John Delavoy

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The friend who kindly took me to the first night of poor Windon's first which was also poor Windon's last: it was removed as fast as, at an unlucky dinner, a dish of too perceptible a presence also obligingly pointed out to me the notabilities in the house. So it was that we came round, just opposite, to a young lady in the front row of the balcony a young lady in mourning so marked that I rather wondered to see her at a place of pleasure. I dare say my surprise was partly produced by my thinking her face, as I made it out at the distance, refined enough to aid a little the contradiction. I remember at all events dropping a word about the manners and morals of London a word to the effect that, for the most part, elsewhere, people so bereaved as to be so becraped were bereaved enough to stay at home. We recognised of course, however, during the wait, that nobody ever did stay at home; and, as my companion proved vague about my young lady, who was yet somehow more interesting than any other as directly in range, we took refuge in the several theories that might explain her behaviour. One of these was that she had a sentiment for Windon which could override superstitions; another was that her scruples had been mastered by an influence discernible on the spot. This was nothing less than the spell of a gentleman beside her, whom I had at first mentally disconnected from her on account of some visibility of difference. He was not, as it were, quite good enough to have come with her; and yet he was strikingly handsome, whereas she, on the contrary, would in all likelihood have been pronounced almost occultly so. That was what, doubtless, had led me to put a question about her; the fact of her having the kind of distinction that is quite independent of beauty. Her friend, on the other hand, whose clustering curls were fair, whose moustache and whose fixed monocular glass particularly, if indescribably, matched them, and whose expanse of white shirt and waistcoat had the air of carrying out and balancing the scheme of his large white forehead her friend had the kind of beauty that is quite independent of distinction. That he was her friend and very much was clear from his easy imagination of all her curiosities. He began to show her the company, and to do much better in this line than my own companion did for me, inasmuch as he appeared even to know who we ourselves were. That gave a propriety to my finding, on the return from a dip into the lobby in the first entr'acte, that the lady beside me was at last prepared to identify him. I, for my part, knew too few people to have picked up anything. She mentioned a friend who had edged in to speak to her and who had named the gentleman opposite as Lord Yarracome.

Somehow I questioned the news. "It sounds like the sort of thing that's too good to be true."

"Too good?"

"I mean he's too much like it."

"Like what? Like a lord?"

"Well, like the name, which is expressive, and yes even like the dignity. Isn't that just what lords are usually not?" I didn't, however, pause for a reply, but inquired further if his lordship's companion might be regarded as his wife.

"Dear, no. She's Miss Delavoy."

I forget how my friend had gathered this not from the informant who had just been with her; but on the spot I accepted it, and the young lady became vividly interesting. "The daughter of the great man?"

"What great man?"

"Why, the wonderful writer, the immense novelist: the one who died last year." My friend gave me a look that led me to add: "Did you never hear of him?" and, though she professed inadvertence, I could see her to be really so vague that perhaps a trifle too sharply I afterwards had the matter out with her. Her immediate refuge was in the question of Miss Delavoy's mourning. It was for *him*, then, her illustrious father; though that only deepened the oddity of her coming so soon to the theatre, and coming with a lord. My companion spoke as if the lord made it worse, and, after watching the pair a moment with her glass, observed that it was easy to see he could do anything he liked with his young lady. I permitted her, I confess, but little benefit from this diversion, insisting on giving it to her plainly that I didn't know what we were coming to and that there was in the air a gross indifference to which perhaps more almost than anything else the general density on the subject of Delavoy's genius testified. I even let her know, I am afraid, how scant, for a supposedly clever woman, I thought the grace of these *lacunæ*; and I may as well immediately mention that, as I have had time to see, we were not again to be just the same allies as before my explosion. This was a brief, thin flare, but it expressed a feeling, and the feeling led me to concern myself for the rest of the evening, perhaps a trifle too markedly, with Lord Yarracome's victim. She was the image of a nearer approach, of a personal view: I mean in respect to my great artist, on whose consistent aloofness from the crowd I needn't touch, any more than on his patience in going his way and attending to his work, the most unadvertised, unreported, uninterviewed, unphotographed, uncriticised of all originals. Was he not the man of the time about whose private life we delightfully knew least? The young lady in the balcony, with the stamp of her close relation to him in her very dress, was a sudden opening into that region. I borrowed my companion's glass; I treated myself, in this direction yes, I was momentarily gross to an excursion of some minutes. I came back from it with the sense of something gained; I felt as if I had been studying Delavoy's own face, no portrait of which I had ever met. The result of it all, I easily recognised, would be to add greatly to my impatience for the finished book he had left behind, which had not yet seen the light, which was announced for a near date, and as to which rumour I mean of course only in the particular warm air in which it lived at all had already been sharp. I went out after the second act to make room for another visitor they buzzed all over the place and when I rejoined my friend she was primed with rectifications.

"He isn't Lord Yarracome at all. He's only Mr Beston."

I fairly jumped; I see, as I now think, that it was as if I had read the future in a flash of lightning. "Only ? The mighty editor?"

"Yes, of the celebrated *Cynosure*." My interlocutress was determined this time not to be at fault. "He's always at first nights."

"What a chance for me, then," I replied, "to judge of my particular fate!"

"Does that depend on Mr Beston?" she inquired; on which I again borrowed her glass and went deeper into the subject.

"Well, my literary fortune does. I sent him a fortnight ago the best thing I've ever done. I've not as yet had a sign from him, but I can perhaps make out in his face, in the light of his type and expression, some little portent or promise." I did my best, but when after a minute my companion asked what I discovered I was obliged to answer "Nothing!" The next moment I added: "He won't take it."

"Oh, I hope so!"

"That's just what I've been doing." I gave back the glass. "Such a face is an abyss."

"Don't you think it handsome?"

"Glorious. Gorgeous. Immense. Oh, I'm lost! What does Miss Delavoy think of it?" I then articulated.

"Can't you see?" My companion used her glass. "She's under the charm she has succumbed. How else can he have dragged her here in her state?" I wondered much, and indeed her state seemed happy enough, though somehow, at the same time, the pair struck me as not in the least matching. It was only for half a minute that my friend made them do so by going on: "It's perfectly evident. She's not a daughter, I should have told you, by the way she's only a sister. They've struck up an intimacy in the glow of his having engaged to publish from month to month the wonderful book that, as I understand you, her brother has left behind."

That was plausible, but it didn't bear another look. "Never!" I at last returned. "Daughter or sister, that fellow won't touch him."

"Why in the world ?"

"Well, for the same reason that, as you'll see, he won't touch *me*. It's wretched, but we're too good for him." My explanation did as well as another, though it had the drawback of leaving me to find another for Miss Delavoy's enslavement. I was not to find it that evening, for as poor Windon's play went on we had other problems to meet, and at the end our objects of interest were lost to sight in the general blinding blizzard. The affair was a bitter 'frost', and if we were all in our places to the last everything else had disappeared. When I got home it was to be met by a note from Mr Beston accepting my article almost with enthusiasm, and it is a proof of the rapidity of my fond revulsion that before I went to sleep, which was not till ever so late, I had excitedly embraced the prospect of letting him have, on the occasion of Delavoy's new thing, my peculiar view of the great man. I must add that I was not a little ashamed to feel I had made a fortune the very night Windon had lost one.

