under heavy fire; but heavy fire, alas the extremity of exposure was promptly embodied in her friend's public embrace. "Miss Prodmore," said this terrible friend, "let me present Captain Yule." Never had so great a gulf been bridged in so free a span. "Captain Yule, Miss Prodmore. Miss Prodmore, Captain Yule."

There was stiffness, the cold mask of terror, in such notice as either party took of this demonstration, the convenience of which was not enhanced for the divided pair by the perception that Mr Prodmore had now followed his daughter. Cora threw herself confusedly into it indeed, as with a vain rebound into the open. "Papa, let me 'present' you to Mrs Gracedew. Mrs Gracedew, Mr Prodmore. Mr Prodmore, Mrs Gracedew."

Mrs Gracedew, with a free salute and a distinct repetition, took in Mr Prodmore as she had taken everything else. "Mr Prodmore" oh, she pronounced him, spared him nothing of himself. "So happy to meet your daughter's father. Your daughter's so perfect a specimen."

Mr Prodmore, for the first moment, had simply looked large and at sea; then, like a practical man and without more question, had quickly seized the long perch held out to him in this statement. "So perfect a specimen, yes!" he seemed to pass it on to his young friend.

Mrs Gracedew, if she observed his emphasis, drew from it no deterrence; she only continued to cover Cora with a gaze that kept her well in the middle. "So fresh, so quaint, so droll!"

It was apparently a result of what had passed in the morning−room that Mr Prodmore had grasped afresh the need for effective action, which he clearly felt he did something to meet in clutching precipitately the helping hand popped so suddenly out of space, yet so beautifully gloved and so pressingly and gracefully brandished. "So fresh, so quaint, so droll!" he again gave Captain Yule the advantage of the stranger's impression.

To what further appreciation this might have prompted the lady herself was not, however, just then manifest; for the return of Chivers had been almost simultaneous with the advance of the Prodmores, and it had taken place with forms that made it something of a circumstance. There was positive pomp in the way he preceded several persons of both sexes, not tourists at large, but simple sightseers of the half−holiday order, plain provincial folk already, on the spot, rather awestruck. The old man, with suppressed pulls and prayers, had drawn them up in a broken line, and the habit of more peopled years, the dull drone of the dead lesson, sounded out in his prompt beginning. The party stood close, in this manner, on one side of the apartment, while the master of the house and his little circle were grouped on the other. But as Chivers, guiding his squad, reached the centre of the space, Mrs Gracedew, markedly moved, quite unreservedly engaged, came slowly forward to meet him. "This, ladies and gentlemen," he mechanically quavered, "is perhaps the most important feature the grand old feudal, baronial 'all. Being, from all accounts, the most ancient portion of the edifice, it was erected in the very earliest ages." He paused a moment, to mark his effect, then gave a little cough which had become, obviously, in the great reaches of time, an essential part of the trick. "Some do say," he dispassionately remarked, "in the course of the fifteenth century."

Mrs Gracedew, who had visibly thrown herself into the working of the charm, following him with vivid sympathy and hanging on his lips, took the liberty, at this, of quite affectionately pouncing on him. " *I* say in the fourteenth,

my dear you're robbing us of a hundred years!"

Her victim yielded without a struggle. "I do seem, in them dark old centuries, sometimes to trip a little." Yet the interruption of his ancient order distinctly discomposed him, all the more that his audience, gaping with a sense of the importance of the fine point, moved in its mass a little nearer. Thus put upon his honour, he endeavoured to address the group with a dignity undiminished. "The Gothic roof is much admired, but the west gallery is a modern addition."

His discriminations had the note of culture, but his candour, all too promptly, struck Mrs Gracedew as excessive. "What in the name of Methuselah do you call 'modern'? It was here at the visit of James the First, in 1611, and is supposed to have served, in the charming detail of its ornament, as a model for several that were constructed in his reign. The great fireplace," she handsomely conceded, "*is* Jacobean."

She had taken him up with such wondrous benignant authority as if, for her life, if they *were* to have it, she couldn't help taking care that they had it out; she had interposed with an assurance that so converted her as by the wave of a great wand, the motion of one of her own free arms from mere passive alien to domesticated dragon, that poor Chivers could only assent with grateful obeisances. She so plunged into the old book that he had quite lost his place. The two gentlemen and the young lady, moreover, were held there by the magic of her manner. His own, as he turned again to his cluster of sightseers, took refuge in its last refinement. "The tapestry on the left Italian the elegant wood−work Flemish."

Mrs Gracedew was upon him again. "Excuse me if I just deprecate a misconception. The elegant wood−work Italian the tapestry on the left Flemish." Suddenly she put it to him before them all, pleading as familiarly and gaily as she had done when alone with him and looking now at the others, all round, gentry and poor folk alike, for sympathy and support. She had an idea that made her dance. "Do you really mind if *I* just do it? Oh, I know how: I can do quite beautifully the housekeeper last week at Castle Gaunt." She fraternised with the company as if it were a game they must play with her, though this first stage sufficiently hushed them. "How do you do? Ain't it thrilling?" Then with a laugh as free as if, for a disguise, she had thrown her handkerchief over her head or made an apron of her tucked−up skirt, she passed to the grand manner. "Keep well together, please we're not doing puss−in−the−corner. I've my duty to all parties I can't be partial to one!"

The contingent from Gossage had, after all, like most contingents, its spokesman a very erect little personage in a very new suit and a very green necktie, with a very long face and upstanding hair. It was on an evident sense of having been practically selected for encouragement that he, in turn, made choice of a question which drew all eyes. "How many parties, now, can you manage?"

Mrs Gracedew was superbly definite. "Two. The party up and the party down." Chivers gasped at the way she dealt with this liberty, and his impression was conspicuously deepened as she pointed to one of the escutcheons in the high hall−window. "Observe in the centre compartment the family arms." She did take his breath away, for before he knew it she had crossed with the lightest but surest of gestures to the black old portrait, on the opposite wall, of a long−limbed gentleman in white trunk−hose. "And observe the family legs!" Her method was wholly her own, irregular and broad; she flew, familiarly, from the pavement to the roof and then dropped from the roof to the pavement as if the whole air of the place were an element in which she floated. "Observe the suit of armour worn at Tewkesbury observe the tattered banner carried at Blenheim." They bobbed their heads wherever she pointed, but it would have come home to any spectator that they saw her alone. This was the case quite as much with the opposite trio the case especially with Clement Yule, who indeed made no pretence of keeping up with her signs. It was the signs themselves he looked at not at the subjects indicated. But he never took his eyes from her, and it was as if, at last, she had been peculiarly affected by a glimpse of his attention. All her own, for a moment, frankly went back to him and was immediately determined by it. "Observe, above all, that you're in one of the most interesting old houses, of its type, in England; for which the ages have been tender and the generations wise: letting it change so slowly that there's always more left than taken living their lives in it, but letting it

shape their lives!"

Though this pretty speech had been unmistakeably addressed to the younger of the temporary occupants of Covering End, it was the elder who, on the spot, took it up. "A most striking and appropriate tribute to a real historical monument!" Mr Prodmore had a natural ease that could deal handsomely with compliments, and he manifestly, moreover, like a clever man, saw even more in such an explosion of them than fully met the ear. "You do, madam, bring the whole thing out!"

The visitor who had already with such impunity ventured had, on this, a loud renewal of boldness, but for the benefit of a near neighbour. "Doesn't she indeed, Jane, bring it out?"

Mrs Gracedew, with a friendly laugh, caught the words in their passage. "But who in the world wants to keep it *in?* It isn't a secret it isn't a strange cat or a political party!" The housekeeper, as she talked, had already dropped from her; her sense of the place was too fresh for control, though instead of half an hour it might have taken six months to become so fond. She soared again, at random, to the noble spring of the roof. "Just look at those lovely lines!" They all looked, all but Clement Yule, and several of the larger company, subdued, overwhelmed, nudged each other with strange sounds. Wherever she turned Mrs Gracedew appeared to find a pretext for breaking out. "Just look at the tone of that glass, and the gilding of that leather, and the cutting of that oak, and the dear old flags of the very floor." It came back, came back easily, her impulse to appeal to the lawful heir, and she seemed, with her smile of universal intelligence, just to demand the charity of another moment for it. "To look, in this place, is to love!"

A voice from the party she had in hand took it up with an artless guffaw that resounded more than had doubtless been meant and that, at any rate, was evidently the accompaniment of some private pinch applied to one of the ladies. "I *say* to love!"

It was one of the ladies who very properly replied. "It depends on who you look at !"

Mr Prodmore, in the geniality of the hour, made his profit of the simple joke. "Do you hear *that*, Captain? You must look at the right person!"

Mrs Gracedew certainly had not been looking at the wrong one. "I don't think Captain Yule cares. He doesn't do justice !"

Though her face was still gay, she had faltered, which seemed to strike the young man even more than if she had gone on. "To what, madam?"

Well, on the chance, she let him have it. "To the value of your house."

He took it beautifully. "I like to hear *you* express it!"

"I *can't* express it!" She once more looked all round, and so much more gravely than she had yet done that she might have appeared in trouble. She tried but, with a sigh, broke down. "It's too inexpressible!"

This was a view of the case to which Mr Prodmore, for his own reasons, was not prepared to assent. Expression and formulation were what he naturally most desired, and he had just encountered a fountain of these things that he couldn't prematurely suffer to fail him. "Do what you can for it, madam. It would bring it quite home."

Thus excited, she gave with sudden sombre clearness another try. "Well the value's a fancy value!"

Mr Prodmore, receiving it as more than he could have hoped, turned triumphant to his young friend. "Exactly what I told you!"

Mrs Gracedew explained indeed as if Mr Prodmore's triumph was not perhaps exactly what she had argued for. Still, the truth was too great. "When a thing's unique, it's unique!"

That was every bit Mr Prodmore required. "It's unique!"

This met, moreover, the perception of the gentleman in the green necktie. "It's unique!" They all, in fact, demonstratively almost vociferously now caught the point.

Mrs Gracedew, finding herself so sustained, and still with her eyes on the lawful heir's, put it yet more strongly. "It's worth anything you like."

What was this but precisely what Mr Prodmore had always striven to prove? "Anything you like!" he richly reverberated.

The pleasant discussion and the general interest seemed to bring them all together. "Twenty thousand now?" one of the gentlemen from Gossage archly inquired a very young gentleman with an almost coaxing voice, who blushed immensely as soon as he had spoken.

He blushed still more at the way Mrs Gracedew faced him. "I wouldn't *look* at twenty thousand!"

Mr Prodmore, on the other hand, was proportionately uplifted. "She wouldn't look at twenty thousand!" he announced with intensity to the Captain.

The visitor who had been the first to speak gave a shrewder guess. "Thirty then, as it stands?"

Mrs Gracedew looked more and more responsible; she communed afresh with the place; but she too evidently had her conscience. "It would be giving it away!"

Mr Prodmore, at this, could scarcely contain himself. "It would be giving it away!"

The second speaker had meanwhile conceived the design of showing that, though still crimson, he was not ashamed. "You'd hold out for forty ?"

Mrs Gracedew required a minute to answer a very marked minute during which the whole place, pale old portraits and lurking old echoes and all, might have made you feel how much depended on her; to the degree that the consciousness in her face became finally a reason for her not turning it to Gossage. "Fifty thousand, Captain Yule, is what I think I should propose."

If the place had seemed to listen it might have been the place that, in admiring accents from the gentleman with the green tie, took up the prodigious figure. "Fifty thousand pound!"

It was echoed in a high note from the lady he had previously addressed. "Fifty thousand!"

Yet it was Mr Prodmore who caught it up loudest and appeared to make it go furthest. "Fifty thousand fifty thousand!" Mrs Gracedew had put him in such spirits that he found on the spot, indicating to her his young friend, both the proper humour and the proper rigour for any question of what anyone might 'propose'. "He'll never part with the dear old home!"

Mrs Gracedew could match at least the confidence. "Then I'll go over it again while I have the chance." Her own humour enjoined that she should drop into the housekeeper, in the perfect tone of which character she addressed herself once more to the party. "We now pass to the grand staircase." She gathered her band with a brave gesture, but before she had fairly impelled them to the ascent she heard herself rather sharply challenged by Captain Yule, who, during the previous scene, had uttered no sound, yet had remained as attentive as he was impenetrable. "Please let them pass without you!"

She was taken by surprise. "And stay here with *you?*"

"If you'll be so good. I want to speak to you." Turning then to Chivers and frowning on the party, he delivered himself for the first time as a person in a position. "For God's sake, remove them!"

The old man, at this blast of impatience, instantly fluttered forward. "We now pass to the grand staircase."

They all passed, Chivers covering their scattered ascent as a shepherd scales a hillside with his flock; but it became evident during the manœuvre that Cora Prodmore was quite out of tune. She had been standing beyond and rather behind Captain Yule; but she now moved quickly round and reached her new friend's right. "Mrs Gracedew, may *I* speak to you?"

