The Given Case

Henry James

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Barton Reeve waited, with outward rigour and inward rage, till every one had gone: there was in particular an objectionable, travelled, superior young man a young man with a long neck and bad shoes, especially great on Roumania whom he was determined to outstay. He could only wonder the while whether he most hated designed or unconscious unpleasantness. It was a Sunday afternoon, the time in the week when, for some subtle reason, 'such people' Reeve freely generalised them most take liberties. But even when the young man had disappeared there still remained Mrs Gorton, Margaret Hamer's sister and actual hostess it was with this lady that Miss Hamer was at present staying. He was sustained, however, as he had been for half an hour previous, by the sense that the charming girl knew perfectly he had something to say to her and was trying covertly to help him. 'Only hang on: leave the rest to me' something of that sort she had already conveyed to him. He left it to her now to get rid of her sister, and was struck by the wholly natural air with which she soon achieved this feat. It was not absolutely hidden from him that if he had not been so insanely in love he might like her for herself. As it was, he could only like her for Mrs Despard. Mrs Gorton was dining out, but Miss Hamer was not; that promptly turned up, with the effect of bringing on, for the former lady, the question of time to dress. She still remained long enough to say over and over that it *was* time. Meanwhile, a little awkwardly, they hung about by the fire.
Mrs Gorton looked at her pretty shoe on the fender, but Barton Reeve and Miss Hamer were on their feet as if to declare that they were fixed.

"You're dining all alone?" he said to the girl.

"Women never dine alone," she laughed. "When they're alone they don't dine."

Mrs Gorton looked at her with an expression of which Reeve became aware: she was so handsome that, but for its marked gravity, it might have represented the pleasure and pride of sisterhood. But just when he most felt such complacency to be natural his hostess rather sharply mystified him. "She won't *be* alone more's the pity!"
Mrs Gorton spoke with more intention than he could seize, and the next moment he was opening the door for her.

"I shall have a cup of coffee and a biscuit and also, propped up before me, Gardiner's *Civil War*. Don't you always read when you dine alone?" Miss Hamer asked as he came back.

Women were strange he was not to be drawn in that direction. She had been showing him for an hour that she knew what he wanted; yet now that he had got his chance which she moreover had given him she looked as innocent as the pink face in the oval frame above the chimney. It took him, however, but a moment to see more: her innocence was her answer to the charge with which her sister had retreated, a charge into which, the next minute, her conscious blankness itself helped him to read a sense. Margaret Hamer was never alone, because Phil Mackern was always But it was none of *his* business! She lingered there on the rug, and it somehow passed between them before anything else was done that he quite recognised that. After the point was thus settled he took his own affair straight up. "You know why I'm here. It's because I believe you can help me."

"Men always think that. They think every one can 'help' them but themselves."

"And what do women think?" Barton Reeve asked with some asperity. "It might be a little of a light for me if you were able to tell me *that*. What do they think a man is made of? What does *she* think ?"

A little embarrassed, Margaret looked round her, wishing to show she could be kind and patient, yet making no movement to sit down. Mrs Gorton's allusion was still in the air it had just affected their common comfort. "I know what you mean. You assume she tells me everything."

"I assume that you're her most intimate friend. I don't know to whom else to turn."

The face the girl now took in was smooth−shaven and fine, a face expressing penetration up to the limit of decorum. It was full of the man's profession passionately legal. Barton Reeve was certainly concerned with advice, but not with taking it. "What particular thing," she asked, "do you want me to do?"

"Well, to make her see what she's doing to me. From you she'll take it. She won't take it from me. She doesn't believe me she thinks I'm 'prejudiced'. But she'll believe you."

Miss Hamer smiled, but not with cruelty. "And whom shall *I* believe?"

"Ah, that's not kind of you!" Barton Reeve returned; after which, for a moment, as he stood there sombre and sensitive, something visibly came to him that completed his thought, but that he hesitated to produce. Presently, as if to keep it back, he turned away with a jerk. He knew all about the girl herself the woman of whom they talked had, out of the fulness of her own knowledge, told him; he knew what would have given him a right to say: 'Oh, come; don't pretend I've to reveal to *you* what the dire thing makes of us!' He moved across the room and came back felt himself even at this very moment, in the grip of his passion, shaken as a rat by a terrier. But just that was what he showed by his silence. As he rejoined her by the chimney−piece he was extravagantly nervous. "Oh Lord, Lord!" he at last simply exclaimed.

"I believe you I believe you," she replied. "But *she* really does too."

"Then why does she treat me so? it's a refinement of perversity and cruelty. She never gives me an inch but she takes back the next day ten yards; never shows me a gleam of sincerity without making up for it as soon as possible by something that leaves me in no doubt of her absolute heartless coquetry. Of whom the deuce is she afraid?"

His companion hesitated. "You perhaps might remember once in a while that she has a husband."

"Do I ever forget it for an instant? Isn't my life one long appeal to her to get rid of him?"

"Ah," said his friend as if she knew all about it, "getting rid of husbands isn't so easy!"

"I beg your pardon" Reeve spoke with much more gravity and a still greater competence "there's every facility for it when the man's a proved brute and the woman an angel whom, for three years, he has not troubled himself so much as to look at."

"Do you think," Miss Hamer inquired, "that, even for an angel, extreme intimacy with another angel such another as you: angels of a feather flock together! positively adds to the facility?"

Barton could perfectly meet her. "It adds to the reason that's what it adds to; and the reason *is* the facility. I only know one way," he went on, "of showing her I want to marry her. I can't show it by never going near her."