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Mr Beston really proved, in the event, most kind, though his appeal, which promised to become frequent, was for two or three quite different things before it came round to my peculiar view of Delavoy. It in fact never addressed itself at all to that altar, and we met on the question only when, the posthumous volume having come out, I had found myself wound up enough to risk indiscretions. By this time I had twice been with him and had had three or four of his notes. They were the barest bones, but they phrased, in a manner, a connection. This was not a triumph, however, to bring me so near to him as to judge of the origin and nature of his relations with Miss Delavoy. That his magazine would, after all, publish no specimens was proved by the final appearance of the new book at a single splendid bound. The impression it made was of the deepest it remains the author's highest

mark; but I heard, in spite of this, of no emptying of table−drawers for Mr Beston's benefit. What the book is we know still better to−day, and perhaps even Mr Beston does; but there was no approach at the time to a general rush, and I therefore of course saw that if he was thick with the great man's literary legatee as I, at least, supposed her it was on some basis independent of his bringing anything out. Nevertheless he quite rose to the idea of my study, as I called it, which I put before him in a brief interview.

"You ought to have something. That thing has brought him to the front with a leap !"

"The front? What do you call the front?"

He had laughed so good−humouredly that I could do the same. "Well, the front is where you and I are." I told him my paper was already finished.

"Ah then, you must write it again."

"Oh, but look at it first !"

"You must write it again," Mr Beston only repeated. Before I left him, however, he had explained a little. "You must see his sister."

"I shall be delighted to do that."

"She's a great friend of mine, and my having something may please her which, though my first, my only duty is to please my subscribers and shareholders, is a thing I should rather like to do. I'll take from you something of the kind you mention, but only if she's favourably impressed by it."

I just hesitated, and it was not without a grain of hypocrisy that I artfully replied: "I would much rather *you* were!"

"Well, I shall be if she is." Mr Beston spoke with gravity. "She can give you a good deal, don't you know? all sorts of leads and glimpses. She naturally knows more about him than anyone. Besides, she's charming herself."

To dip so deep could only be an enticement; yet I already felt so saturated, felt my cup so full, that I almost wondered what was left to me to learn, almost feared to lose, in greater waters, my feet and my courage. At the same time I welcomed without reserve the opportunity my patron offered, making as my one condition that if Miss Delavoy assented he would print my article as it stood. It was arranged that he should tell her that I would, with her leave, call upon her, and I begged him to let her know in advance that I was prostrate before her brother. He had all the air of thinking that he should have put us in a relation by which *The Cynosure* would largely profit, and I left him with the peaceful consciousness that if I had baited my biggest hook he had opened his widest mouth. I wondered a little, in truth, how he could care enough for Delavoy without caring more than enough, but I may at once say that I was, in respect to Mr Beston, now virtually in possession of my point of view. This had revealed to me an intellectual economy of the rarest kind. There was not a thing in the world with a single exception, on which I shall presently touch that he valued for itself, and not a scrap he knew about anything save whether or no it would do. To 'do' with Mr Beston, was to do for *The Cynosure*. The wonder was that he could know that of things of which he knew nothing else whatever.

There are a hundred reasons, even in this most private record, which, from a turn of mind so unlike Mr Beston's, I keep exactly for a love of the fact in itself: there are a hundred confused delicacies, operating however late, that hold my hand from any motion to treat the question of the effect produced on me by first meeting with Miss Delavoy. I say there are a hundred, but it would better express my sense perhaps to speak of them all in the singular. Certain it is that one of them embraces and displaces the others. It was not the first time, and I dare say it was not even the second, that I grew sure of a shyness on the part of this young lady greater than any exhibition in such a line that my kindred constitution had ever allowed me to be clear about. My own diffidence, I may say,

kept me in the dark so long that my perception of hers had to be retroactive — to go back and put together and, with an element of relief, interpret and fill out. It failed, inevitably, to operate in respect to a person in whom the infirmity of which I speak had none of the awkwardness, the tell−tale anguish, that makes it as a rule either ridiculous or tragic. It was too deep, too still, too general — it was perhaps even too proud. I must content myself, however, with saying that I have in all my life known nothing more beautiful than the faint, cool morning−mist of confidence less and less embarrassed in which it slowly evaporated. We have made the thing all out since, and we understand it all now. It took her longer than I measured to believe that a man without her particular knowledge could make such an approach to her particular love. The approach was made in my paper, which I left with her on my first visit and in which, on my second, she told me she had not an alteration to suggest. She said of it what I had occasionally, to an artist, heard said, or said myself, of a likeness happily caught: that to touch it again would spoil it, that it had 'come' and must only be left. It may be imagined that after such a speech I was willing to wait for anything; unless indeed it be suggested that there could be then nothing more to wait for. A great deal more, at any rate, seemed to arrive, and it was all in conversation about Delavoy that we ceased to be hindered and hushed. The place was still full of him, and in everything there that spoke to me I heard the sound of his voice. I read his style into everything — I read it into his sister. She was surrounded by his relics, his possessions, his books; all of which were not many, for he had worked without material reward: this only, however, made each more charged, somehow, and more personal. He had been her only devotion, and there were moments when she might have been taken for the guardian of a temple or a tomb. That was what brought me nearer than I had got even in my paper; the sense that it was he, in a manner, who had made her, and that to be with her was still to be with himself. It was not only that I could talk to him so; it was that he listened and that he also talked. Little by little and touch by touch she built him up to me; and then it was, I confess, that I felt, in comparison, the shrinkage of what I had written. It grew faint and small — though indeed only for myself; it had from the first, for the witness who counted so much more, a merit that I have ever since reckoned the great good fortune of my life, and even, I will go so far as to say, a fine case of inspiration. I hasten to add that this case had been preceded by a still finer. Miss Delavoy had made of her brother the year before his death a portrait in pencil that was precious for two rare reasons. It was the only representation of the sort in existence, and it was a work of curious distinction. Conventional but sincere, highly finished and smaller than life, it had a quality that, in any collection, would have caused it to be scanned for some signature known to the initiated. It was a thing of real vision, yet it was a thing of taste, and as soon as I learned that our hero, sole of his species, had succeeded in never, save on this occasion, sitting, least of all to a photographer, I took the full measure of what the studied strokes of a pious hand would some day represent for generations more aware of John Delavoy than, on the whole, his own had been. My feeling for them was not diminished, moreover, by learning from my young lady that Mr Beston, who had given them some attention, had signified that, in the event of his publishing an article, he would like a reproduction of the drawing to accompany it. The 'pictures' in *The Cynosure* were in general a marked chill to my sympathy: I had always held that, like good wine, honest prose needed, as it were, no bush. I took them as a sign that if good wine, as we know, is more and more hard to meet, the other commodity was becoming as scarce. The bushes, at all events, in *The Cynosure*, quite planted out the text; but my objection fell in the presence of Miss Delavoy's sketch, which already, in the forefront of my study, I saw as a flower in the coat of a bridegroom.