Her father, before the reply could come, had taken up the place. " *After* Captain Yule, my dear." He was in a state of positively polished lucidity. "You must make the most don't you see? of the opportunity of the others!"

He waved her to the staircase as one who knew what he was about, but, while the young man, turning his back, moved consciously and nervously away, the girl renewed her effort to provoke Mrs Gracedew to detain her. It happened, to her sorrow, that this lady appeared for the moment, to the detriment of any free attention, to be absorbed in Captain Yule's manner; so that Cora could scarce disengage her without some air of invidious reference to it. Recognising as much, she could only for two seconds, but with great yearning, parry her own antagonist. "She'll *help* me, I think, papa!"

"That's exactly what strikes me, love!" he cheerfully replied. "But *I'll* help you too!" He gave her, towards the stairs, a push proportioned both to his authority and to her weight; and while she reluctantly climbed in the wake of the visitors he laid on Mrs Gracedew's arm, with a portentous glance at Captain Yule, a hand of commanding significance. "Just pile it on!"

Her attention came back she seemed to see. "He doesn't like it?"

"Not half enough. Bring him round."

Her eyes rested again on their companion, who had fidgetted further away and who now, with his hands in his pockets and unaware of this private passage, stood again in the open doorway and gazed into the grey court. Something in the sight determined her. "I'll bring him round."

But at this moment Cora, pausing half−way up, sent down another entreaty. "Mrs Gracedew, will you see *me?*"

The charming woman looked at her watch. "In ten minutes," she smiled back.

Mr Prodmore, bland and assured, looked at his own. "You could put him through in five but I'll allow you twenty. There!" he decisively cried to his daughter, whom he quickly rejoined and hustled on her course. Mrs Gracedew kissed after her a hand of vague comfort.

4

The silence that reigned between the pair might have been registered as embarrassing had it lasted a trifle longer. Yule had continued to turn his back, but he faced about, though he was distinctly grave, in time to avert an awkwardness. "How do you come to know so much about my house?"

She was as distinctly not grave. "How do *you* come to know so little?"

"It's not my fault," he said very gently. "A particular combination of misfortunes has forbidden me, till this hour, to come within a mile of it."

These words evidently struck her as so exactly the right ones to proceed from the lawful heir that such a felicity of misery could only quicken her interest. He was plainly as good in his way as the old butler the particular combination of misfortunes corresponded to the life−long service. Her interest, none the less, in its turn, could only quicken her pity, and all her emotions, we have already seen, found prompt enough expression. What could any expression do indeed now but mark the romantic reality? "Why, you poor thing!" she came toward him on the weary road. "Now that you've got here I hope at least you'll stay." Their intercourse must pitch itself so far as she was concerned in some key that would make up for things. "Do make yourself comfortable. Don't mind me."

Yule looked a shade less serious. "That's exactly what I wanted to say to *you!*"

She was struck with the way it came in. "Well, if you *had* been haughty I shouldn't have been quite crushed, should I?"

The young man's gravity, at this, completely yielded. "I'm never haughty oh no!"

She seemed even more amused. "Fortunately then, as *I'm* never crushed. I don't think," she added, "that I'm really as crushable as you."

The smile with which he received this failed to conceal completely that it was something of a home−thrust. "Aren't we really *all* crushable by the right thing?"

She considered a little. "Don't you mean rather by the wrong?"

He had got, clearly, a trifle more accustomed to her being extraordinary. "Are you sure we always know them apart?"

She weighed the responsibility. "I always do. Don't you?"

"Not quite every time!"

"Oh," she replied, "I don't think, thank goodness, we have positively 'every time' to distinguish."

"Yet we must always act," he objected.

She turned this over; then with her wonderful living look, "I'm glad to hear it," she exclaimed, "because, I fear, I

always *do!* You'll certainly think," she added with more gravity, "that I've taken a line to−day!"

"Do you mean that of mistress of the house? Yes you do seem in possession!"

"*You* don't!" she honestly answered; after which, as to attenuate a little the rigour of the charge: "You don't comfortably look it, I mean. You don't look" she was very serious "as I want you to."

It was when she was most serious that she was funniest. "How do you 'want' me to look?"

She endeavoured, while he watched her, to make up her mind, but seemed only, after an instant, to recognise a difficulty. "When you look at *me,* you're all right!" she sighed. It was an obstacle of her lesson, and she cast her eyes about. "Look at that chimney−piece."

"Well ?" he inquired as his eyes came back from it.

"You mean to say it isn't lovely?"

He returned to it without passion gave a vivid sign of mere disability. "I'm sure I don't know. I don't mean to say anything. I'm a rank outsider."

It had an instant effect on her she almost pounced upon him. "Then you must let me put you up!"

"Up to what?"

"Up to everything!" his levity added to her earnestness. "You were smoking when you came in," she said as she glanced about. "Where's your cigarette?"

The young man appreciatively produced another. "I thought perhaps I mightn't here."

"You may everywhere."

He bent his head to the information. "Everywhere."

She laughed at his docility, yet could only wish to presume upon it. "It's a rule of the house!"

He took in the place with greater pleasure. "What delightful rules!"

"How could such a house have any others?" she was already launched again in her brave relation to it. "I *may* go up just once more mayn't I to the long gallery?"

How could he tell? "The long gallery?"

With an added glow she remembered. "I forgot you've never seen it. Why, it's the leading thing about you!" She was full, on the spot, of the pride of showing it. "Come right up!"

Clement Yule, half seated on a table from which his long left leg nervously swung, only looked at her and smiled and smoked. "There's a party up."

She remembered afresh. "So *we* must be the party down? Well, you must give me the chance. That long gallery's the principal thing I came over for."

She was strangest of all when she explained. "Where in heaven's name did you come over from?"

"Missoura Top, where I'm building just in this style. I came for plans and ideas," Mrs Gracedew serenely pursued. "I felt I must look right *at* you."

"But what did you know about us?"

She kept it a moment as if it were too good to give him all at once. "Everything!"

He seemed indeed almost afraid to touch it. "At 'Missoura Top'?"

"Why not? It's a growing place forty thousand the last census." She hesitated; then as if her warrant should be slightly more personal: "My husband left it to me."

The young man presently changed his posture. "You're a widow?"

Nothing was wanting to the simplicity of her quiet assent. "A very lone woman." Her face, for a moment, had the vision of a long distance. "My loneliness is great enough to want something big to hold it and my taste good enough to want something beautiful. You see, I had your picture."

Yule's innocence made a movement. "Mine?"

Her smile reassured him; she nodded toward the main entrance. "A watercolour I chanced on in Boston."

"In Boston?"

She stared. "Haven't you heard of Boston either?"

"Yes but what has Boston heard of *me?*"

"It wasn't 'you', unfortunately it was your divine south front. The drawing struck me so that I got you up in the books."

He appeared, however, rather comically, but half to make it out, or to gather at any rate that there was even more of it than he feared. "Are we in the books?"

"Did you never discover it?" Before his blankness, the dim apprehension in his fine amused and troubled face of how much there was of it, her frank, gay concern for him sprang again to the front. "Where in heaven's name, Captain Yule, have *you* come over from?"

He looked at her very kindly, but as if scarce expecting her to follow. "The East End of London."

She had followed perfectly, he saw the next instant, but she had by no means equally accepted. "What were you doing there?"

He could only put it, though a little over−consciously, very simply, "Working, you see. When I left the army it was much too slow, unless one was personally a whirlwind of war I began to make out that, for a fighting man "

"There's always," she took him up, "somebody or other to go for?"

He considered her, while he smoked, with more confidence; as if she might after all understand. "The enemy, yes everywhere in force. I went for *him*: misery and ignorance and vice injustice and privilege and wrong. Such as you see me !"

"You're a rabid reformer?" she understood beautifully. "I wish we had you at Missoura Top!"

He literally, for a moment, in the light of her beauty and familiarity, appeared to measure his possible use there; then, looking round him again, announced with a sigh that, predicament for predicament, his own would do. "I fear my work is nearer home. I hope," he continued, "since you're so good as to seem to care, to perform a part of that work in the next House of Commons. My electors have wanted me "

"And you've wanted *them*," she lucidly put in, "and that has been why you couldn't come down."

"Yes, for all this last time. And before that, from my childhood up, there was another reason." He took a few steps away and brought it out as rather a shabby one. "A family feud."

She proved to be quite delighted with it. "Oh, I'm so glad I *hoped* I'd strike a 'feud'! That rounds it off, and spices it up, and, for the heartbreak with which I take leave of you, just neatly completes the fracture!" Her reference to her going seemed suddenly, on this, to bring her back to a sense of proportion and propriety, and she glanced about once more for some wrap or reticule. This, in turn, however, was another recall. "Must I really wait to go up?"

He had watched her movement, had changed colour, had shifted his place, had tossed away, plainly unwitting, a cigarette but half smoked; and now he stood in her path to the staircase as if, still unsatisfied, he abruptly sought a way to turn the tables. "Only till you tell me this: if you absolutely meant, a while ago, that this old thing is so precious."

She met his doubt with amazement and his density with compassion. "Do you literally need I should *say* it? Can you stand here and not feel it?" If he had the misfortune of bandaged eyes she could at least rejoice in her own vision, which grew intenser with her having to speak for it. She spoke as with a new rush of her impression. "It's a place to love " Yet to say the whole thing was not easy.

"To love ?" he impatiently insisted.

"Well, as you'd love a person!" If that was saying the whole thing, saying the whole thing could only be to go. A sound from the 'party up' came down at that moment, and she took it so clearly as a call that, for a sign of separation, she passed straight to the stairs. "Goodbye!"

The young man let her reach the foot, but then, though the greatest width of the hall now divided them, spoke, anxiously and nervously, as if the point she had just made brought them still more together. "I think I 'feel' it, you know; but it's simply you your presence, as I may say, and the remarkable way you put it that make me. I'm afraid that in your absence " He struck a match to smoke again.

It gave her time apparently to make out something to pause for. "In my absence?"

He lit his cigarette. "I may come back "

"Come back?" she took him almost sharply up. "I should like to see you *not!*"

He smoked a moment. "I mean to my old idea "

She had quite turned round on him now. "Your old idea ?"

He faced her over the width still between them. "Well that one *could* give it up."

Her stare, at this, fairly filled the space. "Give up Covering? How in the world or why?"

"Because I can't afford to keep it."

It brought her straight back, but only half−way: she pulled up short as at a flash. "Can't you let it?"

Again he smoked before answering. "Let it to *you?*"

She gave a laugh, and her laugh brought her nearer. "I'd take it in a minute!"

Clement Yule remained grave. "I shouldn't have the face to charge you a rent that would make it worth one's while, and I think even you, dear lady" his voice just trembled as he risked that address "wouldn't have the face to offer me one." He paused, but something in his aspect and manner checked in her now any impulse to read his meaning too soon. "My lovely inheritance is Dead Sea fruit. It's mortgaged for all it's worth and I haven't the means to pay the interest. If by a miracle I could scrape the money together it would leave me without a penny to live on." He puffed his cigarette profusely. "So if I find the old home at last I lose it by the same luck!"

Mrs Gracedew had hung upon his words, and she seemed still to wait, in visible horror, for something that would improve on them. But when she had to take them for his last, "I never heard of anything so awful!" she broke out. "Do you mean to say you can't arrange ?"

"Oh yes," he promptly replied, "an arrangement if that be the name to give it has been definitely proposed to me."

"What's the matter then?" she had dropped into relief. "For heaven's sake, you poor thing, definitely accept it!"

He laughed, though with little joy, at her sweet simplifications. "I've made up my mind in the last quarter of an hour that I can't. It's such a peculiar case."

Mrs Gracedew frankly wondered; her bias was clearly sceptical. " *How* peculiar ?"

He found the measure difficult to give. "Well more peculiar than most cases."

Still she was not satisfied. "More peculiar than mine?"

"Than yours?" Clement Yule knew nothing about that.

Something, at this, in his tone, his face it might have been his 'British' density seemed to pull her up. "I forgot you don't know mine. No matter. What *is* yours?"

He took a few steps in thought. "Well, the fact that I'm asked to change."

"To change what?"

He wondered how he could put it; then at last, on his own side, simplified. "My attitude."

"Is that all?" she was relieved again. "Well, you're not a statue."

"No, I'm not a statue; but on the other hand, don't you see? I'm not a windmill." There was good humour, none the less, in his rigour. "The mortgages I speak of have all found their way, like gregarious silly sheep, into the hands of one person a devouring wolf, a very rich, a very sharp man of money. He holds me in this manner at his mercy. He consents to make things comfortable for me, but he requires that, in return, I shall do something for him that don't you know? rather sticks in my crop."

It appeared on this light showing to stick for a moment even in Mrs Gracedew's. "Do you mean something wrong?"

He had not a moment's hesitation. "Exceedingly so!"

She turned it over as if pricing a Greek Aldus. "Anything immoral?"

"Yes I may literally call it immoral."

She courted however, frankly enough, the strict truth. "Too bad to tell?"

He indulged in another pensive fidget, then left her to judge. "He wants me to give up " Yet again he faltered.