"But need you also show Colonel Despard?"

"Colonel Despard doesn't care a rap!"

"He cares enough to have given her all this time nothing whatever for divorcing him, if you mean that to take hold of."

"I do mean that," Barton Reeve declared; "and I must ask you to believe that I know what I'm talking about. He hates her enough for any perversity, but he has given her exactly what is necessary. Enough's as good as a feast!"

Miss Hamer looked away looked now at the clock; but it was none the less apparent that she understood. "Well she of course has a horror of that. I mean of doing anything herself."

"Then why does she go so far?"

Margaret still looked at the clock. "So far ?"

"With me, month after month, in every sort of way!"

Moving away from the fire, she gave him an irrelevant smile. "Though I *am* to be alone, my time's up."

He kept his eyes on her. "Women don't feed for themselves, but they do dress, eh?"

"I must go to my room."

"But that isn't an answer to my question."

She thought a moment. "About poor Kate's going so far? I thought your complaint was of her not going far enough."

"It all depends," said Reeve impatiently, "upon her having some truth in her. She shouldn't do what she does if she doesn't care for me."

"She does care for you," said the girl.

"Well then, damn it, she should do much more!"

Miss Hamer put out her hand. "Good−bye. I'll speak to her."

Reeve held her fast. "She does care for me?"

She hesitated but an instant. "Far too much. It's excessively awkward."

He still detained her, pressing her with his sincerity, almost with his crudity. "That's exactly why I've come to you." Then he risked: "*You* know !" But he faltered.

"I know what?"

"Why, what it is."

She threw back her head, releasing herself. "To be impertinent? Never!" She fairly left him the man was in the hall to let him out; and he walked away with a sense not diminished, on the whole, of how viciously fate had seasoned his draught. Yet he believed Margaret Hamer *would* speak for him. She had a kind of nobleness.

2

At Pickenham, on the Saturday night, it came round somehow to Philip Mackern that Barton Reeve was to have been of the party, and that Mrs Despard's turning up without him so it was expressed had somewhat disconcerted their hostess. This, in the smoking−room, made him silent more to think than to listen he knew whom *he* had 'turned up' without. The next morning, among so many, there were some who went to church; Mackern always went now because Miss Hamer had told him she wished it. He liked it, moreover, for the time: it was an agreeable symbol to him of the way his situation made him 'good'. Besides, he had a plan; he knew what Mrs Despard would do; *her* situation made her good too. The morning, late in May, was bright, and the walk, though short, charming; they all straggled, in vivid twos and threes, across the few fields passing stiles and gates, drawing out, scattering their colour over the green, as if they had the 'tip' for some new sport. Mrs Despard, with two companions, was one of the first; Mackern himself, as it happened, quitted the house by the side of Lady Orville, who, before they had gone many steps, completed the information given him the night before.

"That's just the sort of thing Kate Despard's always up to. I'm too tired of her!"

Phil Mackern wondered. "But do you mean she prevented him ?"

"I asked her only to make him come it was *him* I wanted. But she's a goose: she hasn't the courage "

"Of her reckless passion?" Mackern asked as his companion's candour rather comically dropped.

"Of her ridiculous flirtation. She doesn't know what she wants she's in and out of her hole like a frightened mouse. On knowing she's invited he immediately accepts, and she encourages him in the fond thought of the charming time they'll have. Then at the eleventh hour she finds it will never do. It will be too 'marked'! Marked it would certainly have been," Lady Orville pursued. "But there would have been a remedy!"

"For *her* to have stayed away?"

Her ladyship waited. "What horrors you make me say!"

"Well," Mackern replied, "I'm glad she came. I particularly want her."

"You? what have *you* to do with her? You're as bad as she!" his hostess added; quitting him, however, for some other attention, before he had need to answer.

He sought no second companion — he had matter for thought as he went on; but he reached the door of the church before Mrs Despard had gone in, and he observed that when, glancing back, she saw him pass the gate, she immediately waited for him. She had turned off a little into the churchyard, and as he came up he was struck with the prettiness that, beneath the old grey tower and among the crooked headstones, she presented to the summer morning.

"It's just to say, before any one else gets hold of you, that I want you, when we come out, to walk home with me. I want most particularly to speak to you."

" *Comme cela se trouve*!" Mackern laughed. "That's exactly what I want to do to you!"

"Oh, I warn you that you won't like it; but you will have, all the same, to take it!" Mrs Despard declared. "In fact, it's why I came," she added.

"To speak to *me*?"

"Yes, and you needn't attempt to look innocent and interesting. You know perfectly what it's about!" With which she passed into church.

It scarce prepared the young man for his devotions; he thought more of what it might be about — whether he knew or not — than he thought of what, ostensibly, he had come for. He was not seated near Mrs Despard, but he appropriated her, after service, before they had left the place; and then, on the walk back, took care they should be quite by themselves. She opened fire with a promptitude clearly intended to deprive him of every advantage.

"Don't you think it's about time, you know, to let Margaret Hamer alone?"

He found his laugh again a resource. "Is that what you came down to say to me?"

"I suppose what you mean is that in that case I might as well have stayed at home. But I can assure you," Mrs Despard continued, "that if you don't care for her, I at least do. I'd do anything for her!"

"Would you?" Philip Mackern asked. "Then, for God's sake, try to induce her to show me some frankness and reason. Knowing that you know all about it and that I should find you here, that's what determined me. And I find you talking to me," he went on, "about giving her up. How *can* I give her up? What do you mean by my not caring for her? Don't I quite sufficiently show — and to the point absolutely of making a public fool of myself — that I don't care for anything else in life?"