I was obliged just after my visit to leave town for three weeks and was, in the country, surprised at their elapsing without bringing me a proof from Mr Beston. I finally wrote to ask of him an explanation of the delay; for which in turn I had again to wait so long that before I heard from him I received a letter from Miss Delavoy, who, thanking me as for a good office, let me know that our friend had asked her for the portrait. She appeared to suppose that I must have put in with him some word for it that availed more expertly than what had passed on the subject between themselves. This gave me occasion, on my return to town, to call on her for the purpose of explaining how little as yet, unfortunately, she owed me. I am not indeed sure that it didn't quicken my return. I knocked at her door with rather a vivid sense that if Mr Beston had her drawing I was yet still without my proof. My privation was the next moment to feel a sharper pinch, for on entering her apartment I found Mr Beston in possession. Then it was that I was fairly confronted with the problem given me from this time to solve. I began at that hour to look it straight in the face. What I in the first place saw was that Mr Beston was 'making up' to our hostess; what I saw in the second — what at any rate I believed I saw — was that she had come a certain distance to

meet him; all of which would have been simple and usual enough had not the very things that gave it such a character been exactly the things I should least have expected. Even this first time, as my patron sat there, I made out somehow that in that position at least he was sincere and sound. Why should this have surprised me? Why should I immediately have asked myself how he would make it pay? He was there because he liked to be, and where was the wonder of his liking? There was no wonder in my own, I felt, so that my state of mind must have been already a sign of how little I supposed we could like the same things. This even strikes me, on looking back, as an implication sufficiently ungraceful of the absence on Miss Delavoy's part of direct and designed attraction. I dare say indeed that Mr Beston's subjection would have seemed to me a clearer thing if I had not had by the same stroke to account for his friend's. She liked him, and I grudged her that, though with the actual limits of my knowledge of both parties I had literally to invent reasons for its being a perversity, I could only in private treat it as one, and this in spite of Mr Beston's notorious power to please. He was the handsomest man in 'literary' London, and, controlling the biggest circulation a body of subscribers as vast as a conscript army he represented in a manner the modern poetry of numbers. He was in love moreover, or he thought he was; that flushed with a general glow the large surface he presented. Thid sound. Why should this have surprised me? Why should I immediately have asked myself how he would make it pay? He was there because he liked to be, and where was the wonder of his liking? There was no wonder in my own, I felt, so that my state of mind must have been already a sign of how little I supposed we could like the same things. This even strikes me, on looking back, as an implication sufficiently ungraceful of the absence on Miss Delavoy's part of direct and designed attraction. I dare say indeed that Mr Beston's subjection would have seemed to me a clearer thing if I had not had by the same stroke to account for his friend's. She liked him, and I grudged her that, though with the actual limits of my knowledge of both parties I had literally to invent reasons for its being a perversity, I could only in private treat it as one, and this in spite of Mr Beston's notorious power to please. He was the handsomest man in 'literary' London, and, controlling the biggest circulation — a body of subscribers as vast as a conscript army — he represented in a manner the modern poetry of numbers. He was in love moreover, or he thought he was; that flushed with a general glow the large surface he presented. This surface, from my quiet corner, struck me as a huge tract, a sort of particoloured map, a great spotted social chart. He abounded in the names of things, and his mind was like a great staircase at a party — you heard them bawled at the top. He ought to have liked Miss Delavoy because *her* name, so announced, sounded well, and I grudged him, as I grudged the young lady, the higher motive of an intelligence of her charm. It was a charm so fine and so veiled that if she had been a piece of prose or of verse I was sure he would never have discovered it. The oddity was that, as the case stood, he had seen she would 'do'. I too had seen it, but then I was a critic: these remarks will sadly have miscarried if they fail to show the reader how much of one.

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I mentioned my paper and my disappointment, but I think it was only in the light of subsequent events that I could fix an impression of his having, at the moment, looked a trifle embarrassed. He smote his brow and took out his tablets; he deplored the accident of which I complained, and promised to look straight into it. An accident it could only have been, the result of a particular pressure, a congestion of work. Of course he had had my letter and had fully supposed it had been answered and acted on. My spirits revived at this, and I almost thought the incident happy when I heard Miss Delavoy herself put a clear question.

"It won't be for April, then, which was what I had hoped?"

It was what *I* had hoped, goodness knew, but if I had had no anxiety I should not have caught the low, sweet ring of her own. It made Mr Beston's eyes fix her a moment, and, though the thing has as I write it a fatuous air, I remember thinking that he must at this instant have seen in her face almost all his contributor saw. If he did he couldn't wholly have enjoyed it; yet he replied genially enough: "I'll put it into June."

"Oh, June!" our companion murmured in a manner that I took as plaintive — even as exquisite.

Mr Beston had got up. I had not promised myself to sit him out, much less to drive him away; and at this sign of his retirement I had a sense still dim, but much deeper, of being literally lifted by my check. Even before it was set up my article was somehow operative, so that I could look from one of my companions to the other and quite magnanimously smile. "June will do very well."

"Oh, if *you* say so—!" Miss Delavoy sighed and turned away.

"We must have time for the portrait; it will require great care," Mr Beston said.

"Oh, please be sure it has the greatest!" I eagerly returned.

But Miss Delavoy took this up, speaking straight to Mr Beston. "I attach no importance to the portrait. My impatience is all for the article."

"The article's very neat. It's very neat," Mr Beston repeated. "But your drawing's our great prize."

"Your great prize," our young lady replied, "can only be the thing that tells most about my brother."

"Well, that's the case with your picture," Mr Beston protested.

"How can you say that? My picture tells nothing in the world but that he never sat for another."

"Which is precisely the enormous and final fact!" I laughingly exclaimed.

Mr Beston looked at me as if in uncertainty and just the least bit in disapproval; then he found his tone. "It's the big fact for *The Cynosure*. I shall leave you in no doubt of *that*!" he added, to Miss Delavoy, as he went away.

I was surprised at his going, but I inferred that, from the pressure at the office, he had no choice; and I was at least not too much surprised to guess the meaning of his last remark to have been that our hostess must expect a handsome draft. This allusion had so odd a grace on a lover's lips that, even after the door had closed, it seemed still to hang there between Miss Delavoy and her second visitor. Naturally, however, we let it gradually drop; she only said with a kind of conscious quickness: "I'm really very sorry for the delay." I thought her beautiful as she spoke, and I felt that I had taken with her a longer step than the visible facts explained. "Yes, it's a great bore. But to an editor — one doesn't show it."

She seemed amused. "Are they such queer fish?"

I considered. "You know the great type."

"Oh, I don't know Mr Beston as an editor."

"As what, then?"

"Well, as what you call, I suppose, a man of the world. A very kind, clever one."

"Of course *I* see him mainly in the saddle and in the charge — at the head of his hundreds of thousands. But I mustn't undermine him," I added, smiling, "when he's doing so much for me."

She appeared to wonder about it. "Is it really a great deal?"

"To publish a thing like that? Yes — as editors go. They're all tarred with the same brush."