"To give up what?" What could it be, she appeared to ask, that was barely nameable?

He quite blushed to her indeed as he came to the point. "My fundamental views."

She was disappointed she had waited for more. "Nothing but *them?*"

He met her with astonishment. "Surely they're quite enough, when one has unfortunately" he rather ruefully smiled "so very many!"

She laughed aloud; this was frankly so odd a plea. "Well, *I've* a neat collection too, but I'd 'swap', as they say in the West, the whole set !" She looked about the hall for something of equivalent price; after which she pointed, as it caught her eye, to the great cave of the fireplace. "I'd take *that* set!"

The young man scarcely followed. "The fire−irons?"

"For the whole fundamental lot!" She gazed with real yearning at the antique group. "*They're* three hundred years old. Do you mean to tell me your wretched 'views' ?"

"Have anything like that age? No, thank God," Clement Yule laughed, "my views wretched as you please! are quite in their prime! They're a hungry little family that has got to be fed. They keep me awake at night."

"Then you must make up your sleep!" Her impatience grew with her interest. "Listen to *me!*"

"That would scarce be the way!" he returned. But he added more sincerely: "You must surely see a fellow can't chuck his politics."

"'Chuck' them ?"

"Well sacrifice them."

"I'd sacrifice mine," she cried, "for that old fire−back with your arms!" He glanced at the object in question, but with such a want of intelligence that she visibly resented it. "See how it has stood!"

"See how *I've* stood!" he answered with spirit. "I've glowed with a hotter fire than anything in any chimney, and the warmth and light I diffuse have attracted no little attention. How can I consent to reduce them to the state of that desolate hearth?"

His companion, freshly struck with the fine details of the desolation, had walked over to the chimney−corner, where, lost in her deeper impression, she lingered and observed. At last she turned away with her impatience controlled. "It's magnificent!"

"The fire−back?"

"Everything everywhere. I don't understand your haggling."

He hesitated. "That's because you're ignorant." Then seeing in the light of her eye that he had applied to her the word in the language she least liked, he hastened to attenuate. "I mean of what's behind my reserves."

She was silent in a way that made their talk more of a discussion than if she had spoken. "What *is* behind them?" she presently asked.

"Why, my whole political history. Everything I've said, everything I've done. My scorching addresses and letters, reproduced in all the papers. I needn't go into details, but I'm a pure, passionate, pledged Radical."

Mrs Gracedew looked him full in the face. "Well, what if you *are?*"

He broke into mirth at her tone. "Simply this that I can't therefore, from one day to the other, pop up at Gossage in the purple pomp of the opposite camp. There's a want of transition. It may be timid of me it me be abject. But I can't."

If she was not yet prepared to contest she was still less prepared to surrender it, and she confined herself for the instant to smoothing down with her foot the corner of an old rug. "Have you thought very much about it?"

He was vague. "About what?"

"About what Mr Prodmore wants you to do."

He flushed up. "Oh then, you know it's *he?*"

"I'm not," she said, still gravely enough, "of an intelligence absolutely infantile."

"You're the cleverest Tory I've ever met!" he laughed. "I didn't mean to mention my friend's name, but since *you've* done so !" He gave up with a shrug his scruple.

Oh, she had already cleared the ground of it! "It's he who's the devouring wolf? It's he who holds your mortgages?"

The very lucidity of her interest just checked his assent. "He holds plenty of others, and he treats me very handsomely."

She showed of a sudden an inconsequent face. "Do you call *that* handsome such a condition?"

He shed surprise. "Why, I thought it was just the condition you could meet."

She measured her inconsistency, but was not abashed. "We're not talking of what *I* can meet." Yet she found also a relief in dropping the point. "Why doesn't he stand himself?"

"Well, like other devouring wolves, he's not personally adored."

"Not even," she asked, "when he offers such liberal terms?"

Clement Yule had to explain. "I dare say he doesn't offer them to everyone."

"Only to you?" at this she quite sprang. "You *are* personally adored; you will be still more if you stand; and that, you poor lamb, is why he wants you!"

The young man, obviously pleased to find her after all more at one with him, accepted gracefully enough the burden her sympathy imposed. "I'm the bearer of my name, I'm the representative of my family; and to my family and my name since you've led me to it this countryside has been for generations indulgently attached."

She listened to him with a sentiment in her face that showed how now, at last, she felt herself deal with the lawful heir. She seemed to perceive it with a kind of passion. "You do of course what you will with the countryside!"

"Yes" he went with her "if we do it as genuine Yules. I'm obliged of course to grant you that your genuine Yule's a Tory of Tories. It's Mr Prodmore's belief that I should carry Gossage in that character, but in that character only. They won't look at me in any other."

It might have taxed a spectator to say in what character Mrs Gracedew, on this, for a little, considered him. "Don't be too sure of people's not looking at you!"

He blushed again, but he laughed. "We must leave out my personal beauty."

"We can't!" she replied with decision. "Don't we take in Mr Prodmore's?"

Captain Yule was not prepared. "You call him beautiful?"

"Hideous." She settled it; then pursued her investigation. "What's the extraordinary interest that he attaches ?"

"To the return of a Tory?" Here the young man *was* prepared. "Oh, his desire is born of his fear his terror on behalf of Property, which he sees, somehow, with an intensely Personal, with a quite colossal 'P'. He has a great deal of that article, and very little of anything else."

Mrs Gracedew, accepting provisionally his demonstration, had one of her friendly recalls. "Do you call that nice daughter 'very little'?"

The young man looked quite at a loss. "Is she very big? I really didn't notice her and moreover she's just a part of the Property. He thinks things are going too far."

She sat straight down on a stiff chair; on which, with high distinctness: "Well, they *are!*"

He stood before her in the discomposure of her again thus appearing to fail him. "Aren't you then a lover of justice?"

"A passionate one!" She sat there as upright as if she held the scales. "Where's the justice of your losing this house?" Generous as well as strenuous, all her fairness thrown out by her dark old high−backed seat, she put it to

him as from the judicial bench. "To keep Covering, you must carry Gossage!"

The odd face he made at it might have betrayed a man dazzled. "As a renegade?"

"As a genuine Yule. What business have you to be anything else?" She had already arranged it all. "You must close with Mr Prodmore you must stand in the Tory interest." She hung fire a moment; then as she got up: "If you will, I'll conduct your canvas!"

He stared at the distracting picture. "That puts the temptation high!"

But she brushed the mere picture away. "Ah, don't look at me as if *I* were the temptation! Look at this sweet old human home, and feel all its gathered memories. Do you want to know what they do to me?" She took the survey herself again, as if to be really sure. "They speak to me for Mr Prodmore."

He followed with a systematic docility the direction of her eyes, but as if with the result only of its again coming home to him that there was no accounting for what things might do. "Well, there are others than these, you know," he goodnaturedly pleaded "things for which I've spoken, repeatedly and loudly, to others than you." The very manner of his speaking on such occasions appeared, for that matter, now to come back to him. "One's 'human home' is all very well, but the rest of one's humanity is better!" She gave, at this, a droll soft wail; she turned impatiently away. "I see you're disgusted with me, and I'm sorry; but one must take one's self as circumstances and experience have made one, and it's not my fault, don't you know? if they've made me a very modern man. I see something else in the world than the beauty of old show−houses and the glory of old show−families. There are thousands of people in England who can show no houses at all, and I don't feel it utterly shameful to share their poor fate!"

She had moved away with impatience, and it was the advantage of this for her that the back she turned prevented him from seeing how intently she listened. She seemed to continue to listen even after he had stopped; but if that gave him a sense of success he might have been checked by the way she at last turned round with a sad and beautiful headshake. "We share the poor fate of humanity whatever we do, and we do something to help and console when we've something precious to show. What on earth is more precious than what the ages have slowly wrought? They've trusted us, in such a case, to keep it to do something, in our turn, for *them*." She shone out at him as if her contention had the evidence of the noonday sun, and yet in her generosity she superabounded and explained. "It's such a virtue, in anything, to have lasted; it's such an honour, for anything, to have been spared. To all strugglers from the wreck of time hold out a pitying hand!"

Yule, on this argument of a strain which even a good experience of debate could scarce have prepared him to meet had not a congruous rejoinder absolutely pat, and his hesitation unfortunately gave him time to see how soon his companion made out that what had touched him most in it was her particular air in presenting it. She would manifestly have preferred he should have been floored by her mere moral reach; yet he was aware that his own made no great show as he took refuge in general pleasantry. "What a plea for looking backward, dear lady, to come from Missoura Top!"

"We're making a Past at Missoura Top as fast as ever we can, and I should like to see you lay your hand on an hour of the one we've made! It's a tight fit, as yet, I grant," she said, "and that's just why I like, in yours, to find room, don't you see? to turn round. You're *in* it, over here, and you can't get out; so just make the best of that and treat the thing as part of the fun!"

"The whole of the fun, to me," the young man replied, "is in hearing you defend it! It's like your defending hereditary gout or chronic rheumatism and sore throat the things I feel aching in every old bone of these walls and groaning in every old draught that, I'm sure, has for centuries blown through them."

Mrs Gracedew looked as if no woman could be shaken who was so prepared to be just all round. "If there be aches there may be you're here to soothe them, and if there be draughts there *must* be! you're here to stop them up. And do you know what *I'm* here for? If I've come so far and so straight I've almost wondered myself. I've felt with a kind of passion but now I see *why* I've felt." She moved about the hall with the excitement of this perception and, separated from him at last by a distance across which he followed her discovery with a visible suspense, she brought out the news. "I'm here for an act of salvation I'm here to avert a sacrifice!"

So they stood a little, with more, for the minute, passing between them than either really could say. She might have flung down a glove that he decided on the whole, passing his hand over his head as the seat of some confusion, not to pick up. Again, but flushed as well as smiling, he sought the easiest cover. "You're here, I think, madam, to be a memory for all my future!"

Well, she was willing, she showed as she came nearer, to take it, at the worst, for that. "You'll be one for mine, if I can see you by that hearth. Why do you make such a fuss about changing your politics? If you'd come to Missoura Top you'd change them quick enough!" Then, as she saw further and struck harder, her eyes grew deep, her face even seemed to pale, and she paused, splendid and serious, with the force of her plea. "What do politics amount to, compared with religions? Parties and programmes come and go, but a duty like this abides. There's nothing you can break with" she pressed him closer, ringing out "that would be like breaking *here*. The very words are violent and ugly as much a sacrilege as if you had been trusted with the key of the temple. This *is* the temple don't profane it! Keep up the old altar kindly you can't set up a new one as good. You *must* have beauty in your life, don't you see? that's the only way to make sure of it for the lives of others. Keep leaving it to *them*, to all the poor others," she went on with her bright irony, "and heaven only knows what will become of it! Does it take one of *us* to feel that? to preach you the truth? Then it's good, Captain Yule, we come right over just to see, you know, what you may happen to be about. We know," she went on while her sense of proportion seemed to play into her sense of humour, "what we haven't got, worse luck; so that if you've happily got it you've got it also for *us*. You've got it in trust, you see, and oh! we have an eye on you. You've had it so for me, all these dear days that I've been drinking it in, that, to be grateful, I've wanted regularly to *do* something." With which, as if in the rich confidence of having convinced him, she came so near as almost to touch him. "Tell me now I shall have done it I shall have kept you at your post!"

If he moved, on this, immediately further, it was with the oddest air of seeking rather to study her remarks at his ease than to express an independence of them. He kept, to this end, his face averted he was so completely now in intelligent possession of her own. The sacrifice in question carried him even to the door of the court, where he once more stood so long engaged that the persistent presentation of his back might at last have suggested either a confession or a request.

Mrs Gracedew, meanwhile, a little spent with her sincerity, seated herself again in the great chair, and if she sought, visibly enough, to read a meaning into his movement, she had as little triumph for one possible view of it as she had resentment for the other. The possibility that he yielded left her after all as vague in respect to a next step as the possibility that he merely wished to get rid of her. The moments elapsed without her abdicating; and indeed when he finally turned round his expression was an equal check to any power to feel she might have won. "You have," he queerly smiled at her, "a standpoint quite your own and a style of eloquence that the few scraps of parliamentary training I've picked up don't seem at all to fit me to deal with. Of course I don't pretend, you know, that I don't *care* for Covering."

That, at all events, she could be glad to hear, if only perhaps for the tone in it that was so almost comically ingenuous. But her relief was reasonable and her exultation temperate. "You haven't even seen it yet." She risked, however, a laugh. "Aren't you a bit afraid?"

He took a minute to rely, then replied as if to make it up with a grand collapse. "Yes; awfully. But if I am," he hastened in decency to add, "it isn't only Covering that makes me."

This left his friend apparently at a loss. "What else is it?"

"Everything. But it doesn't in the last matter," he loosely pursued. "You may be quite correct. When we talk of the house your voice comes to me somehow as the wind in its old chimneys."

Her amusement distinctly revived. "I hope you don't mean I roar!"