Mrs Despard, slightly to his surprise and pacing beside him a moment in silence, seemed arrested by this challenge. But she presently found her answer. "That's not the way, you know, to get on at the Treasury."

"I don't pretend it is; and it's just one of the things that I thought of asking you to bring home to her better than any one else can. She plays the very devil with my work. She makes me hope just enough to be all upset, and yet never, for an hour, enough to be — well, what you may call made strong; enough to know where I am."

"You're where you've no business to be — that's where you are," said Mrs Despard. "You've no right whatever to persecute a girl who, to listen to you, will have to do something that she doesn't want, and that would be most improper if she did."

"You mean break off ?"

"I mean break off — with Mr Grove−Stewart."

"And why shouldn't she?"

"Because they've been engaged three years."

"And could there be a better reason?" Philip Mackern asked with heat. "A man who's engaged to a girl three years without marrying her what sort of a man is that, and what tie to him is she, or is any one else, bound to recognise?"

"He's an extremely nice person," Mrs Despard somewhat sententiously replied, "and he's to return from India and not to go back, you know this autumn at latest."

"Then that's all the more reason for my acting successfully before he comes for my insisting on an understanding without the loss of another week."

The young man, who was tall and straight, had squared his shoulders and, throwing back his massive, fair head, appeared to proclaim to earth and air the justice of his cause. Mrs Despard, for an instant, answered nothing, but, as if to take account of his manner, she presently stopped short. "I think I ought to express to you my frank belief that for you, Mr Mackern, there can be nothing but loss. I'm sorry for you, to a certain point; but you happen to have got hold of a girl who's incapable of anything dishonourable." And with this as if *that* were settled she resumed her walk.

Mackern, however, stood quite still only too glad of the opportunity for emphasis given him by their pause; so that after a few steps she turned round. "Do you know that that's exactly on what I wanted to appeal to you? *Is* she the woman to chuck me now?"

Mrs Despard, all face and figure in the mild brightness, looked at him across the grass and appeared to give some extension to the question of what, in general at least, a woman might be the woman to do. "Now?"

"Now. After all she has done."

Mrs Despard, however, wouldn't hear of what Margaret Hamer had done; she only walked straight off again, shaking everything away as Mackern overtook her. "Leave her alone leave her alone!"

He held his tongue for some minutes, but he swished the air with his stick in a way that made her presently look at him. She found him positively pale, and he looked away from her. "You should have given me that advice," he remarked with dry derision, "a good many weeks ago!"

"Well, it's never too late to mend!" she retorted with some vivacity.

"I beg your pardon. It's often too late altogether too late. And as for 'mending'," Mackern went on almost sternly, "you know as well as I that if I *had* in time, or anything of that sort tried to back out or pull up, you would have been the first to make her out an injured innocent and declare I had shamefully used her."

This proposition took, as appeared, an instant or two to penetrate Mrs Despard's consciousness; but when it had fairly done so it produced, like a train of gunpowder, an audible report. "Why, you strange, rude man!" she fairly laughed for indignation. "Permit me not to answer you: I can't discuss any subject with you in that key."

They had reached a neat white gate and paused for Mackern to open it; but, with his hand on the top, he only held it a little, fixing his companion with insistence and seemingly in full indifference to her protest. "Upon my soul, the way women treat men !"

"Well?" she demanded, while he gasped as if it were more than he could express.

"It's too execrable! There's only one thing for her to do." He clearly wished to show he was not to be humbugged.

"And what wonderful thing is that?"

"There's only one thing for *any* woman to do," he pursued with an air of conscious distinctness, "when she has drawn a man on to believe there's nothing she's not ready for."

Mrs Despard waited; she watched, over the gate, the gambols, in the next field, of a small white lamb. "Will you kindly let me pass?" she then asked.

But he went on as if he had not heard her. "It's to make up to him for what she has cost him. It's simply to do everything."

Mrs Despard hesitated. "Everything?" she then vaguely asked.

"Everything," Mackern said as he opened the gate. "*Won't* you help me?" he added more appealingly as they got into the next field.

"No." She was as distinct as himself. She followed with her eyes the little white lamb. She dismissed the subject. "You're simply wicked."

3

Barton Reeve, of a Sunday, sometimes went for luncheon to his sister, who lived in Great Cumberland Place, and this particular Sunday was so fine that, from the Buckingham Palace Road, he walked across the Park. There, in the eastern quarter, he encountered many persons who appeared, on the return from church, to have assembled to meet each other and who had either disposed themselves on penny chairs or were passing to and fro near the Park Lane palings. The sitters looked at the walkers, the walkers at the sitters, and Barton Reeve, with his sharp eyes, at every one. Thus it was that he presently perceived, under a spreading tree, Miss Hamer and her sister, who, however, though in possession of chairs, were not otherwise engaged. He went straight up to them, and, while he stood talking, they were approached by another friend, an elderly intimate, as it seemed, of Mrs Gorton's, whom he recognised as one of the persons so trying to his patience the day of his long wait in her drawing−room. Barton Reeve looked very hard at the younger lady, and was perfectly conscious of the effect he produced of always reminding her that there was a subject between them. He was, on the other hand, probably not aware of the publicity that his manner struck his alert young friend as conferring on this circumstance, nor of the degree in which, as an illustration of his intensity about his own interests, his candour appeared to her comic. What *was* comic, on his part, was the excessive frankness clever man though he was of his assumption that he finely, quite disinterestedly, extended their subject by this very looking of volumes. She and her affairs figured in them all, and there was a set of several in a row by the time that, laughing in spite of herself, she now said to him: "Will you take me a little walk?" He left her in no doubt of his alacrity, and in a moment Mrs Gorton's visitor was in her chair and our couple away from the company and out in the open.