"Ah, but he has immense ideas. He goes in for the best in all departments. That's his own phrase. He has often assured me that he'll never stoop."

"He wants none but 'first−class stuff'. That's the way he has expressed it to *me*; but it comes to the same thing.

It's our great comfort. He's charming."

"He's charming," my friend replied; and I thought for the moment we had done with Mr Beston. A rich reference to him, none the less, struck me as flashing from her very next words — words that she uttered without appearing to have noticed any I had pronounced in the interval. "Does no one, then, really care for my brother?"

I was startled by the length of her flight. "Really care?"

"No one but you? Every month your study doesn't appear is at this time a kind of slight."

"I see what you mean. But of course *we're* serious."

"Whom do you mean by 'we'?"

"Well, you and me."

She seemed to look us all over and not to be struck with our mass. "And no one else? No one else is serious?"

"What I should say is that no one *feels* the whole thing, don't you know? as much."

Miss Delavoy hesitated. "Not even so much as Mr Beston?" And her eyes, as she named him, waited, to my surprise, for my answer.

I couldn't quite see why she returned to him, so that my answer was rather lame. "Don't ask me too many things; else there are some *I* shall have to ask."

She continued to look at me; after which she turned away. "Then I won't — for I don't understand him." She turned away, I say, but the next moment had faced about with a fresh, inconsequent question. "Then why in the world has he cooled off?"

"About my paper? *Has* he cooled? Has he shown you that otherwise?" I asked.

"Than by his delay? Yes, by silence — and by worse."

"What do you call worse?"

"Well, to say of it — and twice over — what he said just now."

"That it's very 'neat'? You don't think it *is*?" I laughed.

"I don't say it;" and with that she smiled. "My brother might hear!"

Her tone was such that, while it lingered in the air, it deepened, prolonging the interval, whatever point there was in this; unspoken things therefore had passed between us by the time I at last brought out: "He hasn't read me! It doesn't matter," I quickly went on; "his relation to what I may do or not do is, for his own purposes, quite complete enough without that."

She seemed struck with this. "Yes, his relation to almost anything is extraordinary."

"His relation to everything!" It rose visibly before us and, as we felt, filled the room with its innumerable, indistinguishable objects. "Oh, it's the making of him!"

She evidently recognised all this, but after a minute she again broke out: "You say he hasn't read you and that it doesn't matter. But has he read my brother? Doesn't *that* matter?"

I waved away the thought. "For what do you take him, and why in the world should it? He knows perfectly what he wants to do, and his postponement is quite in your interest. The reproduction of the drawing—"

She took me up. "I hate the drawing!"

"So do I," I laughed, "and I rejoice in there being something on which we can feel so together!"

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What may further have passed between us on this occasion loses, as I try to recall it, all colour in the light of a communication that I had from her four days later. It consisted of a note in which she announced to me that she had heard from Mr Beston in terms that troubled her: a letter from Paris — he had dashed over on business — abruptly proposing that she herself should, as she quoted, give him something; something that her intimate knowledge of the subject — which was of course John Delavoy — her rare opportunities for observation and study would make precious, would make as unique as the work of her pencil. He appealed to her to gratify him in this particular, exhorted her to sit right down to her task, reminded her that to tell a loving sister's tale was her obvious, her highest duty. She confessed to mystification and invited me to explain. Was this sudden perception of her duty a result on Mr Beston's part of any difference with myself? Did he want two papers? Did he want an alternative to mine? Did he want hers as a supplement or as a substitute? She begged instantly to be informed if anything had happened to mine. To meet her request I had first to make sure, and I repaired on the morrow to Mr Beston's office in the eager hope that he was back from Paris. This hope was crowned; he had crossed in the night and was in his room; so that on sending up my card I was introduced to his presence, where I promptly broke ground by letting him know that I had had even yet no proof.

"Oh, yes! about Delavoy. Well, I've rather expected you, but you must excuse me if I'm brief. My absence has put me back; I've returned to arrears. Then from Paris I meant to write to you, but even there I was up to my neck. I think, too, I've instinctively held off a little. You won't like what I have to say — you *can't*!" He spoke almost as if I might wish to prove I could. "The fact is, you see, your thing won't do. No — not even a little."

Even after Miss Delavoy's note it was a blow, and I felt myself turn pale. "Not even a little? Why, I thought you wanted it so!"

Mr Beston just perceptibly braced himself. "My dear man, we didn't want *that*! We couldn't do it. I've every desire to be agreeable to you, but we really couldn't."

I sat staring. "What in the world's the matter with it?"

"Well, it's impossible. That's what's the matter with it."

"Impossible?" There rolled over me the ardent hours and a great wave of the feeling that I had put into it.

He hung back but an instant — he faced the music. "It's indecent."

I could only wildly echo him. "Indecent? Why, it's absolutely, it's almost to the point of a regular chill, expository. What in the world is it but critical?"

Mr Beston's retort was prompt. "Too critical by half! That's just where it is. It says too much."

"But what it says is all about its subject."

"I dare say, but I don't think we want quite so much about its subject."

I seemed to swing in the void and I clutched, fallaciously, at the nearest thing. "What you do want, then — what is *that* to be about?"

"That's for you to find out — it's not my business to tell you."

It was dreadful, this snub to my happy sense that I *had* found out. "I thought you wanted John Delavoy. I've simply stuck to him."

Mr Beston gave a dry laugh. "I should think you had!" Then after an instant he turned oracular. "Perhaps we wanted him — perhaps we didn't. We didn't at any rate want indelicacy."

"Indelicacy?" I almost shrieked. "Why it's pure portraiture."

"'Pure', my dear fellow, just begs the question. It's most objectionable — that's what it is. For portraiture of *such* things, at all events, there's no place in our scheme."

I speculated. "Your scheme for an account of Delavoy?"

Mr Beston looked as if I trifled. "Our scheme for a successful magazine."

"No place, do I understand you, for criticism? No place for the great figures—? If you don't want too much detail," I went on, "I recall perfectly that I was careful not to go into it. What I tried for was a general vivid picture — which I really supposed I arrived at. I boiled the man down — I gave the three or four leading notes. *Them* I did try to give with some intensity."

Mr Beston, while I spoke, had turned about and, with a movement that confessed to impatience and even not a little, I thought, to irritation, fumbled on his table among a mass of papers and other objects; after which he had pulled out a couple of drawers. Finally he fronted me anew with my copy in his hand, and I had meanwhile added a word about the disadvantage at which he placed me. To have made me wait was unkind; but to have made me wait for such news—! I ought at least to have been told it earlier. He replied to this that he had not at first had time to read me, and, on the evidence of my other things, had taken me pleasantly for granted: he had only been enlightened by the revelation of the proof. What he had fished out of his drawer was, in effect, not my manuscript, but the 'galleys' that had never been sent me. The thing was all set up there, and my companion, with eyeglass and thumb, dashed back the sheets and looked up and down for places. The proof−reader, he mentioned, had so waked him up with the blue pencil that he had no difficulty in finding them. They were all in his face when he again looked at me. "Did you candidly think that we were going to print this?"