He blushed again; there was no doubt he was confused. "No nor yet perhaps that you whistle! I don't believe the wind does either, here. It only whispers," he sought gracefully to explain; "and it sighs "

"And I hope," she broke in, "that it sometimes laughs!"

The sound she gave only made him, as he looked at her, more serious. "Whatever it does, it's all right."

"All right?" they were sufficiently together again for her to lay her hand straight on his arm. "Then you promise?"

"Promise what?"

He had turned pale as if she hurt him, and she took her hand away. "To meet Mr Prodmore."

"Oh dear no; not yet!" he quite recovered himself. "I must wait I must think."

She looked disappointed, and there was a momentary silence. "When have you to answer him?"

"Oh, he gives me time!" Clement Yule spoke very much as he might have said "Oh, in two minutes!"

"*I* wouldn't give you time," Mrs Gracedew cried with force "I'd give you a shaking! For God's sake, at any rate" and she really tried to push him off "go upstairs!"

"And literally *find* the dreadful man?" This was so little his personal idea that, distinctly dodging her pressure, he had already reached the safe quarter.

But it befell that at the same moment she saw Cora reappear on the upper landing a circumstance that promised her a still better conclusion. "He's coming down!"

Cora, in spite of this announcement, came down boldly enough without him and made directly for Mrs Gracedew, to whom her eyes had attached themselves with an undeviating glare. Her plain purpose of treating this lady as an isolated presence allowed their companion perfect freedom to consider her arrival with sharp alarm. His disconcerted stare seemed for a moment to balance; it wandered, gave a wild glance at the open door, then searched the ascent of the staircase, in which, apparently, it now found a coercion. "I'll go up!" he gasped; and he took three steps at a time.

5

The girl threw herself, in her flushed eagerness, straight upon the wonderful lady. "I've come back to you I want to speak to you!" The need had been a rapid growth, but it was clearly immense. "May I confide in you?"

Her instant overflow left Mrs Gracedew both astonished and amused. "You too?" she laughed. "Why, it *is* good we come over!"

"It is indeed!" Cora gratefully echoed. "You were so very kind to me and seemed to think me so curious."

The mirth of her friend redoubled. "Well, I loved you for it, and it was nothing moreover to what you thought *me!*"

Miss Prodmore found, for this, no denial she only presented her frank high colour. "I loved *you*. But I'm the worst!" she generously added. "And I'm solitary."

"Ah, so am I!" Mrs Gracedew declared with gaiety, but with emphasis. "A *very* queer thing always *is* solitary! But, since we have that link, by all means confide."

"Well, I was met here by tremendous news." Cora produced it with a purple glow. "He wants me to marry him!"

Mrs Gracedew looked amiably receptive, but as if she failed as yet to follow. "'He' wants you?"

"Papa, of course. He has settled it!"

Mrs Gracedew was still vague. "Settled what?"

"Why, the whole question. That I must take him."

Mrs Gracedew seemed to frown at her own scattered wits. "But, my dear, take *whom?*"

The girl looked surprised at this lapse of her powers. "Why, Captain Yule, who just went up."

"Oh!" said Mrs Gracedew with a full stare. "Oh!" she repeated looking straight away.

"I thought you would know," Cora gently explained.

Her friend's eyes, with a kinder light now, came back to her. "I didn't know." Mrs Gracedew looked, in truth, as if that had been sufficiently odd, and seemed also to wonder at two or three things more. It all, however, broke quickly into a question. "Has Captain Yule asked you?"

"No, but he *will*" Cora was clear as a bell. "He'll do it to keep the house. It's mortgaged to papa, and Captain Yule buys it back."

Her friend had an illumination that was rapid for the way it spread. "By marrying you?" she quavered.

Cora, under further parental instruction, had plainly mastered the subject. "By giving me his name and his position. They're awfully great, and they're the price, don't you see?" she modestly mentioned. " *My* price. Papa's price. Papa wants them."

Mrs Gracedew had caught hold; yet there were places where her grasp was weak, and she had, strikingly, begun again to reflect. "But his name and his position, great as they may be, are his dreadful politics!"

Cora threw herself with energy into this advance. "You *know* about his dreadful politics? He's to change them," she recited, "to get *me*. And if he gets me "

"He keeps the house?" Mrs Gracedew snatched it up.

Cora continued to show her schooling. "I go *with* it he's to have us both. But only," she admonishingly added, "if he changes. The question is *will* he change?"

Mrs Gracedew appeared profoundly to entertain it. "I see. *Will* he change?"

Cora's consideration of it went even further. "*Has* he changed?"

It went and the effect was odd a little too far for her companion, in whom, just discernibly, it had touched the spring of impatience. "My dear child, how in the world should *I* know?"

But Cora knew exactly how anyone would know. "He hasn't seemed to care enough for the house. *Does* he care?"

Mrs Gracedew moved away, passed over to the fireplace and stood a moment looking at the old armorial fire−back she had praised to its master yet not, it must be added, as if she particularly saw it. Then as she faced about: "You had better ask him!"

They stood thus confronted, with the fine old interval between them, and the girl's air was for a moment that of considering such a course. "If he does care," she said at last, "he'll propose."

Mrs Gracedew, from where she stood in relation to the stairs, saw at this point the subject of their colloquy restored to view: Captain Yule was just upon them he had turned the upper landing. The sight of him forced from her in a flash an ejaculation that she tried, however, to keep private "He does care!" She passed swiftly, before he reached them, back to the girl and, in a quick whisper, but with full conviction, let her have it: "He'll propose!"

Her movement had made her friend aware, and the young man, hurrying down, was now in the hall. Cora, at his hurry, looked dismay "Then I fly!" With which, casting about for a direction, she reached the door to the court.

Captain Yule, however, at this result of his return, expressed instant regret. "I drive Miss Prodmore away!"

Mrs Gracedew, more quickly still, eased off the situation. "It's all right!" She had embraced both parties with a smile, but it was most liberal now for Cora. "Do you mind, one moment?" it conveyed, unmistakeably, a full intelligence and a fine explanation. "I've something to say to Captain Yule."

Cora stood in the doorway, robust against the garden−light, and looking from one to the other. "Yes but I've also something more to say to *you*."

"Do you mean now?" the young man asked.

It was the first time he had spoken to her, and her hesitation might have signified a maidenly flutter. "No but before she goes."

Mrs Gracedew took it amiably up. "Come back, then; I'm not going." And there was both dismissal and encouragement in the way that, as on the occasion of the girl's former retreat, she blew her a familiar kiss. Cora, still with her face to them, waited just enough to show that she took it without a response; then, with a quick turn, dashed out, while Mrs Gracedew looked at their visitor in vague surprise. "What's the matter with her?"

She had turned away as soon as she spoke, moving as far from him as she had moved a few moments before from Cora. The silence that, as he watched her, followed her question would have been seen by a spectator to be a hard one for either to break. "I don't know what's the matter with her," he said at last: "I'm afraid I only know what's the matter with *me*. It will doubtless give you pleasure to learn," he added, "that I've closed with Mr Prodmore."

It was a speech that, strangely enough, seemed but half to dissipate the hush. Mrs Gracedew reached the great chimney again; again she stood there with her face averted; and when she finally replied it was in other words than he might have supposed himself naturally to inspire. "I thought you said he gave you time."

"Yes; but you produced just now so deep an effect on me that I thought best not to take any." He appeared to listen to a sound from above, and, for a moment, under this impulse, his eyes travelled about almost as if he were alone. Then he completed, with deliberation, his statement. "I came upon him right there, and I burnt my ships."

Mrs Gracedew continued not to meet his face. "You do what he requires?"

The young man was markedly, consciously caught. "I do what he requires. I felt the tremendous force of all you said to me."

She turned round on him now, as if perhaps with a slight sharpness, the face of responsibility even, it might be, of reproach. "So did I or I shouldn't have said it!"

It was doubtless this element of justification in her tone that drew from him a laugh a tiny trifle dry. "You're perhaps not aware that you wield an influence of which it's not too much to say "

But he paused at the important point so long that she took him up. "To say what?"

"Well, that it's practically irresistible!"

It sounded a little as if it had not been what he first meant; but it made her, none the less, still graver and just faintly ironical. "You've given me the most flattering proof of my influence that I've ever enjoyed in my life!"

He fixed her very hard, now distinctly so mystified that he could only wonder what different recall of her previous attitude she would have looked for. "This was inevitable, dear madam, from the moment you had converted me and in about three minutes too! into the absolute echo of your raptures."

Nothing was, indeed, more extraordinary than her air of having suddenly forgotten them. "My 'raptures'?"

He was amazed. "Why, about my home."

He might look her through and through, but she had no eyes for himself, though she had now quitted the fireplace and finally recognised this allusion. "Oh yes your home!" From where had she come back to it? "It's a nice tattered, battered old thing." This account of it was the more shrunken that her observation, even as she spoke, freshly went to rounds. "It has defects of course" with this renewed attention they appeared suddenly to strike her. They had popped out, conspicuous, and for a little it might have been a matter of conscience. However, her conscience dropped. "But it's no use mentioning them now!"

They had half an hour earlier been vividly present to himself, but to see her thus oddly pulled up by them was to forget on the spot the ground he had taken. "I'm particularly sorry," he returned with some spirit, "that you didn't mention them before!"

At this imputation of inconsequence, of a levity not, after all, without its excuse, Mrs Gracedew was reduced, in keeping her resentment down, to an effort not quite successfully disguised. It was in a tone, nevertheless, all the more mild in intention that she reminded him of where he had equally failed. "If you had really gone over the house, as I almost went on my knees to you to do, you might have discovered some of them yourself!"

"How can you say that," the young man asked with heat, "when I was precisely in the very act of it? It was just *because* I was that the first person I met above was Mr Prodmore; on which, feeling that I must come to it sooner or later, I simply gave in to him on the spot yielded him, to have it well over, the whole of his point."

She listened to this account of the matter as she might have gazed, from afar, at some queer object that was scarce distinguishable. It left her a moment in the deepest thought, but she presently recovered her tone. "Let me then congratulate you on at last knowing what you want!"

But there were, after all, he instantly showed, no such great reasons for that. "I only know it so far as *you* know it! I struck while the iron was hot or at any rate while the hammer was."

"Of course I recognise" she adopted his image with her restored gaiety "that it can rarely have been exposed to such a fire. I blazed up, and I know that when I burn "

She had pulled up with the foolish sense of this. "When you burn?"

"Well, I do it as Chicago does."

He also could laugh out now. "Isn't that usually down to the ground?"

Meeting his laugh, she threw up her light arms. "As high as the sky!" Then she came back, as with a scruple, to the real question. "I suppose you've still formalities to go through."

"With Mr Prodmore?" Well, he would suppose it too if she liked. "Oh, endless, tiresome ones, no doubt!"

This sketch of them made her wonder. "You mean they'll take so very, very long?"

He seemed after all to know perfectly what he meant. "Every hour, every month, that I can possibly make them last!"

She was with him here, however, but to a certain point. "You mustn't drag them out *too* much must you? Won't he think in that case you may want to retract?"

Yule apparently tried to focus Mr Prodmore under this delusion, and with a success that had a quick, odd result. "I shouldn't be so terribly upset by his mistake, you know, even if he did!"

His manner, with its slight bravado, left her proportionately shocked. "Oh, it would never do to give him any colour whatever for supposing you to have any doubt that, as one may say, you've pledged your honour."

He devoted to this proposition more thought than its simplicity would have seemed to demand; but after a minute, at all events, his intelligence triumphed. "Of course not not when I *haven't* any doubt!"

Though his intelligence had triumphed, she still wished to show she was there to support it. "How can you *possibly* have any any more than you can possibly have that one's honour is everything in life?" And her charming eyes expressed to him her need to feel that he was quite at one with her on *that* point.

He could give her every assurance. "Oh yes everything in life!"

It did her much good, brought back the rest of her brightness. "Wasn't it just of the question of the honour of things that we talked a while ago and of the difficulty of sometimes keeping our sense of it clear? There's no more to be said therefore," she went on with the faintest soft sigh about it, "except that I leave you to your ancient glory as I leave you to your strict duty." She had these things there before her; they might have been a well−spread board from which she turned away fasting. "I hope you'll do justice to dear old Covering in spite of its weak points, and I hope above all you'll not be incommoded "

As she hesitated here he was too intent. "Incommoded ?"

She saw it better than she could express it. "Well, by such a rage !"

He challenged this description with a strange gleam. "You suppose it will be a rage?"

She laughed out at his look. "Are you afraid of the love that kills?"

He grew singularly grave. "*Will* it kill ?"

"Great passions *have!*" she was highly amused.

But he could only stare. "Is it a great passion?"

"Surely when so many feel it!"

He was fairly bewildered. "But how many ?"

She reckoned them up. "Let's see. If you count them all "

"'All'?" Clement Yule gasped.

She looked at him, in turn, slightly mystified. "I see. You knock off some. About half?"

It was too obscure he broke down. "Whom on earth are you talking about?"

"Why, the electors "

"Of Gossage?" he leaped at it. "Oh!"