"I want you to know," the girl immediately began, "that I've said what I could for you that I say it whenever I can. But I've asked you to speak to me now just because you mustn't be under any illusion or flatter yourself that I'm doing " she hesitated, for his attention had made her stop short "well, what I'm not. I may as well tell you, at any rate," she added, "that I do maturely consider she cares for you. But what will you have? She's a woman of

duty."

"Duty? What do you mean by duty?"

Barton Reeve's irritation at this name had pierced the air with such a sound that Margaret Hamer looked about for a caution. But they were in an empty circle a wide circle of smutty sheep. She showed a slight prevision of embarrassment even of weariness: she had hoped for an absence of that. "You know what I mean. What else is there to mean? I mean Colonel Despard."

"Was it her duty to Colonel Despard to be as consciously charming to me as if there had been no such person alive? Has she explained to you that?" he demanded.

"She hasn't explained to me anything I don't need it," said the girl with some spirit. "I've only explained to *her*."

"Well?" he was almost peremptory.

She didn't mind it. "Well, her excuse for her false position, I mean is really a perfectly good one." Miss Hamer had been standing, but with this she walked on. "She found she what do you call it? liked you."

"Then what's the matter?"

"Why, that she didn't know how much you'd like her, how far you'd what do you call it? 'go'. It's odious to be talking of such things, I think," she pursued; "and I assure you I wouldn't do it for other people for any one but you and her. It makes it all sound so vulgar. She didn't think you cared on the contrary. Then when she began to see, she had got in too deep."

"She had made my life impossible to me without her? She certainly has 'got in' to that extent," said Barton Reeve, "and it's precisely my contention. Can you pretend for her that to have found out that she has done this leaves open to her, in common decency, any but the one course?"

"I don't pretend anything!" his companion replied with some confusion and still more impatience. "I'm bound to say I don't see what responsibility you're trying to fix on me."

He just cast about him, making little wild jerks with his stick. "I'm not trying anything and you're awfully good to me. I dare say my predicament makes me a shocking bore makes me in fact ridiculous. But I don't speak to you only because you're her friend her friend, and therefore not indifferent to the benefit for her of what, take it altogether, I have to offer. It's because I feel so sure of how, in her place, you would generously, admirably take your own line."

"Heaven forbid I should ever be in her place!" Margaret exclaimed with a laugh in which it pleased Reeve, at the moment, to discover a world of dissimulation.

"You're already there I say, come!" the young man had it on his tongue's end to reply. But he stopped himself in time, and felt extraordinarily delicate and discreet. "I don't say it's the easiest one in the world; but here I stand, after all and I'm not supposed to be such an ass ready to give her every conceivable assistance." His friend, at this, replied nothing; but he presently spoke again. "What has she invented, at Pickenham, to−day, but to keep me from coming?"

"Is Kate to−day at Pickenham?" Miss Hamer inquired.

Barton Reeve, in his acuteness, caught something in the question an energy of profession of ignorance in which he again saw depths. It presented Pickenham and whomsoever might be there as such a blank that he felt quite forced to say: "I rather imagined till I spied you just now that you would have gone."

"Well, you see I haven't." With which our young lady paused again, turning on him more frankly. It struck him that, as from a conscious effort, she had a heightened colour. "You must know far better than I what she feels, but I repeat it to you, once for all, as, the last time I saw her, she gave it me. I said just now she hadn't explained, but she did explain that." The girl just faltered, but she brought it out. "She can't divorce. And if she can't, you know, she can't!"

"I never heard such twaddle," Barton Reeve declared. "As if a woman with a husband who hates her so he would like to kill her couldn't obtain any freedom !" And he gave such a passionate whirl of his stick that it flew straight away from him.

His companion waited till he had picked it up. "Ah, but there's freedom and freedom."

"She can do anything on all the wide earth she likes." He had gone on as if not hearing her, and, lost in the vastness of his meaning, he absolutely glared a while at the distance. "But she's afraid!"

Miss Hamer, in her turn, stared at the way he sounded it; then she gave a vague laugh. "How you say that!"

Barton Reeve said it again said it with rage and scorn. "She's afraid, she's afraid!"

Margaret continued to look at him; then she turned away. "Yes she is."

"Well, who wouldn't be?" came to her, as a reply, across the grass. Mrs Gorton, with two gentlemen now, rejoined them.

4

On hearing from Mrs Despard that she must see him, Philip Mackern's action was immediate: she had named the morrow for his call, but he knocked at her door, on the chance, an hour after reading her note. The footman demurred, but at the same moment Barton Reeve, taking his departure, appeared in the hall, and Mackern instantly appealed to him.