All my silly young pride in my performance quivered as if under the lash. "Why the devil else should I have taken the trouble to write it? If you're not going to print it, why the devil did you ask me for it?"

"I didn't ask you. You proposed it yourself."

"You jumped at it; you quite agreed you ought to have it: it comes to the same thing. So indeed you ought to have it. It's too ignoble, your not taking up such a man."

He looked at me hard. "I *have* taken him up. I do want something about him, and I've got his portrait there — coming out beautifully."

"Do you mean you've taken him up," I inquired, "by asking for something of his sister? Why, in that case, do you speak as if I had forced on you the question of a paper? If you want one you want one."

Mr Beston continued to sound me. "How do you know what I've asked of his sister?"

"I know what Miss Delavoy tells me. She let me know it as soon as she had heard from you."

"Do you mean that you've just seen her?"

"I've not seen her since the time I met you at her house; but I had a note from her yesterday. She couldn't understand your appeal — in the face of knowing what I've done myself."

Something seemed to tell me at this instant that she had not yet communicated with Mr Beston, but that he wished me not to know she hadn't. It came out still more in the temper with which he presently said: "I want what Miss Delavoy can do, but I don't want this kind of thing!" And he shook my proof at me as if for a preliminary to hurling it.

I took it from him, to show I anticipated his violence, and, profoundly bewildered, I turned over the challenged pages. They grinned up at me with the proof−reader's shocks, but the shocks, as my eye caught them, bloomed on the spot like flowers. I didn't feel abased — so many of my good things came back to me. "What on earth do you seriously mean? This thing isn't bad. It's awfully good — it's beautiful."

With an odd movement he plucked it back again, though not indeed as if from any new conviction. He had had after all a kind of contact with it that had made it a part of his stock. "I dare say it's clever. For the kind of thing it is, it's as beautiful as you like. It's simply not *our* kind." He seemed to break out afresh. "Didn't you know more—?"

I waited. "More what?"

He in turn did the same. "More everything. More about Delavoy. The whole point was that I thought you did."

I fell back in my chair. "You think my article shows ignorance? I sat down to it with the sense that I knew more than any one."

Mr Beston restored it again to my hands. "You've kept that pretty well out of sight then. Didn't you get anything out of *her*? It was simply for that I addressed you to her."

I took from him with this, as well, a silent statement of what it had not been for. "I got everything in the wide world I could. We almost worked together, but what appeared was that all her own knowledge, all her own view, quite fell in with what I had already said. There appeared nothing to subtract or to add."

He looked hard again, not this time at me, but at the document in my hands. "You mean she has gone into all that — seen it just as it stands there?"

"If I've still," I replied, "any surprise left, it's for the surprise your question implies. You put our heads together, and you've surely known all along that they've remained so. She told me a month ago that she had immediately let you know the good she thought of what I had done."

Mr Beston very candidly remembered, and I could make out that if he flushed as he did so it was because what most came back to him was his own simplicity. "I see. That must have been why I trusted you — sent you, without control, straight off to be set up. But now that I see you—!" he went on.

"You're surprised at her indulgence?"

Once more he snatched at the record of my rashness — once more he turned it over. Then he read out two or three paragraphs. "Do you mean she has gone into all that?"

"My dear sir, what do you take her for? There wasn't a line we didn't thresh out, and our talk wouldn't for either of us have been a bit interesting if it hadn't been really frank. Have you to learn at this time of day," I continued, "what her feeling is about her brother's work? She's not a bit stupid. She has a kind of worship for it."

Mr Beston kept his eyes on one of my pages. "She passed her life with him and was extremely fond of him."

"Yes, and she has the point of view and no end of ideas. She's tremendously intelligent."

Our friend at last looked up at me, but I scarce knew what to make of his expression. "Then she'll do me exactly what I want."

"Another article, you mean, to replace mine?"

"Of a totally different sort. Something the public *will* stand." His attention reverted to my proof, and he suddenly reached out for a pencil. He made a great dash against a block of my prose and placed the page before me. "Do you pretend to me they'll stand *that* ?"

'That' proved, as I looked at it, a summary of the subject, deeply interesting and treated, as I thought, with extraordinary art, of the work to which I gave the highest place in my author's array. I took it in, sounding it hard for some hidden vice, but with a frank relish, in effect, of its lucidity; then I answered: "If they won't stand it, what will they stand?"

Mr Beston looked about and put a few objects on his table to rights. "They won't stand anything." He spoke with such pregnant brevity as to make his climax stronger. "And quite right too! *I'm* right, at any rate; I can't plead ignorance. I know where I am, and I want to stay there. That single page would have cost me five thousand subscribers."

"Why, that single page is a statement of the very essence—!"

He turned sharp round at me. "Very essence of what?"

"Of my very topic, damn it."

"Your very topic is John Delavoy."

"And what's *his* very topic? Am I not to attempt to utter it? What under the sun else am I writing about?"

"You're not writing in *The Cynosure* about the relations of the sexes. With those relations, with the question of sex in any degree, I should suppose you would already have seen that we have nothing whatever to do. If you want to know what our public won't stand, there you have it."

I seem to recall that I smiled sweetly as I took it. "I don't know, I think, what you mean by those phrases, which strike me as too empty and too silly, and of a nature therefore to be more deplored than any, I'm positive, that I use in my analysis. I don't use a single one that even remotely resembles them. I simply try to express my author, and if your public won't stand his being expressed, mention to me kindly the source of its interest in him."

Mr Beston was perfectly ready. "He's all the rage with the clever people — that's the source. The interest of the public is whatever a clever article may make it."

"I don't understand you. How can an article be clever, to begin with, and how can it make anything of anything, if it doesn't avail itself of material?"

"There *is* material, which I'd hoped you'd use. Miss Delavoy has lots of material. I don't know what she has told you, but I know what she has told *me*." He hung fire but an instant. "Quite lovely things."

"And have you told *her*—?"

"Told her what?" he asked as I paused.

"The lovely things you've just told me."

Mr Beston got up; folding the rest of my proof together, he made the final surrender with more dignity than I had looked for. "You can do with this what you like." Then as he reached the door with me: "Do you suppose that I talk with Miss Delavoy on such subjects?" I answered that he could leave that to me — I shouldn't mind so doing; and I recall that before I quitted him something again passed between us on the question of her drawing. "What we want," he said, "is just the really nice thing, the pleasant, right thing to go with it. That drawing's going

to take!"

5

A few minutes later I had wired to our young lady that, should I hear nothing from her to the contrary, I would come to her that evening. I had other affairs that kept me out; and on going home I found a word to the effect that though she should not be free after dinner she hoped for my presence at five o'clock: a notification betraying to me that the evening would, by arrangement, be Mr Beston's hour and that she wished to see me first. At five o'clock I was there, and as soon as I entered the room I perceived two things. One of these was that she had been highly impatient; the other was that she had not heard, since my call on him, from Mr Beston, and that her arrangement with him therefore dated from earlier. The tea−service was by the fire — she herself was at the window; and I am at a loss to name the particular revelation that I drew from this fact of her being restless on general grounds. My telegram had fallen in with complications at which I could only guess; it had not found her quiet; she was living in a troubled air. But her wonder leaped from her lips. "He does want two?"