"I got the whole thing up there are six thousand. It's such a fine figure!" said Mrs Gracedew.

He had sharply passed from her, to cover his mistake, and it carried him half round the hall. Then, as if aware that this pause itself compromised him, he came back confusedly and with her last words in his ear. "*Has* she a fine figure?"

But her own thoughts were off. "'She'?"

He blushed and recovered himself. "Aren't we talking "

"Of Gossage? Oh yes she has every charm! Good−bye," said Mrs Gracedew.

He pulled, at this, the longest face, but was kept dumb a moment by the very decision with which she again began to gather herself. It held him helpless, and there was finally real despair in his retarded protest. "You don't mean to say you're going?"

"You don't mean to say you're surprised at it? Haven't I done," she luminously asked, "what I told you I had been so mystically moved to come for?" She recalled to him by her renewed supreme survey the limited character of this errand, which she then in a brisk familiar word expressed to the house itself. "You dear old thing you're saved!"

Clement Yule might, on the other hand, by his simultaneous action, have given himself out for lost. "For God's sake," he cried as he circled earnestly round her, "don't go till I can come back to thank you!" He pulled out his watch. "I promised to return immediately to Prodmore."

This completely settled his visitor. "Then don't let me, for a moment more, keep you away from him. You must have such lots" it went almost without saying "to talk comfortably over."

The young man's embrace of that was, in his restless movement, to roam to the end of the hall furthest from the stairs. But here his assent was entire. "I certainly feel, you know, that I must see him again." He rambled even to the open door and looked with incoherence into the court. "Yes, decidedly, I *must!*"

"Is he out there?" Mrs Gracedew lightly asked.

He turned short round. "No I left him in the long gallery."

"You *saw* that then?" she flashed back into eagerness. "Isn't it lovely?"

Clement Yule rather wondered. "I didn't notice it. How *could* I?"

His face was so woeful that she broke into a laugh. "How *couldn't* you? Notice it now, then. Go up to him!"

He crossed at last to the staircase, but at the foot he stopped again. "Will you wait for me?"

He had such an air of proposing a bargain, of making the wait a condition, that she had to look it well in the face. The result of her doing so, however, was apparently a strong sense that she could give him no pledge. Her silence, after a moment, expressed that; but, for a further emphasis, moving away, she sank suddenly into the chair she had already occupied and in which, serious again and very upright, she continued to withhold her promise. "Go up to him!" she simply repeated. He obeyed, with an abrupt turn, mounting briskly enough several steps, but pausing midway and looking back at her as if he were after all irresolute. He was in fact so much so that, at the sight of her still in her chair and alone by his cold hearth, he descended a few steps again and seemed, with too much decidedly on his mind, on the point of breaking out. She had sat a minute in such thought, figuring him clearly as gone, that at the sound of his return she sprang up with a protest. This checked him afresh, and he remained where he had paused, still on the ascent and exchanging with her a look to which neither party was inspired, oddly enough, to contribute a word. It struck him, without words, at all events, as enough, and he now took his upward course at such a pace that he presently disappeared. She listened a while to his retreating tread; then her own, on the old flags of the hall, became rapid, though, it may perhaps be added, directed to no visible end. It conveyed her, in the great space, from point to point, but she now for the first time moved there without attention and without joy, her course determined by a series of such inward throbs as might have been the suppressed beats of a

speech. A real observer, had such a monster been present, would have followed this tacit evolution from sign to sign and from shade to shade. "Why didn't he tell me *all?* But it was none of my business! What does he mean to do? What should he do but what he *has* done? And what *can* he do, when he's so deeply committed, when he's practically engaged, when he's just the same as married and buried? The thing for *me* to 'do' is just to pull up short and bundle out: to remove from the scene they encumber the numerous fragments well, of what?"

Her thought was plainly arrested by the sight of Cora Prodmore, who, returning from the garden, reappeared first in the court and then in the open doorway. Mrs Gracedew's was a thought, however, that, even when desperate, was never quite vanquished, and it found a presentable public solution in the pieces of the vase smashed by Chivers and just then, on the table where he had laid them, catching her eye. "Of my old Chelsea pot!" Her gay, sad headshake as she took one of them up pronounced for Cora's benefit its funeral oration. She laid the morsel thoughtfully down, while her visitor seemed with simple dismay to read the story.

6

"Has he been *breaking* ?" the girl asked in horror.

Mrs Gracedew laughingly tapped her heart. "Yes, we've had a scene! He went up again to your father."

Cora was disconcerted. "Papa's not there. He just came down to me by the other way."

"Then he can join you here," said Mrs Gracedew with instant resignation. "I'm going."

"Just when I've come back to you at the risk," Cora made bold to throw off, "of again interrupting, though I really hoped he had gone, your conversation with Captain Yule?"

But Mrs Gracedew let the ball quite drop. "I've nothing to say to Captain Yule."

Cora picked it up for another toss. "You had a good deal to say a few minutes ago!"

"Well, I've said it, and it's over. I've nothing more to say at all," Mrs Gracedew insisted. But her announcement of departure left her on this occasion, as each of its predecessors had done, with a last, with indeed a fresh solicitude. "What has become of my delightful 'party'?"

"They've been dismissed, through the grounds, by the other door. But they mentioned," the girl pursued, "the probable arrival of a fresh lot."

Mrs Gracedew showed on this such a revival of interest as fairly amounted to yearning. "Why, what times you have! *You*," she nevertheless promptly decreed, "must take the fresh lot since the house is now practically yours!"

Poor Cora looked blank. "Mine?"

Her companion matched her stare. "Why, if you're going to marry Captain Yule."

Cora coloured, in a flash, to the eyes. "I'm *not* going to marry Captain Yule!"

Her friend as quickly paled again. "Why on earth then did you tell me only ten minutes ago that you were?"

Cora could only look bewildered at the charge. "I told you nothing of the sort. I only told you" she was almost indignantly positive "that he had been ordered me!"

It sent Mrs Gracedew off; she moved away to indulge an emotion that presently put on the form of extravagant mirth. "Like a dose of medicine or a course of baths?"

The girl's gravity and lucidity sustained themselves. "As a remedy for the single life." Oh, she had mastered the matter now! "But I won't take him!"

"Ah then, why didn't you let me know?" Mrs Gracedew panted.

"I was on the very point of it when he came in and interrupted us." Cora clearly felt she might be wicked, but was at least not stupid. "It's just to let you know that I'm here now."

Ah, the difference it made! This difference, for Mrs Gracedew, suddenly shimmered in all the place, and her companion's fixed eyes caught in her face the reflection of it. "Excuse me I misunderstood. I somehow took for granted !" She stopped, a trifle awkwardly suddenly tender, for Cora, as to the way she had inevitably seen it.

"You took for granted I'd jump at him? Well, now you can take for granted I won't!"

Mrs Gracedew, fairly admiring her, put it sympathetically. "You prefer the single life?"

"No but I don't prefer *him!*" Cora was crystal−bright.

Her light indeed, for her friend, was at first almost blinding; it took Mrs Gracedew a moment to distinguish which she then did, however, with immense eagerness. "You prefer someone else?" Cora's promptitude dropped at this, and, starting to hear it, as you might well have seen, for the first time publicly phrased, she abruptly moved away. A minute's sense of her scruple was enough for Mrs Gracedew: this was proved by the tone of soft remonstrance and high benevolence with which that lady went on. She had looked very hard, first, at one of the old warriors hung on the old wall, and almost spoke as if he represented their host. "He seems remarkably clever."

Cora, at something in the sound, quite jumped about. "Then why don't you marry him yourself?"

Mrs Gracedew gave a sort of happy sigh. "Well, I've got fifty reasons! I rather think one of them must be that he hasn't happened to ask me."

It was a speech, however, that her visitor could easily better. "I haven't got fifty reasons, but I *have* got one."

Mrs Gracedew smiled as if it were indeed a stroke of wit. "You mean your case is one of those in which safety is *not* in numbers?" And then on Cora's visibly not understanding: "It *is* when reasons are bad that one needs so many!"

The proposition was too general for the girl to embrace, but the simplicity of her answer was far from spoiling it. "My reason is awfully good."

Mrs Gracedew did it complete justice. "I see. An older friend."

Cora listened as at a warning sound; yet she had by this time practically let herself go, and it took but Mrs Gracedew's extended encouraging hand, which she quickly seized, to bring the whole thing out. "I've been trying this hour, in my terrible need of advice, to tell you about him!" It came in a small clear torrent, a soft tumble−out of sincerity. "After we parted you and I at the station, he suddenly turned up there, and I took a little quiet walk with him which gave you time to get here before me and of which my father is in a state of ignorance that I don't know whether to regard as desirable or dreadful."

Mrs Gracedew, attentive and wise, might have been, for her face, the old family solicitor. "You want me then to *inform* your father?" It was a wonderful intonation.

Poor Cora, for that matter too, might suddenly have become under this touch the prodigal with a list of debts. She seemed an instant to look out of a blurred office window−pane at a grey London sky; then she broke away. "I really don't know *what* I want. I think," she honestly admitted, "I just want kindness."

Mrs Gracedew's expression might have hinted but not for too long that Bedford Row was an odd place to apply for it: she appeared for an instant to make the revolving office−chair creak. "What do you mean by kindness?"

Cora was a model client she perfectly knew. "I mean help."

Mrs Gracedew closed an inkstand with a clap and locked a couple of drawers. "What do you mean by help?"

The client's inevitable answer seemed to perch on the girl's lips: "A thousand pounds." But it came out in another, in a much more charming form. "I mean that I love him."

The family solicitor got up: it was a high figure. "And does he love *you?*"

Cora hesitated. "Ask *him*."

Mrs Gracedew weighed the necessity. "Where is he?"

"Waiting." And the girl's glance, removed from her companion and wandering aloft and through space, gave the scale of his patience.

Her adviser, however, required the detail. "But *where?*"

Cora briefly demurred again. "In that funny old grotto."

Mrs Gracedew thought. "Funny?"

"Half way from the park gate. It's very *nice!*" Cora more eagerly added.

Mrs Gracedew continued to reflect. "Oh, I know it!" She spoke as if she had known it most of her life.

Her tone encouraged her client. "Then will you see him?"

"No." This time it was almost dry.

"No?"

"No. If you want help " Mrs Gracedew, still musing, explained.

"Yes?"

"Well you want a great deal."

"Oh, so much!" Cora but too woefully took it in. "I want," she quavered, "all there is!"

"Well you shall have it."

"All there is?" she convulsively held her to it.

Mrs Gracedew had finally mastered it. "I'll see your father."

"You dear, delicious lady!" Her young friend had again encompassed her; but, passive and preoccupied, she showed some of the chill of apprehension. It was indeed as if to meet this that Cora went earnestly on: "He's intensely sympathetic"

"Your father?" Mrs Gracedew had her reserves.

"Oh no the other person. I so believe in him!" Cora cried.

Mrs Gracedew looked at her a moment. "Then so do I and I like him for believing in *you*."

"Oh, he does that," the girl hurried on, "far more than Captain Yule I could see just with one glance that *he* doesn't at all. Papa has of course seen the young man I mean, but we've been so sure papa would hate it that we've had to be awfully careful. He's the son of the richest man at Bellborough, he's Granny's godson, and he'll inherit his father's business, which is simply immense. Oh, from the point of view of the things he's *in*" and Cora found herself sharp on this "he's quite as good as papa himself. He has been away for three days, and if he met me at the station, where, on his way back, he has to change, it was by the merest chance in the world. I wouldn't love him," she brilliantly wound up, "if he wasn't nice."

"A man's always nice if you *will* love him!" Mrs Gracedew laughed.

Her young friend more than met it. "He's nicer still if he 'will' love *you!*"

But Mrs Gracedew kept her head. "Nicer of course than if he won't! But are you sure this gentleman *does* love you?"

"As sure as that the other one doesn't."

"Ah, but the other one doesn't know you."

"Yes, thank goodness and never shall!"

Mrs Gracedew watched her a little, but on the girl's meeting her eyes turned away with a quick laugh. "You mean of course till it's too late!"

"Altogether!" Cora spoke as with quite the measure of the time.

Mrs Gracedew, revolving a moment in silence, appeared to accept her showing. "Then what's the matter?" she impatiently asked.

"The matter?"

"Your father's objection to the gentleman in the grotto."

Cora now for the first time faltered. "His name."

This for a moment pulled up her friend, in whom, however, relief seemed to contend with alarm. "Only his name?"

"Yes, but " Cora's eyes rolled.

Her companion invitingly laughed. "But it's enough?"

Her roll confessingly fixed itself. "*Not* enough that's just the trouble!"

Mrs Gracedew looked kindly curious. "What then *is* it?"

Cora faced the music. "Pegg."

Mrs Gracedew stared. "Nothing else?"

"Nothing to speak of." The girl was quite candid now. "Hall."

"Nothing before ?"

"Not a letter."

"Hall Pegg?" Mrs Gracedew had winced, but she quickly recovered herself, and, for a further articulation, appeared, from delicacy, to form the sound only with her mind. The sound she formed with her lips was, after an instant, simply "Oh!"