"She *is* at home, I judge isn't she?" The young man was so impatient that it was only afterwards he took into account a queerness of look on Reeve's part a queerness that seemed to speak of a different crisis and that indeed something in his own face might, to his friend's eyes, remarkably have matched. Like two uneasy Englishmen, at any rate, they somehow passed each other, and when, a minute later, in the drawing−room, Mrs Despard, who, with her back presented, was at the window, turned about at the sound of his name, she showed him an expression in which nothing corresponded to that of her other visitor. It may promptly be mentioned that, even through what followed, this visitor's presence was, to Mackern's sense, still in the air; only it was also just one of the things ministering, for our friend, to the interest of retrospect that such a fact the fact that Mrs Despard could be so 'wonderful' conveyed a reminder of the superior organisation of women. "I know you said to−morrow," he quickly began; "but I'll come to−morrow too. Is it bad or good?" he went on "I mean what you have to tell me. Even if I just know it's bad, I believe I can wait if you haven't time now."

"I haven't time, at all, now," Mrs Despard replied very sweetly. "I can only give you two minutes my

dressmaker's waiting. But it isn't bad," she added.

"Then it's good?" he eagerly asked.

"Oh, I haven't the least idea you'll think it so! But it's because it's exactly what I myself have been wanting and hoping that I wrote to you. It strikes me that the sooner you know the better. I've just heard from Bombay from Amy Warden."

"Amy Warden?" Philip Mackern wondered.

"John Grove−Stewart's sister the nice one. He comes home immediately doesn't wait till the autumn. So there you are!" said Mrs Despard.

Philip Mackern looked straight at the news, with which she now presented herself as brilliantly illuminated. "I don't see that I'm anywhere but where I've always been. I haven't expected anything of his absence that I shan't expect of his presence."

Mrs Despard thought a moment, but with perfect serenity. "Have you expected quite fatally to compromise her?"

He gave her question an equal consideration. "To compromise her?"

"That's what you are doing, you know as deliberately as ever you can."

Again the young man thought. They were in the middle of the room she had not asked him to sit down. "Quite fatally, you say?"

"Well, she has just one chance to save herself."

Mackern, whom Mrs Despard had already, more than once, seen turn pale under the emotion of which she could touch the spring, gave her again and with it a smile that struck her as strange this sign of sensibility. "Yes she may have only one chance. But it's such a good one!" he laughed. "What is Mr Grove−Stewart coming home for?"

"Because it has reached him that the whole place is filled with the wonder of her conduct. Amy Warden thinks that, as so intimate a friend, I should hear what he has decided to do. She takes for granted, I suppose though she doesn't say it that I'll let Margaret know."

Philip Mackern looked at the ceiling. "She doesn't know yet? "

Mrs Despard hesitated. "I suppose he means it as a surprise."

"So you won't tell her?"

"On the contrary I shall tell her immediately. But I thought it best to tell you first."

"I'm extremely obliged to you," said Philip Mackern.

"Of course you hate me but I don't care!" Mrs Despard declared. "You've made her talked about in India you may be proud!"

Once more Philip Mackern considered. "I'm not at all proud but I think I'm very glad."

"I think you're very horrible then. But I've said what I wanted. Good−bye." Mrs Despard had nodded at the footman, who, returning, had announced her carriage. He had left, on retiring, the door open, and as she followed him to go to her room her visitor went out with her. She gave Mackern, on the landing, a last word. "Her one chance is to marry him as soon as he arrives."

Mackern's strange smile, in his white face, was now fixed. "Her one chance, dear lady, is to marry *me*."

His hostess, suddenly flushing on this, showed a passion that startled him. " Stuff!" she crudely cried, and turned away with such impatience that, quitting her, he passed half downstairs. But she more quickly turned back to him; calling his name, she came to the top, while, checked, he looked up at her. Then she spoke with a particular solemnity. "To marry you, Mr Mackern" it was quite portentous "will be the very worst thing for her good name."

The young man stood staring, then frankly emulated his friend. "Rubbish!" he rang out as he swiftly descended.

5

"Mrs Gorton has come in?"

"No, miss; but Mrs Despard is here. She said she'd wait for you."

"Then I'm not at home to any one." Margaret Hamer went straight upstairs and found her visitor in the smaller drawing−room, not seated, erect before the fireplace and with the air of having for some time restlessly paced and turned. Mrs Despard hailed her with an instant cry.

"It has come at last!"

"Do you mean you've seen your husband?"

"He dropped on me to−day out of the blue. He came in just before luncheon. If the house is his own !" And Mrs Despard, who, as with the first relief to her impatience, had flung herself, to emphasise her announcement on the sofa, gave a long, sombre sigh.

"If the house is his own he can come when he likes?" Standing before her and looking grave and tired, Margaret Hamer showed interest, but kept expression down. "And yet you were so splendidly sure," she continued, "that he wouldn't come!"

"I wasn't sure I see now I wasn't; I only tried to convince myself. I knew at the back of my head that he probably *was* in England; I felt in all my bones six weeks ago, you know that he would really have returned and, in his own infamous, underhand way, would be somewhere looking out. He told me to−day about ninety distinct lies. I don't know how he has kept so dark, but he has been at one of the kind of places he likes some fourth−rate watering−place."

Margaret waited a moment. "With any one?"

"I don't know. I don't care." This time, for emphasis, Mrs Despard jumped up and, wandering, like a caged creature, to a distance, stopped before a glass and gave a touch or two to the position of her hat. "It makes no difference. Nothing makes any."

Her friend, across the room, looked at her with a certain blankness. "Of what does he accuse you?"

"Of nothing whatever," said Mrs Despard, turning round. "Not of the least little thing!" she sighed, coming back.

"Then he made no scene?"

"No it was too awful."

Again the girl faltered. "Do you mean he was ?"

"I mean he was dreadful. I mean I can't bear it."

"Does he want to come back?"