I had brought in my proof with me, putting it in my hat and my hat on a chair. "Oh, no — he wants only one, only yours."

Her wonder deepened. "He won't print—?"

"My poor old stuff! He returns it with thanks."

"Returns it? When he had accepted it!"

"Oh, that doesn't prevent — when he doesn't like it."

"But he does; he did. He liked it to *me*. He called it 'sympathetic'."

"He only meant that *you* are — perhaps even that I myself am. He hadn't read it then. He read it but a day or two ago, and horror seized him."

Miss Delavoy dropped into a chair. "Horror?"

"I don't know how to express to you the fault he finds with it." I had gone to the fire, and I looked to where it peeped out of my hat; my companion did the same, and her face showed the pain she might have felt, in the street, at sight of the victim of an accident. "It appears it's indecent."

She sprang from her chair. "To describe my brother?"

"As *I've* described him. That, at any rate, is how my account sins. What I've said is unprintable." I leaned against the chimney−piece with a serenity of which, I admit, I was conscious; I rubbed it in and felt a private joy in watching my influence.

"Then what *have* you said?"

"You know perfectly. You heard my thing from beginning to end. You said it was beautiful."

She remembered as I looked at her; she showed all the things she called back. "It *was* beautiful." I went over and picked it up; I came back with it to the fire. "It was the best thing ever said about him," she went on. "It was the finest and truest."

"Well, then—!" I exclaimed.

"But what have you done to it since?"

"I haven't touched it since."

"You've put nothing else in?"

"Not a line — not a syllable. Don't you remember how you warned me against spoiling it? It's of the thing we read together, liked together, went over and over together; it's of this dear little serious thing of good sense and good faith" — and I held up my roll of proof, shaking it even as Mr Beston had shaken it — "that he expresses that opinion."

She frowned at me with an intensity that, though bringing me no pain, gave me a sense of her own. "Then that's why he has asked *me* —?"

"To do something instead. But something pure. You, he hopes, won't be indecent."

She sprang up, more mystified than enlightened; she had pieced things together, but they left the question gaping. "Is he mad? What is he talking about?"

"Oh, *I* know — now. Has he specified what he wants of you?"

She thought a moment, all before me. "Yes — to be very 'personal'."

"Precisely. You mustn't speak of the work."

She almost glared. "Not speak of it?"

"That's indecent."

"My brother's work?"

"To speak of it."

She took this from me as she had not taken anything. "Then how can I speak of him at all? — how can I articulate? He *was* his work."

"Certainly he was. But that's not the kind of truth that will stand in Mr Beston's way. Don't you know what he means by wanting you to be personal?"

In the way she looked at me there was still for a moment a dim desire to spare him — even perhaps a little to save him. None the less, after an instant, she let herself go. "Something horrible?"

"Horrible; so long, that is, as it takes the place of something more honest and really so much more clean. He wants — what do they call the stuff? — anecdotes, glimpses, gossip, chat; a picture of his 'home life', domestic habits, diet, dress, arrangements — all his little ways and little secrets, and even, to better it still, all your own, your relations with him, your feelings about him, his feelings about *you*: both his and yours, in short, about anything else you can think of. Don't you see what I mean?" She saw so well that, in the dismay of it, she grasped my arm an instant, half as if to steady herself, half as if to stop me. But she couldn't stop me. "He wants you just to write round and round that portrait."

She was lost in the reflections I had stirred, in apprehensions and indignations that slowly surged and spread; and for a moment she was unconscious of everything else. "What portrait?"

"Why, the beautiful one you did. The beautiful one you gave him."

"Did I give it to him? Oh, yes!" It came back to her, but this time she blushed red, and I saw what had occurred to her. It occurred, in fact, at the same instant to myself. "Ah, *par exemple* ," she cried, "he shan't have it!"

I couldn't help laughing. "My dear young lady, unfortunately he *has* got it!"

"He shall send it back. He shan't use it."

"I'm afraid he *is* using it," I replied. "I'm afraid he *has* used it. They've begun to work on it."

She looked at me almost as if I were Mr Beston. "Then they must stop working on it." Something in her decision somehow thrilled me. "Mr Beston must send it straight back. Indeed I'll wire to him to bring it to−night."

"Is he coming to−night?" I ventured to inquire.

She held her head very high. "Yes, he's coming to−night. It's most happy!" she bravely added, as if to forestall any suggestion that it could be anything else.

I thought a moment; first about that, then about something that presently made me say: "Oh, well, if he brings it back—!"

She continued to look at me. "Do you mean you doubt his doing so?"

I thought again. "You'll probably have a stiff time with him."

She made, for a little, no answer to this but to sound me again with her eyes; our silence, however, was carried off by her then abruptly turning to her tea−tray and pouring me out a cup. "Will you do me a favour?" she asked as I took it.

"Any favour in life."

"Will you be present?"

"Present?" — I failed at first to imagine.

"When Mr Beston comes."

It was so much more than I had expected that I of course looked stupid in my surprise. "This evening — here?"

"This evening — here. Do you think my request very strange?"

I pulled myself together. "How can I tell when I'm so awfully in the dark?"

"In the dark—?" She smiled at me as if I were a person who carried such lights!

"About the nature, I mean, of your friendship."

"With Mr Beston?" she broke in. Then in the wonderful way that women say such things: "It has always been so pleasant."

"Do you think it will be pleasant for *me*?" I laughed.

"Our friendship? I don't care whether it is or not!"

"I mean what you'll have out with him — for of course you *will* have it out. Do you think it will be pleasant for *him*?"

"To find you here — or to see you come in? I don't feel obliged to think. This is a matter in which I now care for no one but my brother — for nothing but his honour. I stand only on that."

I can't say how high, with these words, she struck me as standing, nor how the look that she gave me with them seemed to make me spring up beside her. We were at this elevation together a moment. "I'll do anything in the world you say."

"Then please come about nine."

That struck me as so tantamount to saying 'And please therefore go this minute' that I immediately turned to the door. Before I passed it, however, I gave her time to ring out clear: "I know what I'm about!" She proved it the next moment by following me into the hall with the request that I would leave her my proof. I placed it in her hands, and if she knew what she was about I wondered, outside, what *I* was.

6

I dare say it was the desire to make this out that, in the evening, brought me back a little before my time. Mr Beston had not arrived, and it's worth mentioning — for it was rather odd — that while we waited for him I sat with my hostess in silence. She spoke of my paper, which she had read over — but simply to tell me she had done so; and that was practically all that passed between us for a time at once so full and so quiet that it struck me neither as short nor as long. We felt, in the matter, so indivisible that we might have been united in some observance or some sanctity — to go through something decorously appointed. Without an observation we listened to the door−bell, and, still without one, a minute later, saw the person we expected stand there and show his surprise. It was at me he looked as he spoke to her.

"I'm not to see you alone?"

"Not just yet, please," Miss Delavoy answered. "Of what has suddenly come between us this gentleman is essentially a part, and I really think he'll be less present if we speak before him than if we attempt to deal with the question without him." Mr Beston was amused, but not enough amused to sit down, and we stood there while, for the third time, my proof−sheets were shaken for emphasis. "I've been reading these over," she said as she held them up.