It was to the combination of the spoken and the unspoken that Cora desperately replied. "It sounds like a hat−rack!"

"'Hall Pegg? Hall Pegg'?" Mrs Gracedew now made it, like a questionable coin, ring upon the counter. But it lay there as lead and without, for a moment, her taking it up again. "How many has your father?" she inquired instead.

"How many names?" Miss Prodmore seemed dimly to see that there was no hope in that. "He somehow makes out five."

"Oh, that's *too* many!" Mrs Gracedew jeeringly declared.

"Papa unfortunately doesn't think so, when Captain Yule, I believe, has six."

"Six?" Mrs Gracedew, alert, looked as if that might be different.

"Papa, in the morning−room, told me them all."

Mrs Gracedew visibly considered, then for a moment dropped Mr Pegg. "And what *are* they?"

"Oh, all sorts. 'Marmaduke Clement '" Cora tried to recall.

Mrs Gracedew, however, had already checked her. "I see 'Marmaduke Clement' will do." She appeared for a minute intent, but, as with an energetic stoop, she picked up Mr Pegg. "But so will yours," she said, with decision.

"Mine? you mean *his!*"

"The same thing what you'll *be*."

"Mrs Hall Pegg!" Cora tried it, with resolution, loudly.

It fell a little flat in the noble space, but Mrs Gracedew's manner quickly covered it. "It won't make you a bit less charming."

Cora wondered she hoped. "Only for papa."

And what was *he?* Mrs Gracedew by this time seemed assentingly to ask. "Never for *me!*" she soothingly declared.

Cora took this in with deep thanks that gripped and patted her companion's hand. "You accept it more than gracefully. But if you could only make *him* !"

Mrs Gracedew was all concentration. "'Him'? Mr Pegg?"

"No he naturally *has* to accept it. But papa."

She looked harder still at this greater feat, then seemed to see light. "Well, it will be difficult but I will."

Doubt paled before it. "Oh, you heavenly thing!"

Mrs Gracedew after an instant, sustained by this appreciation, went a step further. "And I'll make him *say* he does!"

Cora closed her eyes with the dream of it. "Oh, if I could only hear him!"

Her benefactress had at last run it to earth. "It will be enough if *I* do."

Cora quickly considered; then, with prompt accommodation, gave the comfortable measure of her faith. "Yes I think it will." She was quite ready to retire. "I'll give you time."

"Thank you," said Mrs Gracedew; "but before you give me time give me something better."

This pulled the girl up a little, as if in parting with her secret she had parted with her all. "Something better?"

"If I help you, you know," Mrs Gracedew explained, "you must help me."

"But how?"

"By a clear assurance." The charming woman's fine face now gave the real example of clearness. "That if Captain Yule should propose to you, you would unconditionally refuse him."

Cora flushed with the surprise of its being only that. "With my dying breath!"

Mrs Gracedew scanned her robust vitality. "Will you make it even a promise?"

The girl looked about her in solid certainty. "Do you want me to sign ?"

Mrs Gracedew was quick. "No, don't sign!"

Yet Cora was so ready to oblige. "Then what shall I do?"

Mrs Gracedew turned away, but after a few vague steps faced her again. "Kiss me."

Cora flew to her arms, and the compact had scarce been sealed before the younger of the parties was already at the passage to the front. "We meet of course at the station."

Mrs Gracedew thought. "If all goes well. But where shall you be meanwhile?"

Her confederate had no need to think. "Can't you guess?"

The bang of the house−door, the next minute, so helped the answer to the riddle as fairly to force it, when she found herself alone, from her lips. "At that funny old grotto? Well," she sighed, "I *like* funny old grottos!" She found herself alone, however, only for a minute; Mr Prodmore's formidable presence had darkened the door from the court.

7

"My daughter's not here?" he demanded from the threshold.

"Your daughter's not here." She had rapidly got under arms. "But it's a convenience to me, Mr Prodmore, that *you* are, for I've something very particular to ask you."

Her interlocutor crossed straight to the morning−room. "I shall be delighted to answer your question, but I must first put my hand on Miss Prodmore." This hand the next instant stayed itself on the latch, and he appealed to the amiable visitor. "Unless indeed she's occupied in there with Captain Yule?"

The amiable visitor met the appeal. "I don't think she's occupied anywhere with Captain Yule."

Mr Prodmore came straight away from the door. "Then where the deuce *is* Captain Yule?"

The amiable visitor turned a trifle less direct. "His absence, for which I'm responsible, is just what renders the inquiry I speak of to you possible." She had already assumed a most inquiring air, yet it was soon clear that she needed every advantage her manner could give her. "What will you take ? What will you take ?"

It had the sound, as she faltered, of a general question, and Mr Prodmore raised his eyebrows. "Take? Nothing, thank you I've just had a cup of tea." Then suddenly, as if on the broad hint: "Won't *you* have one?"

"Yes, with pleasure but not yet." She looked about her again; she was now at close quarters and, concentrated,

anxious, pressed her hand a moment to her brow.

This struck her companion. "Don't you think you'd be better for it immediately?"

"No." She was positive. "No." Her eyes consciously wandered. "I want to know how you'd value "

He took her, as his own followed them, more quickly up, expanding in the presence of such a tribute from a real connoisseur. "One of these charming old things that takes your fancy?"

She looked at him straight now. "They *all* take my fancy!"

"All?" He enjoyed it as the joke of a rich person the kind of joke he sometimes made himself.

"Every single one!" said Mrs Gracedew. Then with still a finer shade of the familiar: "Should you be willing to treat, Mr Prodmore, for your interest in this property?"

He threw back his head: she had scattered over the word 'interest' such a friendly, faded colour. She was either *not* joking or was rich indeed; and there was a place always kept in his conversation for the arrival of money, as there is always a box in a well−appointed theatre for that of royalty. "Am I to take it from you then that you *know* about my interest ?"

"Everything!" said Mrs Gracedew with a world of wit.

"Excuse me, madam!" he himself was now more reserved. "You don't know everything if you don't know that my interest considerable as it might well have struck you has just ceased to exist. I've given it up"
Mr Prodmore softened the blow "for a handsome equivalent."

The blow fell indeed light enough. "You mean for a handsome son−in−law?"

"It will be by some such description as the term you use that I shall doubtless, in the future, permit myself, in the common course, to allude to Captain Yule. Unless indeed I call him " But Mr Prodmore dropped the bolder thought. "It will depend on what he calls *me*."

Mrs Gracedew covered him a moment with the largeness of her charity. "Won't it depend a little on what your daughter herself calls him?"

Mr Prodmore seriously considered. "No. That," he declared with delicacy, "will be between the happy pair."

"Am I to take it from you then I adopt your excellent phrase," Mrs Gracedew said "that Miss Prodmore has already accepted him?"

Her companion, with his head still in the air, seemed to signify that he simply put it down on the table and that she could take it or not as she liked. "Her character formed by my assiduous care enables me to locate her, I may say even to *time* her, from moment to moment." His massive watch, as he opened it, further sustained him in the process. "It's my assured conviction that she's accepting him while we stand here."

Mrs Gracedew was so affected by his assured conviction that, with an odd, inarticulate sound, she forbore to stand longer she rapidly moved away, taking one of the brief excursions of step and sense that had been for her, from the first, under the noble roof, so many dumb but decisive communions. But it was soon over, and she floated back on a wave that showed her to be, since she had let herself go, by this time quite in the swing and describing a considerable curve. "Dear Mr Prodmore, why are you so imprudent as to make your daughter afraid of you? You

should have taught her to confide in you. She has clearly shown me," she almost soothingly pursued, "that she *can* confide."

Mr Prodmore, however, suddenly starting, looked far from soothed. "She confides in *you?*"

"You may take it from me!" Mrs Gracedew laughed. "Let me suggest that, as fortune has thrown us together a minute, you follow her good example." She put out a reassuring hand she could perfectly show him the way. "Tell me, for instance, the ground of your objection to poor Mr Pegg. I mean Mr Pegg of Bellborough, Mr Hall Pegg, the godson of your daughter's grandmother and the associate of his father in their flourishing house; to whom (as *he* is to *it* and to *her*) Miss Prodmore's devotedly attached."

Mr Prodmore had in the course of this speech availed himself of the support of the nearest chair, where, in spite of his subsidence, he appeared in his amazement twice his natural size. "It has gone so far as *that?*"

She rose before him as if in triumph. "It has gone so far that you had better let it go the rest of the way!"

He had lost breath, but he had positively gained dignity. "It's too monstrous, to have plotted to keep me in the dark!"

"Why, it's only when you're kept in the dark that your daughter's kept in the light!" She argued it with a candour that might have served for brilliancy. "It's at her own earnest request that I plead to you for her liberty of choice. She's an honest girl perhaps even a peculiar girl; and she's not a baby. You overdo, I think, the nursing. She has a perfect right to her preference."

Poor Mr Prodmore couldn't help taking it from her, and, this being the case, he still took it in the most convenient way. "And pray haven't I a perfect right to mine?" he asked from his chair.

She fairly seemed to serve it up to him to put down the dish with a flourish. "Not at her expense. You expect her to give up too much."

"And what has she," he appealed, "expected *me* to give up? What but the desire of my heart and the dream of my life? Captain Yule announced to me but a few minutes since his intention to offer her his hand."

She faced him on it as over the table. "Well, if he does, I think he'll simply find "

"Find what?" They looked at each other hard.

"Why, that she won't have it."

Oh, Mr Prodmore now sprang up. "She *will!*"

"She won't!" Mrs Gracedew more distinctly repeated.

"She *shall!*" returned her adversary, making for the staircase with the evident sense of where reinforcement might be most required.

Mrs Gracedew, however, with a spring, was well before him. "She sha'n't!" She spoke with positive passion and practically so barred the way that he stood arrested and bewildered and they faced each other, for a flash, like enemies. But it all went out, on her part, in a flash too in a sudden wonderful smile. "Now tell me how much!"

Mr Prodmore continued to glare — the sweat was on his brow. But while he slowly wiped it with a pocket−handkerchief of splendid scarlet silk he remained so silent that he would have had for a spectator the effect of meeting in a manner her question. More formally to answer it he had at last to turn away. "How can I tell you anything so preposterous?"

She was all ready to inform him. "Simply by computing the total amount to which, for your benefit, this unhappy estate is burdened." He listened with his back presented, but that appeared to strike her, as she fixed this expanse, as an encouragement to proceed. "If I've troubled you by showing you that your speculation is built on the sand, let me atone for it by my eagerness to take off your hands an investment from which you derive so little profit."

He at last gave her his attention, but quite as if there were nothing in it. "And pray what profit will *you* derive ?"

"Ah, that's my own secret!" She would show him as well no glimpse of it — her laugh but rattled the box. "I want this house!"

"So do I, damn me!" he roundly returned; "and that's why I've practically paid for it!" He stuffed away his pocket−handkerchief.

There was nevertheless something in her that could hold him, and it came out, after an instant, quietly and reasonably enough. "I'll practically pay for it, Mr Prodmore — if you'll only tell me your figure."

"My figure?"

"Your figure."

Mr Prodmore waited — then removed his eyes from her face. He appeared to have waited on purpose to let her hope of a soft answer fall from a greater height. "My figure would be quite my own!"

"Then it will match, in that respect," Mrs Gracedew laughed, "this overture, which is quite *my* own! As soon as you've let me know it I cable to Missoura Top to have the money sent right out to you."

Mr Prodmore surveyed in a superior manner this artless picture of a stroke of business. "You imagine that having the money sent right out to me will make you owner of this place?"

She herself, with her head on one side, studied her sketch and seemed to twirl her pencil. "No — not quite. But I'll settle the rest with Captain Yule."

Her companion looked, over his white waistcoat, at his large tense shoes, the patent−leather shine of which so flashed propriety back at him that he became, the next moment, doubly erect on it. "Captain Yule has nothing to sell."

She received the remark with surprise. "Then what have you been trying to buy?"

She had touched in himself even a sharper spring. "Do you mean to say," he cried, "you want to buy *that?*" She stared at his queer emphasis, which was intensified by a queer grimace; then she turned from him with a change of colour and an ejaculation that led to nothing more, after a few seconds, than a somewhat conscious silence — a silence of which Mr Prodmore made use to follow up his unanswered question with another. "Is your proposal that I should transfer my investment to you for the mere net amount of it your conception of a fair bargain?"

This second inquiry, however, she could, as she slowly came round, substantially meet. "Pray then what is yours?"

"Mine would be, not that I should simply get my money back, but that I should get the effective value of the house."

Mrs Gracedew considered it. "But isn't the effective value of the house just what your money expresses?"

The lid of his hard left eye, the harder of the two, just dipped with the effect of a wink. "No, madam. It's just what *yours* does. It's moreover just what your lips have already expressed so distinctly!"

She clearly did her best to follow him. "To those people when I showed the place off?"

Mr Prodmore laughed. "You seemed to be *taking* bids then!"

She was candid, but earnest. "Taking them?"