"Immediately and for ever. 'Beginning afresh,' he calls it. Fancy," the poor woman cried, rueful and wide−eyed as with a vision of more things than she could name "fancy beginning afresh!" Once more, in her fidget, appalled, she sank into the nearest seat.

This image of a recommencement had just then, for both ladies, in all the circumstances, a force that filled the room that seemed for a little fairly to make a hush. "But if he can't oblige you?" Margaret presently returned.

Mrs Despard sat sombre. "He *can* oblige me."

"Do you mean by law?"

"Oh," she wailed, "I mean by everything! By my having been the fool !" She dropped to her intolerable sense of it.

Margaret watched her an instant. "Oh, if you say it of yourself!"

Mrs Despard gave one of her springs. "And don't *you* say it?"

Margaret met her eyes, but changed colour. "Say it of you?"

"Say it of *your*self."

They fixed each other a while; it was deep it was even hard. "Yes," said the girl at last. But she turned away.

Her companion's eyes followed her as she moved; then Mrs Despard broke out. "Do you mean you're not going to keep faith?"

"What faith do you *call* faith?"

"You know perfectly what I call faith for *you*, and in how little doubt, from the first, I've left you about it!"

This reply had been sharp enough to jerk the speaker for a moment, as by the toss of her head, out of her woe, but Margaret met it at first only by showing her again a face that enjoined patience and pity. They continued to look indeed, each out of her peculiar distress, more things than they found words for. "I don't know," Margaret Hamer finally said. "I have time I've a little; I've more than you that's what makes me so sorry for you. I've been very possibly the direst idiot I'll admit anything you like; though I won't pretend I see now how it could have been different. It couldn't it couldn't. I don't know, I don't know," she wearily, mechanically repeated. There was

something in her that had surrendered by this time all the importance of her personal question; she wished to keep it back or to get rid of it. "Don't, at any rate, think one is selfish and all taken up. I'm perfectly quiet it's only about you I'm nervous. You're worse than I, dear," she added with a dim smile.

But Mrs Despard took it more than gravely. "Worse?"

"I mean you've more to think of. And perhaps even *he's* worse."

Mrs Despard thought again. "He's terrible."

Her companion hesitated she had perhaps mistaken the allusion. "I don't mean your husband."

Mrs Despard *had* mistaken the allusion, but she carried it off. "Barton Reeve is terrible. It's more than I deserve."

"Well, he really cares. There it is."

"Yes, there it is!" Mrs Despard echoed. "And much *that* helps me!"

They hovered about, but shifting their relation now and each keeping something back. "When are you to see him again?" Margaret asked.

This time Mrs Despard knew whom she meant. "Never never again. What I may feel for him what I may feel for myself has nothing to do with it. Never as long as I live!" Margaret's visitor declared. "You don't believe it?" she, however, the next moment demanded.

"I don't believe it. You know how I've always liked him. But what has *that* to do with it either?" the girl almost incoherently continued. "I don't believe it no," she repeated. "I don't want to make anything harder for you, but you won't find it so easy."

"I shan't find anything easy, and I must row my own boat. But not seeing him will be the least impossibility."

Margaret looked away. "Well!" she spoke at last vaguely and conclusively.

Something in her tone so arrested her friend that she found herself suddenly clutched by the arm. "Do you mean to say you'll see Mr Mackern?"

"I don't know."

"Then *I* do!" Mrs Despard pronounced with energy. "You're lost."

"Ah!" wailed Margaret with the same wan detachment.

"Yes, simply lost!" It rang out would have rung out indeed too loud had it not caught itself just in time. Mrs Gorton at that moment opened the door.

6

Mrs Despard at last came down he had been sure it would be but a question of time. Barton Reeve had, to this

end, presented himself, on the Sunday morning, early: he had allowed a margin for difficulty. He was armed with a note of three lines, which, on the butler's saying to him that she was not at home, he simply, in a tone before which even a butler prompted and primed must quail, requested him to carry straight up. Then unannounced and unaccompanied, not knowing in the least whom he should find, he had taken, for the hundredth time in four months, his quick course to the drawing−room, where emptiness, as it proved, reigned, but where, notwithstanding, he felt, at the end of an hour, rather more than less in possession. To express it, to put it to her, to put it to any one, would perhaps have been vain and vulgar; but the whole assurance on which he had proceeded was his sense that, on the spot, he had, to a certain point, an effect. He was enough on the spot from the moment she knew he was, and she would know it know it by divination, as she had often before shown how extraordinarily she knew things even if that pompous ass had not sent up his note. To what point his effect would prevail in the face of the biggest obstacle he had yet had to deal with was exactly what he had come to find out. It was enough, to begin with, that he did, after a weary wait, draw her draw her in spite of everything: he felt that as he at last heard her hand on the door−knob. He heard it indeed pause as well as move pause while he himself kept perfectly still. During this minute, it must be added, he looked straight at the ugliest of the whole mixed row of possibilities. Something had yielded yes; but what had yielded was quite most probably not her softness. It might well be her hardness. Her hardness was her love of the sight of her own effect.