Mr Beston, on what he had said to me of them, could only look grave; but he tried also to look pleasant, and I foresaw that, on the whole, he would really behave well. "They're remarkably clever."

"And yet you wish to publish instead of them something from so different a hand?"

He smiled now very kindly. "If you'll only let me have it! *Won't* you let me have it? I'm sure you know exactly the thing I want."

"Oh, perfectly!"

"I've tried to give her an idea of it," I threw in.

Mr Beston promptly saw his way to make this a reproach to me. "Then, after all, you had one yourself?"

"I think I couldn't have kept so clear of it if I hadn't had!" I laughed.

"I'll write you something," Miss Delavoy went on, "if you'll print this as it stands." My proof was still in her keeping.

Mr Beston raised his eyebrows. "Print two? Whatever do I want with two? What do I want with the wrong one if I can get the beautiful right?"

She met this, to my surprise, with a certain gaiety. "It's a big subject — a subject to be seen from different sides. Don't you want a full, a various treatment? Our papers will have nothing in common."

"I should hope not!" Mr Beston said good−humouredly. "You have command, dear lady, of a point of view too good to spoil. It so happens that your brother has been really less handled than anyone, so that there's a kind of obscurity about him, and in consequence a kind of curiosity, that it seems to me quite a crime not to work. There's just the perfection, don't you know? of a little sort of mystery — a tantalizing *demi−jour*." He continued to smile at her as if he thoroughly hoped to kindle her, and it was interesting at that moment to get this vivid glimpse of his conception.

I could see it quickly enough break out in Miss Delavoy, who sounded for an instant almost assenting. "And you want the obscurity and the mystery, the tantalizing *demi−jour*, cleared up?"

"I want a little lovely, living thing! Don't be perverse," he pursued, "don't stand in your own light and in your brother's and in this young man's — in the long run, and in mine too and in every one's: just let us have him out as no one but you can bring him and as, by the most charming of chances and a particular providence, he has been kept all this time just on purpose for you to bring. Really, you know" — his vexation *would* crop up — "one could howl to see such good stuff wasted!"

"Well," our young lady returned, "that holds good of one thing as well as of another. I can never hope to describe or express my brother as these pages describe and express him; but, as I tell you, approaching him from a different direction, I promise to do my very best. Only, my condition remains."

Mr Beston transferred his eyes from her face to the little bundle in her hand, where they rested with an intensity that made me privately wonder if it represented some vain vision of a snatch defeated in advance by the

stupidity of his having suffered my copy to be multiplied. "My printing that?"

"Your printing this."

Mr Beston wavered there between us: I could make out in him a vexed inability to keep us as distinct as he would have liked. But he was triumphantly light. "It's impossible. Don't be a pair of fools!"

"Very well, then," said Miss Delavoy; "please send me back my drawing."

"Oh dear, no!" Mr Beston laughed. "Your drawing we must have at any rate."

"Ah, but I forbid you to use it! This gentleman is my witness that my prohibition is absolute."

"Was it to be your witness that you sent for the gentleman? You take immense precautions!" Mr Beston exclaimed. Before she could retort, however, he came back to his strong point. "Do you coolly ask of me to sacrifice ten thousand subscribers?"

The number, I noticed, had grown since the morning, but Miss Delavoy faced it boldly. "If you do, you'll be well rid of them. They must be ignoble, your ten thousand subscribers."

He took this perfectly. "You dispose of them easily! Ignoble or not, what I have to do is to keep them and if possible add to their number; not to get rid of them."

"You'd rather get rid of my poor brother instead?"

"I don't get rid of him. I pay him a signal attention. Reducing it to the least, I publish his portrait."

"His portrait — the only one worth speaking of? Why, you turn it out with horror."

"Do you call the only one worth speaking of that misguided effort?" And, obeying a restless impulse, he appeared to reach for my tribute; not, I think, with any conscious plan, but with a vague desire in some way again to point his moral with it.

I liked immensely the motion with which, in reply to this, she put it behind her: her gesture expressed so distinctly her vision of her own lesson. From that moment, somehow, they struck me as forgetting me, and I seemed to see them as they might have been alone together; even to see a little what, for each, had held and what had divided them. I remember how, at this, I almost held my breath, effacing myself to let them go, make them show me whatever they might. "It's the only one," she insisted, "that tells, about its subject, anything that's anyone's business. If you really want John Delavoy, there he is. If you don't want him, don't insult him with an evasion and a pretence. Have at least the courage to say that you're afraid of him!"

I figured Mr Beston here as much incommoded; but all too simply, doubtless, for he clearly held on, smiling through flushed discomfort and on the whole bearing up. "Do you think I'm afraid of *you*?" He might forget me, but he would have to forget me a little more to yield completely to his visible impulse to take her hand. It was visible enough to herself to make her show that she declined to meet it, and even that his effect on her was at last distinctly exasperating. Oh, how I saw at that moment that in the really touching good faith of his personal sympathy he didn't measure his effect! If he had done so he wouldn't have tried to rush it, to carry it off with tenderness. He dropped to that now so rashly that I was in truth sorry for him. "You *could* do so gracefully, so naturally what we want. What we want, don't you see? is perfect taste. I know better than you do yourself how perfect yours would be. I always know better than people do themselves." He jested and pleaded, getting in, benightedly, deeper. Perhaps I didn't literally hear him ask in the same accents if she didn't care for him at all, but I distinctly saw him look as if he were on the point of it, and something, at any rate, in a lower tone, dropped from him that he followed up with the statement that if she did even just a little she would help him.

7

She made him wait a deep minute for her answer to this, and that gave me time to read into it what he accused her of failing to do. I recollect that I was startled at their having come so far, though I was reassured, after a little, by seeing that he had come much the furthest. I had now I scarce know what amused sense of knowing our hostess so much better than he. "I think you strangely inconsequent," she said at last. "If you associate with — what you speak of — the idea of help, does it strike you as helping *me* to treat in that base fashion the memory I most honour and cherish?" As I was quite sure of what he spoke of I could measure the force of this challenge. "Have you never discovered, all this time, that my brother's work is my pride and my joy?"

"Oh, my dear thing!" — and Mr Beston broke into a cry that combined in the drollest way the attempt to lighten his guilt with the attempt to deprecate hers. He let it just flash upon us that, should he be pushed, he would show as — well, scandalised.

The tone in which Miss Delavoy again addressed him offered a reflection of this gleam. "Do you know what my brother would think of you?"

He was quite ready with his answer, and there was no moment in the whole business at which I thought so well of him. "I don't care a hang what your brother would think!"

"Then why do you wish to commemorate him?"

"How can you ask so innocent a question? It isn't for *him*."

"You mean it's for the public?"

"It's for the magazine," he said with a noble simplicity.

"The magazine *is* the public," it made me so far forget myself as to suggest.