"Oh, like an auctioneer! You ran it up high!" And Mr Prodmore laughed again.

She turned a little pale, but it added to her brightness. "I certainly did, if saying it was charming "

"Charming?" Mr Prodmore broke in. "You said it was magnificent. You said it was unique. That was your very word. You said it was the *perfect* specimen of its class in England." He was more than accusatory, he was really crushing. "Oh, you got in deep!"

It was indeed an indictment, and her smile was perhaps now rather set. "Possibly. But taunting me with my absurd high spirits and the dreadful liberties I took doesn't in the least tell me how deep *you're* in!"

"For you, Mrs Gracedew?" He took a few steps, looking at his shoes again and as if to give her time to plead since he wished to be quite fair that it was *not* for her. "I'm in to the tune of fifty thousand."

She was silent, on this announcement, so long that he once more faced her; but if what he showed her in doing so at last made her speak, it also took the life from her tone. "That's a great deal of money, Mr Prodmore."

The tone didn't matter, but only the truth it expressed, which he so thoroughly liked to hear. "So I've often had occasion to say to myself!"

"If it's a large sum for you then," said Mrs Gracedew, "it's a still larger one for me." She sank into a chair with a vague melancholy; such a mass loomed huge, and she sat down before it as a solitary herald, resigning himself with a sigh to wait, might have leaned against a tree before a besieged city. "We women," she wished to conciliate "have more modest ideas."

But Mr Prodmore would scarce condescend to parley. "Is it as a 'modest idea' that you describe your extraordinary intrusion ?"

His question scarce reached her; she was so lost for the moment in the sense of innocent community with her sex. "I mean I think we measure things often rather more exactly."

There would have been no doubt of Mr Prodmore's very different community as he rudely replied: "Then you measured *this* thing exactly half an hour ago!"

It was a long way to go back, but Mrs Gracedew, in her seat, musingly made the journey, from which she then suddenly returned with a harmless, indeed quite a happy, memento. "Was I *very* grotesque?"

He demurred. "Grotesque?"

"I mean *did* I go on about it?"

Mr Prodmore would have no general descriptions; he was specific, he was vivid. "You banged the desk. You raged. You shrieked."

This was a note she appeared indulgently, almost tenderly, to recognise. "We *do* shriek at Missoura Top!"

"I don't know what you do at Missoura Top, but I know what you did at Covering End!"

She warmed at last to his tone. "So do *I* then! I surprised you. You weren't at all prepared "

He took her briskly up. "No and I'm not prepared yet!"

Mrs Gracedew could quite see it. "Yes, you're too astonished."

"My astonishment's my own affair," he retorted "not less so than my memory!"

"Oh, I yield to your memory," said the charming woman, "and I confess my extravagance. But quite, you know, *as* extravagance."

"I don't at all know," Mr Prodmore shook it off "nor what you *call* extravagance."

"Why, banging the desk. Raving. Shrieking. I overdid it," she exclaimed; "I wanted to please you!"

She had too happy a beauty, as she sat in her high−backed chair, to have been condemned to say that to any man without a certain effect. The effect on Mr Prodmore was striking. "So you said," he sternly inquired, "what you didn't believe?"

She flushed with the avowal. "Yes for you."

He looked at her hard. "For *me?*"

Under his eye for her flush continued she slowly got up. "And for those good people."

"Oh!" he sounded most sarcastic. "Should you like me to call them back?"

"No." She was still gay enough, but very decided. "I took them in."

"And now you want to take *me?*"

"Oh, Mr Prodmore!" she almost pitifully, but not quite adequately, moaned.

He appeared to feel he had gone a little far. "Well, if we're not what you say "

"Yes?" she looked up askance at the stroke.

"Why the devil do you want us?" The question rang out and was truly for the poor lady, as the quick suffusion of her eyes showed, a challenge it would take more time than he left her properly to pick up. He left her in fact no time at all before he went on: "Why the devil did you say you'd offer fifty?"

She looked quite wan and seemed to wonder. "*Did* I say that?" She could only let his challenge lie. "It was a figure of speech!"

"Then that's the kind of figure we're talking about!" Mr Prodmore's sharpness would have struck an auditor as the more effective that, on the heels of this thrust, seeing the ancient butler reappear, he dropped the victim of it as comparatively unimportant and directed his fierceness instantly to Chivers, who mildly gaped at him from the threshold of the court. "Have you seen Miss Prodmore? If you haven't, find her!"

Mrs Gracedew addressed their visitor in a very different tone, though with the full authority of her benevolence. "You won't, my dear man." To Mr Prodmore also she continued bland. "I happen to know she has gone for a walk."

"A walk alone?" Mr Prodmore gasped.

"No not alone." Mrs Gracedew looked at Chivers with a vague smile of appeal for help, but he could only give her, from under his bent old brow, the blank decency of his wonder. It seemed to make her feel afresh that she was, after all, alone so that in her loneliness, which had also its fine sad charm, she risked another brush with their formidable friend. "Cora has gone with Mr Pegg."

"Pegg has *been* here?"

It was like a splash in a full basin, but she launched the whole craft. "He walked with her from the station."

"When she arrived?" Mr Prodmore rose like outraged Neptune. "That's why she was so late?"

Mrs Gracedew assented. "Why I got here first. I get everywhere first!" she bravely laughed.

Mr Prodmore looked round him in purple dismay it was so clearly a question for him where *he* should get, and what! "In which direction did they go?" he imperiously asked.

His rudeness was too evident to be more than lightly recognised. "I think I must let you ascertain for yourself!"

All he could do then was to shout it to Chivers. "Call my carriage, you ass!" After which, as the old man melted into the vestibule, he dashed about blindly for his hat, pounced upon it and seemed, furious but helpless, on the point of hurling it at his contradictress as a gage of battle. "So you abetted and protected this wicked, low intrigue?"

She had something in her face now that was indifferent to any violence. "You're too disappointed to see your real interest: oughtn't I therefore in common charity to point it out to you?"

He faced her question so far as to treat it as one. "What do *you* know of my disappointment?"

There was something in his very harshness that even helped her, for it added at this moment to her sense of making out in his narrowed glare a couple of tears of rage. "I know everything."

"What do you know of my real interest?" he went on as if he had not heard her.

"I know enough for my purpose which is to offer you a handsome condition. I think it's not I who have protected the happy understanding that you call by so ugly a name; it's the happy understanding that has put me" she gained confidence "well, in a position. Do drive after them, if you like but catch up with them only to forgive them. If you'll do that, I'll pay your price."

The particular air with which, a minute after Mrs Gracedew had spoken these words, Mr Prodmore achieved a transfer of his attention to the inside of his hat this special shade of majesty would have taxed the descriptive resources of the most accomplished reporter. It is none the less certain that he appeared for some time absorbed in that receptacle appeared at last to breathe into it hard. "What do you call my price?"

"Why the sum you just mentioned fifty thousand!" Mrs Gracedew feverishly quavered.

He looked at her as if stupefied. "*That's* not my price and it never for a moment was!" If derision can be dry, Mr Prodmore's was of the driest. "Besides," he rang out, "my price is up!"

She caught it with a long wail. "Up?"

Oh, he let her have it now! "Seventy thousand."

She turned away overwhelmed, but still with voice for her despair. "Oh, deary me!"

Mr Prodmore was already at the door, from which he launched his ultimatum. "It's to take or to leave!"

She would have had to leave it, perhaps, had not something happened at this moment to nerve her for the effort of staying him with a quick motion. Captain Yule had come into sight on the staircase and, after just faltering at what he himself saw, had marched resolutely enough down. She watched him arrive watched him with an attention that visibly and responsively excited his own; after which she passed nearer to their companion. "Seventy thousand then!" it gleamed between them, in her muffled hiss, as if she had planted a dagger.

Mr Prodmore, to do him justice, took his wound in front. "Seventy thousand done!" And, without another look at Yule, he was presently heard to bang the outer door after him for a sign.

8

The young man, meanwhile, had approached in surprise. "He's gone? I've been looking for him!"

Mrs Gracedew was out of breath; there was a disturbed whiteness of bosom in her which needed time to subside and which she might have appeared to retreat before him on purpose to veil. "I don't think, you know, that you need him now."

Clement Yule was mystified. "Now?"

She recovered herself enough to explain made an effort at least to be plausible. "I mean that if you don't mind you must deal with *me*. I've arranged with Mr Prodmore to take it over."

Oh, he gave her no help! "Take what over?"

She looked all about as if not quite thinking what it could be called; at last, however, she offered with a smile a sort of substitute for a name. "Why, your debt."

But he was only the more bewildered. "*Can* you without arranging with *me?*"

She turned it round, but as if merely to oblige him. "That's precisely what I want to do." Then, more brightly, as she thought further: "That is, I mean, I want you to arrange with *me*. Surely you will," she said encouragingly.

His own processes, in spite of a marked earnestness, were much less rapid. "But if I arrange with anybody "

"Yes?" She cheerfully waited.

"How do I perform my engagement?"

"The one to Mr Prodmore?"

He looked surprised at her speaking as if he had half−a−dozen. "Yes that's the worst."

"Certainly the worst!" And she gave a happy laugh that made him stare.

He broke into quite a different one. "You speak as if its being the worst made it the best!"

"It does for me. You don't," said Mrs Gracedew, "perform any engagement."

He required a moment to take it in; then something extraordinary leaped into his face. "He lets me off?"

Ah, she could ring out now! "He lets you off."

It lifted him high, but only to drop him with an audible thud. "Oh, I see I lose my house!"

"Dear no *that* doesn't follow!" She spoke as if the absurdity he indicated were the last conceivable, but there was a certain want of sharpness of edge in her expression of the alternative. "You arrange with *me* to keep it."

There was quite a corresponding want, clearly, in the image presented to the Captain of which, for a moment, he seemed with difficulty to follow the contour. "How do I arrange?"

"Well, we must think," said Mrs Gracedew; "we must wait." She spoke as if this were a detail for which she had not yet had much attention; only bringing out, however, the next instant in an encouraging cry and as if it were by itself almost a solution: "We must find some way!" She might have been talking to a reasonable child.

But even reasonable children ask too many questions. "Yes and what way *can* we find?" Clement Yule, glancing about him, was so struck with the absence of ways that he appeared to remember with something of regret how different it had been before. "With Prodmore it was simple enough. You see I could marry his daughter."

Mrs Gracedew was silent just long enough for her soft ironic smile to fill the cup of the pause. "*Could* you?"

It was as if he had tasted in the words the wine at the brim; for he gave, under the effect of them, a sudden headshake and an awkward laugh. "Well, never perhaps *that* exactly when it came to the point. But I had to, you see " It was difficult to say just what.

She took advantage of it, looking hard, but not seeing at all. "You had to ?"

"Well," he repeated ruefully, "think a lot about it. You didn't suspect that?"

Oh, if he came to suspicions she could only break off! "Don't ask me too many questions."

He looked an instant as if he wondered why. "But isn't this just the moment for them?" He fronted her, with a quickness he tried to dissimulate, from the other side. "What *did* you suppose?"

She looked everywhere but into his face. "Why, I supposed you were in distress."

He was very grave. "About his terms?"

"About his terms of course!" she laughed. "Not about his religious opinions."

His gratitude was too great for gaiety. "You really, in your beautiful sympathy, *guessed* my fix?"

But she declined to be too solemn. "Dear Captain Yule, it all quite stuck out of you!"

"You mean I floundered like a drowning man ?"

Well, she consented to have meant that. "Till I plunged in!"

He appeared there, for a few seconds, to see her again take the jump and to listen again to the splash; then, with an odd, sharp impulse, he turned his back. "You saved me."

She wouldn't deny it on the contrary. "What a pity, now, *I* haven't a daughter!"

On this he slowly came round again. "What should I do with her?"

"You'd treat her, I hope, better than you've treated Miss Prodmore."

The young man positively coloured. "But I haven't been bad ?"

The sight of this effect of her small joke produced on Mrs Gracedew's part an emotion less controllable than any she had yet felt. "Oh, you delightful goose!" she irrepressibly dropped.

She made his blush deepen, but the aggravation was a relief. "Of course I'm all right, and there's only one pity in the matter. I've nothing nothing whatever, not a scrap of service nor a thing you'd care for to offer you in compensation."

She looked at him ever so kindly. "I'm not, as they say, 'on the make'." Never had he been put right with a lighter hand. "I didn't do it for payment."

"Then what did you do it for?"

For something, it might have seemed, as her eyes dropped and strayed, that had got brushed into a crevice of the old pavement. "Because I hated Mr Prodmore."

He conscientiously demurred. "So much as all that?"

"Oh, well," she replied impatiently, "of course you also know how much I like the house. My hates and my likes," she subtly explained, "can never live together. I get one of them out. The one this time was that man."

He showed a candour of interest. "Yes you got him out. Yes I saw him go." And his inner vision appeared to attend for some moments Mr Prodmore's departure. "But how did you do it?"

"Oh, I don't know. Women !" Mrs Gracedew but vaguely sketched it.