Dressed for church, though it was now much too late, she was more breathless than he had ever seen her; in spite of which, beginning immediately, he gave her not a moment. "I make a scandal, your letter tells me I make it, you say, even before the servants, whom you appear to have taken in the most extraordinary way into your confidence. You greatly exaggerate but even suppose I do: let me assure you frankly that I care not one rap. What you've done you've done, and I'm here in spite of your letter and in spite of anything, of everything, any one else may say on the perfectly solid ground of your having irretrievably done it. Don't talk to me," Reeve went on, "about your husband and new complications: to do that now is horribly unworthy of you and quite the sort of thing that adds well, you know what to injury. There isn't a single complication that there hasn't always been and that we haven't, on the whole, completely mastered and put in its place. There was nothing in your husband that prevented, from the first hour we met, your showing yourself, and every one else you chose, what you could do with me. What you could do you did systematically and without a scruple without a pang of real compunction or a movement of real retreat."

Mrs Despard had not come down unprepared, and her impenetrable face now announced it. She was even strong enough to speak softly not to meet anger with anger. Yet she was also clearly on her defence. "If I was kind to you if I had the frankness and confidence to let it be seen I liked you it's because I thought I was safe."

"Safe?" Barton Reeve echoed. "Yes, I've no doubt you did! And how safe did you think *I* was? Can't you give me some account of the attention you gave to *that*?" She looked at him without reply to his challenge, but the full beauty of her silent face had only, as in two or three still throbs, to come out, to affect him suddenly with all the force of a check. The plea of her deep, pathetic eyes took the place of the admission that his passion vainly desired to impose upon her. They broke his resentment down; all his tenderness welled up with the change; it came out in supplication. "I can't look at you and believe any ill of you. I feel for you everything I ever felt, and that we're committed to each other by a power that not even death can break. How can you look at *me* and not know to what depths I'm yours? You've the finest, sweetest chance that ever a woman had!"

She waited a little, and the firmness in her face, the intensity of her effort to possess herself, settled into exaltation, at the same time that she might have struck a spectator as staring at some object of fear. "I see my chance I see it; but I don't see it as you see it. You must forgive me. My chance is not *that* chance. It has come to me God knows why! but in the hardest way of all. I made a great mistake I recognise it."

"So *I* must pay for it?" Barton Reeve asked.

She continued to look at him with her protected dread. "We both did so we must both pay."

"Both? I beg your pardon," said the young man: "I utterly deny it I made no mistake whatever. I'm just where I was and everything else is. Everything but you!"

She looked away from him, but going on as if she had not heard him. "We must do our duty when once we see it. I didn't know I didn't understand. But now I do. It's when one's eyes are opened that the wrong is wrong." Not as a lesson got by heart, not as a trick rehearsed in her room, but delicately, beautifully, step by step, she made it out for herself and for him so far as he would take it. "I can only follow the highest line." Then, after faltering a moment, "We must thank God," she said, "it isn't worse. My husband's here," she added with a sufficient strangeness of effect.

But Barton Reeve accepted the mere fact as relevant. "Do you mean he's in the house?"

"Not at this moment. He's on the river for the day. But he comes back to−morrow."

"And he has been here since Friday?" She was silent, on this, so long that her visitor continued: "It's none of my business?"

Again she hesitated, but at last she replied. "Since Friday."

"And you hate him as much as ever?"

This time she spoke out. "More."

Reeve made, with a sound irrepressible and scarce articulate, a motion that was a sort of dash at her. "Ah, my *own* own!"

But she retreated straight before him, checking him with a gesture of horror, her first outbreak of emotion. "Don't touch me!" He turned, after a minute, away; then, like a man dazed, looked, without sight, about for something. It proved to be his hat, which he presently went and took up. "Don't talk, don't talk you're not *in* it!" she continued. "You speak of 'paying', but it's I who pay." He reached the door and, having opened it, stood with his hand on the knob and his eyes on her face. She was far away, at the most distant of the windows. "I shall never care for any one again," she kept on.

Reeve had dropped to something deeper than resentment; more abysmal, even, it seemed to him, than renouncement or despair. But all he did was slowly to shake his helpless head at her. "I've no words for you."

"It doesn't matter. Don't think of me."

He was closing the door behind him, but, still hearing her voice, kept it an instant. "I'm all right!" that was the last that came to him as he drew the door to.

7

"I only speak of the given case," Philip Mackern said; "that's the only thing I have to do with, and on what I've expressed to you of the situation it has made for me I don't yield an inch."

Mrs Gorton, to whom, in her own house, he had thus, in defence, addressed himself, was in a flood of tears which rolled, however, in their current not a few hard grains of asperity. "You're *always* speaking of it, and it acts on my

nerves, and I don't know what you mean by it, and I don't care, and I think you're horrible. The case is like any other case that can be mended if people will behave decently."

Philip Mackern moved slowly about the room; impatience and suspense were in every step he took, but he evidently had himself well in hand and he met his hostess with studied indulgence. She had made her appearance, in advance, to prepare him for her sister, who had agreed by letter to see him, but who, through a detention on the line, which she had wired from Bath to explain, had been made late for the appointment she was on her way back to town to keep. Margaret Hamer had gone home precipitately to Devonshire five days before, the day after her last interview with Mrs Despard; on which had ensued, with the young man, whom she had left London without seeing, a correspondence resulting in her present return. She had forbidden him, in spite of his insistence, either to come down to her at her mother's or to be at Paddington to meet her, and had finally, arriving from these places, but just alighted in Manchester Square, where, while he awaited her, Mackern's restless measurement of the empty drawing−room had much in common with the agitation to which, in a similar place, his friend Barton Reeve had already been condemned. Mrs Gorton, emerging from a deeper retreat, had at last, though not out of compassion, conferred on him her company; she left him from the first instant in no doubt of the spirit in which she approached him. Margaret was at last almost indecently there, Margaret was upstairs, Margaret was coming down; but he would render the whole family an inestimable service by quietly taking up his hat and departing without further parley. Philip Mackern, whose interest in this young lady was in no degree whatever an interest in other persons connected with her, only transferred his hat from the piano to the window−seat and put it kindly to Mrs Gorton that such a departure would be, if the girl had come to take leave of him, a brutality, and if she had come to do anything else an imbecility. His inward attitude was that his interlocutress was an insufferable busybody: he took his stand, he considered, upon admirable facts; Margaret Hamer's age and his own twenty−six and thirty−two her independence, her intelligence, his career, his prospects, his general and his particular situation, his income, his extraordinary merit, and perhaps even his personal appearance. He left his sentiments, in this private estimate, out of account he was almost too proud to mention them even to himself. Yet he found, after the first moment, that he had to mention them to Mrs Gorton.

"I don't know what you mean," he said, "by my 'always' speaking of anything whatever that's between your sister and me; for I must remind you that this is the third time, at most, that we've had any talk of the matter. If I did, however, touch, to you, last month, on what I hold that a woman is, in certain circumstances circumstances that, mind you, would never have existed without her encouragement, her surrender bound in honour to do, it was because you yourself, though I dare say you didn't know with what realities you were dealing, called my attention precisely to the fact of the 'given case'. It isn't always, it isn't often, given, perhaps but when it is one knows it. And it's given now if it ever was in the world," Mackern still, with his suppression of violence, but with an emphasis the more distinct for its peculiar amenity, asserted as he resumed his pacing.

Mrs Gorton watched him a moment through such traces of tears as still resisted the extreme freedom of her pocket−handkerchief. "Admit then as much as you like that you've been a pair of fools and criminals" the poor woman went far: "what business in the world have you to put the whole responsibility on her?"

Mackern pulled up short; nothing could exceed the benevolence of his surprise. "On 'her'? Why, don't I absolutely take an equal share of it?"

"Equal? Not a bit! You're not engaged to any one else."

"Oh, thank heaven, no!" said Philip Mackern with a laugh of questionable discretion and instant effect.

His companion's cheek assumed a deeper hue and her eyes a drier light. "You cause her to be outrageously talked about, and then have the assurance to come and prate to us of 'honour'!"

Mackern turned away again again he measured his cage. "What is there I'm not ready to make good?" and he gave, as he passed, a hard, anxious smile.

Mrs Gorton said nothing for a moment; then she spoke with an accumulation of dignity. "I think you both if you want to know absolutely improper persons, and if I had had my wits about me I would have declined, in time, to lend my house again to any traffic that might take place between you. But you're hatefully here, to my shame, and the wretched creature, whom I myself got off, has come up, and the fat's on the fire, and it's too late to prevent it. It's not too late, however, just to say this: that if you've come, and if you intend, to bully and browbeat her "

"Well?" Philip Mackern asked.

She had faltered and paused, and the next moment he saw why. The door had opened without his hearing it Margaret Hamer stood and looked at them. He made no movement; he only, after a minute, held her eyes long enough to fortify him, as it were, in his attempted intensity of stillness. He felt already as if some process, something complex and exquisite, were going on that a sound, that a gesture might spoil. But his challenge to Mrs Gorton was still in the air, and she apparently, on her vision of her sister, had seen something pass. She fixed the girl and she fixed Mackern; then, highly flushed and moving to the door, she answered him. "Why, you're a brute and a coward!" With which she banged the door behind her.

The way the others met without speech or touch was extraordinary, and still more singular perhaps the things that, in their silence, Philip Mackern thought. There was no freedom of appeal for him he instantly felt that; there was neither burden nor need. He wondered Margaret didn't notice in some way what Mrs Gorton had said; there was a strangeness in her not, on one side or the other, taking that up. There was a strangeness as well, he was perfectly aware, in his finding himself surprised and even, for ten seconds, as it happened, mercilessly disappointed, at her not looking quite so 'badly' as her encounter with a grave crisis might have been entitled to present her. She looked beautiful, perversely beautiful: he couldn't indeed have said just how directly his presumption of visible ravage was to have treated her handsome head. Meanwhile, as she carried this handsome head in a manner he had never quite seen her carry it before to the window and stood looking blindly out, there deepened in him almost to quick anguish the fear even of breathing upon the hour they had reached. That she had come back to him, to whatever end, was somehow in itself so divine a thing that lips and hands were gross to deal with it. What, moreover, in the extremity of a man's want, had he not already said? They were simply shut up there with their moment, and he, at least, felt it throb and throb in the hush.

At last she turned round. "He will never, never understand that I can have been so base."

Mackern awkwardly demurred. "Base?"

"Letting you, from the first, make, to me, such a difference."

"I don't think you could help it." He was still awkward.

"How can he believe that? How can he admit it?"

She asked it too wofully to expect a reply, but the young man thought a moment. "You can't look to me to speak for him" he said it as feeling his way and without a smile. "He should have looked out for himself."

"He trusted me. He trusted me," she repeated.

"So did I so did I."

"Yes. Yes." She looked straight at him, as if tasting all her bitterness. "But I pity him so that it kills me!"

"And only him?" and Philip Mackern came nearer. "It's perfectly simple," he went on. "I'll abide by that measure. It shall be the one you pity most."

She kept her eyes on him till she burst into tears. "Pity *me* pity *me*!"

He drew her to him and held her close and long, and even at that high moment it was perhaps the deepest thing in his gratitude that he did pity her.