A touch or two, however, for that subject, could of course almost always suffice. "Precisely women. May I smoke again?" Clement Yule abruptly asked.

"Certainly. But I managed Mr Prodmore," she laughed as he re−lighted, "without cigarettes."

Her companion puffed. "*I* couldn't manage him."

"So I saw!"

"*I* couldn't get him out."

"So *he* saw!"

Captain Yule, for a little, lost himself in his smoke. "Where is he gone?"

"I haven't the least idea. But I meet him again," she hastened to add "very soon."

"And when do you meet *me?*"

"Why, whenever you'll come and see me." For the twentieth time she gathered herself as if the words she had just spoken were quite her last hand. "At present, you see, I *have* a train to catch."

Absorbed in the trivial act that engaged him, he gave her no help. "A train?"

"Surely. I didn't walk."

"No; but even trains !" His eyes clung to her now. "You fly?"

"I try to. Good−bye."

He had got between her and the door of departure quite as, on her attempt to quit him half an hour before, he had anticipated her approach to the stairs; and in this position he took no notice of her farewell. "I said just now that I had nothing to offer you. But of course I've the house itself."

"The house?" She stared. "Why, I've *got* it!"

"Got it?"

"All in my head, I mean. That's all I want." She had not yet, save to Mr Prodmore, made quite so light of it.

This had its action in his markedly longer face. "Why, I thought you loved it so!"

Ah, she was perfectly consistent. "I love it far too much to deprive *you* of it."

Yet Clement Yule could in a fashion meet her. "Oh, it wouldn't be depriving !"

She altogether protested. "Not to turn you out ?"

"Dear lady, I've never been *in!*"

Oh, she was none the less downright. "You're in *now* I've put you, and you must stay." He looked round so woefully, however, that she presently attenuated. "I don't mean *all* the while, but long enough !"

"Long enough for what?"

"For me to feel you're here."

"And how long will that take?"

"Well, you think me very fast but sometimes I'm slow. I told you just now, at any rate," she went on, "that I had arranged you should lose nothing. Is the very next thing I do, then to make you lose everything?"

"It isn't a question of what I lose," the young man anxiously cried; "it's a question of what I *do!* What *have* I done to find it all so plain?" Fate was really fate reversed, improved and unnatural too much for him, and his heated young face showed honest stupefaction. "I haven't lifted a finger. It's you who have done all."

"Yes, but if you're just where you were before, how in the world are you saved?" She put it to him with still superior lucidity.

"By my life's being my own again to do what I want."

"What you 'want'" Mrs Gracedew's handsome uplifted head had it all there, every inch of it "is to keep your house."

"Ah, but only," he perfectly assented, "if, as you said, you find a way!"

"I *have* found a way and there the way is: for *me* just simply not to touch the place. What you 'want'," she argued more closely, "is what made you give in to Prodmore. What you 'want' is these walls and these acres. What you 'want' is to take the way I first showed you."

Her companion's eyes, quitting for the purpose her face, looked to the quarter marked by her last words as at an horizon now remote. "Why, the way you first showed me was to marry Cora!"

She had to admit it, but as little as possible. "Practically yes."

"Well, it's just 'practically' that I can't!"

"I didn't know that then," said Mrs Gracedew. "You didn't tell me."

He passed, with an approach to a grimace, his hand over the back of his head. "I felt a delicacy!"

"I didn't even know *that*." She spoke it almost sadly.

"It didn't strike you that I might?"

She thought a moment. "No." She thought again. "No. But don't quarrel with me about it *now!*"

"Quarrel with you?" he looked amazement.

She laughed, but she had changed colour. "Cora, at any rate, felt no delicacy. Cora told me."

Clement Yule fairly gaped. "Then she did know ?"

"She knew all; and if her father said she didn't he simply told you what was not." She frankly gave him this, but the next minute, as if she had startled him more than she meant, she jumped to reassurance. "It was quite right of her. She would have refused you."

The young man stared. "Oh!" He was quick, however, to show by an amusement perhaps a trifle overdone that he felt no personal wound. "Do you call that quite right?"

Mrs Gracedew looked at it again. "For *her* yes; and for Prodmore."

"Oh, for Prodmore" his laugh grew more grim "with all my heart!"

This then her kind eyes seemed to drop it upon him was all she meant. "To stay at your post *that* was the way I showed you."

He had come round to it now, as mechanically, in intenser thought, he smoothed down the thick hair he had rubbed up; but his face soon enough gave out, in wonder and pain, that his freedom was somehow only a new predicament. "How can I take any way at all, dear lady ?"

"If I only stick here in your path?" She had taken him straight up, and with spirit; and the same spirit bore her to the end. "I won't stick a moment more! Haven't I been trying this age to leave you?"

Clement Yule, for all answer, caught her sharply, in her passage, by the arm. "You surrender your rights?" He was for an instant almost terrible.

She quite turned pale with it. "Weren't you ready to surrender *yours?*"

"I hadn't any, so it was deuced easy. I hadn't paid for them."

Oh that, she let him see even though with his continued grasp he might hurt her had nothing in it! "Your ancestors had paid: it's the same thing." Erect there in the brightness of her triumph and the force of her logic, she must yet, to anticipate his return, take a stride like a sudden dip into a gully and the scramble up on the other bank that put her dignity to the test. "You're just, in a manner, my tenant."

"But how can I treat that as such a mere detail? I'm your tenant on what terms?"

"Oh, *any* terms choose them for yourself!" She made an attempt to free her arm gave it a small vain shake. Then, as if to bribe him to let her go: "You can write me about them."

He appeared to consider it. "To Missoura Top?"

She fully assented. "I go right back." As if it had put him off his guard she broke away. "Farewell!"

She broke away, but he broke faster, and once more, nearer the door, he had barred her escape. "Just one little moment, please. If you won't tell me your own terms, you must at least tell me Prodmore's."

Ah, the fiend she could never squeeze past *that!* All she could do, for the instant, was to reverberate foolishly "Prodmore's?"

But there was nothing foolish, at last, about *him*. "How you did it how you managed him." His feet were firm while he waited, though he had to wait some time. "You bought him out?"

She made less of it than, clearly, he had ever heard made of a stroke of business; it might have been a case of his owing her ninepence. "I bought him out."

He wanted at least the exact sum. "For how much?" Her silence seemed to say that she had made no note of it, but his pressure only increased. "I really must know."

She continued to try to treat it as if she had merely paid for his cab she put even what she could of that suggestion into a tender, helpless, obstinate headshake. "You shall never know!"

The only thing his own manner met was the obstinacy. "I'll get it from *him!*"

She repeated her headshake, but with a world of sadness added. "Get it if you can!"

He looked into her eyes now as if it was the sadness that struck him most. "He won't say, because he *did* you?"

They showed each other, on this, the least separated faces yet. "He'll never, never say."

The confidence in it was so tender that it sounded almost like pity, and the young man took it up with all the flush of the sense that pity could be but for *him*. This sense broke full in her face. "The scoundrel!"

"Not a bit!" she returned, with equal passion "I was only too clever for him!" The thought of it was again an exultation in which she pushed her friend aside. "So let me go!"

The push was like a jar that made the vessel overflow, and he was before her now as if he stretched across the hall. "With the heroic view of your power and the barren beauty of your sacrifice? You pour out money, you move a mountain, and to let you 'go', to close the door fast behind you, is all I can figure out to do for you?" His emotion trembled out of him with the stammer of a new language, but it was as if in a minute or two he had thrown over all consciousness. "You're the most generous you're the noblest of women! The wonderful chance that brought you here !"

His own arm was grasped now she knew better than he about the wonderful chance. "It brought *you* at the same happy hour! I've done what I liked," she went on very simply; "and the only way to thank me is to believe it."

"You've done it for a proud, poor man" his answer was quite as direct. "He has nothing in the light of such a magic as yours either to give or to hope; but you've made him, in a little miraculous hour, think of you "

He stumbled with the rush of things, and if silence can, in its way, be active, there was a collapse too, for an instant, on her closed lips. These lips, however, she at last opened. "How have I made him think of me?"

"As he has thought of no other woman!" He had personal possession of her now, and it broke, as he pressed her, as he pleaded, the helpless fall of his eloquence. "Mrs Gracedew don't leave me." He jerked his head passionately at the whole place and the yellow afternoon. "If you made me care "

"It was surely that you had made *me* first!" She laughed, and her laugh disengaged her, so that before he could reply she had again put space between them.

He accepted the space now he appeared so sure of his point. "Then let me go on caring. When I asked you a while back for some possible adjustment to my new source of credit, you simply put off the question told me I must trust to time for it. Well," said Clement Yule, "I've trusted to time so effectually that ten little minutes have made me find it. I've found it because I've so quickly found *you*. May I, Mrs Gracedew, keep *all* that I've found? I offer you in return the only thing I have to give I offer you my hand and my life."

She held him off, across the hall, for a time almost out of proportion to the previous wait he had just made so little of. Then at last also, when she answered, it might have passed for a plea for further postponement, even for a plea for mercy. "Ah, Captain Yule !" But she turned suddenly off: the flower had been nipped in the bud by the re−entrance of Chivers, at whom his master veritably glowered.

"What the devil is it?"

The old man showed the shock, but he had his duty. "Another party."

Mrs Gracedew, at this, wheeled round. "The 'party up'!" It brought back her voice indeed, all her gaiety. And her gaiety was always determinant. "Show them in."

Clement Yule's face fell while Chivers proceeded to obey. "You'll *have* them?" he wailed across the hall.

"Ah, mayn't I be proud of my house?" she tossed back at him.

At this, radiant, he had rushed at her. "Then you accept ?"

Her raised hand checked him. "Hush!"

He fell back the party was there. Chivers ushered it as he had ushered the other, making the most, this time, of more scanty material four persons so spectacled, satchelled, shawled and handbooked that they testified on the spot to a particular foreign origin and presented themselves indeed very much as tourists who, at an hotel, casting up the promise of comfort or the portent of cost, take possession, while they wait for their keys, with expert looks and free sounds. Clement Yule, who had receded, effacing himself, to the quarter opposed to that of his companion, addressed to their visitors a covert but dismayed stare and then, edging round, in his agitation, to the rear, instinctively sought relief by escape through the open passage. One of the invaders meanwhile a broad foreign gentleman with long hair tucked behind his ears and a ring on each forefinger had lost no time in showing he knew where to begin. He began at the top the proper place, and took in the dark pictures ranged above the tapestry. "Olt vamily bortraits?" he appealed to Chivers and spoke very loud.

Chivers rose to the occasion and, gracefully pawing the air, began also at the beginning. "Dame Dorothy Yule who lived to a hundred and one."

"A hundred and one ach *so!*" broke, with a resigned absence of criticism, from each of the interested group; another member of which, however, indicated with a somewhat fatigued skip the central figure of the series, the personage with the long white legs that Mrs Gracedew had invited the previous inquirers to remark. "Who' dis!" the present inquirer asked.

The question affected the lovely lady over by the fireplace as the trumpet of battle affects a generous steed. She flashed on the instant into the middle of the hall and into the friendliest and most familiar relation with everyone and with everything. "John Anthony Yule, sir who passed away, poor duck, in his flower!"

They met her with low salutations, a sweep of ugly shawls and a brush of queer German hats: she had issued, to their glazed convergence, from the dusk of the Middle Ages and the shade of high pieces, and now stood there,

beautiful and human and happy, in a light that, whatever it was for themselves, the very breadth of their attention, the expression of their serious faces, converted straightway for her into a new, and oh! into the right, one. To a detached observer of the whole it would have been promptly clear that she found herself striking these good people very much as the lawful heir had, half an hour before, struck another stranger that she produced in them, in her setting of assured antiquity, quite the romantic vibration that she had responded to in the presence of that personage. They read her as she read *him*, and a bright and deepening cheer, reflected dimly in their thick thoroughness, went out from her as she accepted their reading. An impression was exchanged, for the minute, from side to side their grave admiration of the finest feature of the curious house and the deep free radiance of her silent, grateful "Why not?" It made a passage of some intensity and some duration, of which the effect indeed, the next minute, was to cause the only lady of the party a matron of rich Jewish type, with small nippers on a huge nose and a face out of proportion to her little Freischütz hat to break the spell by an uneasy turn and a stray glance at one of the other pictures. "Who's *dat?*"

"That?" The picture chanced to be a portrait over the wide arch, and something happened, at the very moment, to arrest Mrs Gracedew's eyes rather above than below. What took place, in a word, was that Clement Yule, already fidgetting in his impatience back from the front, just occupied the arch, completed her thought and filled her vision. "Oh, that's my future husband!" He caught the words, but answered them only by a long look at her as he moved, with a checked wildness of which she alone, of all the spectators, had a sense, straight across the hall again and to the other opening. He paused there as he had done before, then with a last dumb appeal to her dropped into the court and passed into the garden. Mrs Gracedew, already so wonderful to their visitors, was, before she followed him, wonderful with a greater wonder to poor Chivers. "You dear old thing I give it all back to you!"

THE END