"You've discovered it late in the day! Yes," he went on to our companion, "I don't in the least mind saying I don't care. I don't — I don't!" he repeated with a sturdiness in which I somehow recognised that he was, after all, a great editor. He looked at me a moment as if he even guessed what I saw, and, not unkindly, desired to force it home. "I don't care for anybody. It's not my business to care. That's not the way to run a magazine. Except of course as a mere man!" — and he added a smile for Miss Delavoy. He covered the whole ground again. "Your reminiscences would make a talk!"

She came back from the greatest distance she had yet reached. "My reminiscences?"

"To accompany the head." He must have been as tender as if I had been away. "Don't I see how you'd do them?"

She turned off, standing before the fire and looking into it; after which she faced him again. "If you'll publish our friend here, I'll do them."

"Why are you so awfully wound up about our friend here?"

"Read his article over — with a little intelligence — and your question will be answered."

Mr Beston glanced at me and smiled as if with a loyal warning; then, with a good conscience, he let me have it. "Oh, damn his article!"

I was struck with her replying exactly what I should have replied if I had not been so detached. "Damn it as much as you like, but publish it." Mr Beston, on this, turned to me as if to ask me if I had not heard enough to satisfy me: there was a visible offer in his face to give me more if I insisted. This amounted to an appeal to me to leave the room at least for a minute; and it was perhaps from the fear of what might pass between us that Miss Delavoy once more took him up. "If my brother's as vile as you say—!"

"Oh, I don't say *he's* vile!" he broke in.

"You only say *I* am!" I commented.

"You've entered so into him," she replied to me, "that it comes to the same thing. And Mr Beston says further that out of this unmentionableness he wants somehow to make something — some money or some sensation."

"My dear lady," said Mr Beston, "it's a very great literary figure!"

"Precisely. You advertise yourself with it because it's a very great literary figure, and it's a very great literary figure because it wrote very great literary things that you wouldn't for the world allow to be intelligibly or critically named. So you bid for the still more striking tribute of an intimate picture — an unveiling of God knows

what! — without even having the pluck or the logic to say on what ground it is that you go in for naming him at all. Do you know, dear Mr Beston," she asked, "that you make me very sick? I count on receiving the portrait," she concluded, "by to−morrow evening at latest."

I felt, before this speech was over, so sorry for her interlocutor that I was on the point of asking her if she mightn't finish him without my help. But I had lighted a flame that was to consume me too, and I was aware of the scorch of it while I watched Mr Beston plead frankly, if tacitly, that, though there was something in him not to be finished, she must yet give him a moment and let him take his time to look about him at pictures and books. He took it with more coolness than I; then he produced his answer. "You shall receive it to−morrow morning if you'll do what I asked the last time." I could see more than he how the last time had been overlaid by what had since come up; so that, as she opposed a momentary blank, I felt almost a coarseness in his recall of it with an "Oh, you know — you know!"

Yes, after a little she knew, and I need scarcely add that I did. I felt, in the oddest way, by this time, that she was conscious of my penetration and wished to make me, for the loss now so clearly beyond repair, the only compensation in her power. This compensation consisted of her showing me that she was indifferent to my having guessed the full extent of the privilege that, on the occasion to which he alluded, she had permitted Mr Beston to put before her. The balm for my wound was therefore to see what she resisted. She resisted Mr Beston in more ways than one. "And if I don't do it?" she demanded.

"I'll simply keep your picture!"

"To what purpose if you don't use it?"

"To keep it *is* to use it," Mr Beston said.

"He has only to keep it long enough," I added, and with the intention that may be imagined, "to bring you round, by the mere sense of privation, to meet him on the other ground."

Miss Delavoy took no more notice of this speech than if she had not heard it, and Mr Beston showed that he had heard it only enough to show, more markedly, that he followed her example. "I'll do anything, I'll do everything for you in life," he declared to her, "but publish such a thing as that."

She gave in all decorum to this statement the minute of concentration that belonged to it; but her analysis of the matter had for sole effect to make her at last bring out, not with harshness, but with a kind of wondering pity: "I think you're really very dreadful!"

"In what esteem then, Mr Beston," I asked, "do you hold John Delavoy's work?"

He rang out clear. "As the sort of thing that's out of our purview!" If for a second he had hesitated it was partly, I judge, with just resentment at my so directly addressing him, and partly, though he wished to show our friend that he fairly faced the question, because experience had not left him in such a case without two or three alternatives. He had already made plain indeed that he mostly preferred the simplest.

"Wonderful, wonderful purview!" I quite sincerely, or at all events very musingly, exclaimed.

"Then, if you could ever have got one of his novels—?" Miss Delavoy inquired.

He smiled at the way she put it; it made such an image of the attitude of *The Cynosure*. But he was kind and explicit. "There isn't one that wouldn't have been beyond us. We could never have run him. We could never have handled him. We could never, in fact, have touched him. We should have dropped to — oh, Lord!" He saw the ghastly figure he couldn't name — he brushed it away with a shudder.

I turned, on this, to our companion. "I wish awfully you'd do what he asks!" She stared an instant, mystified; then I quickly explained to which of his requests I referred. "I mean I wish you'd do the nice familiar chat about the sweet home−life. You might make it inimitable, and, upon my word, I'd give you for it the assistance of my general lights. The thing is — don't you see? — that it would put Mr Beston in a grand position. Your position would be grand," I hastened to add as I looked at him, "because it would be so admirably false." Then, more seriously, I felt the impulse even to warn him. "I don't think you're quite aware of what you'd make it. Are you really quite conscious?" I went on with a benevolence that struck him, I was presently to learn, as a depth of fatuity.

He was to show once more that he was a rock. "Conscious? Why should I be? Nobody's conscious."

He was splendid; yet before I could control it I had risked the challenge of a "Nobody?"

"Who's anybody? The public isn't!"

"Then why are you afraid of it?" Miss Delavoy demanded.

"Don't ask him that," I answered; "you expose yourself to his telling you that, if the public isn't anybody, that's still more the case with your brother."

Mr Beston appeared to accept as a convenience this somewhat inadequate protection; he at any rate under cover of it again addressed us lucidly. "There's only one false position — the one you seem so to wish to put me in."

I instantly met him. "That of losing—?"

"That of losing—!"

"Oh, fifty thousand — yes. And they wouldn't see anything the matter—?"

"With the position," said Mr Beston, "that you qualify, I neither know nor care why, as false." Suddenly, in a different tone, almost genially, he continued: "For what do you take them?"

For what indeed? — but it didn't signify. "It's enough that I take *you* — for one of the masters." It's literal that as he stood there in his florid beauty and complete command I felt his infinite force, and, with a gush of admiration, wondered how, for our young lady, there could be at such a moment another man. "We represent different sides," I rather lamely said. However, I picked up. "It isn't a question of where we are, but of what. You're not on a side — you *are* a side. You're the right one. What a misery," I pursued, "for us not to be 'on' you!"

His eyes showed me for a second that he yet saw how our not being on him did just have for it that it could facilitate such a speech; then they rested afresh on Miss Delavoy, and that brought him back to firm ground. "I don't think you can imagine how it will come out."

He was astride of the portrait again, and presently again she had focussed him. "If it does come out—!" she began, poor girl; but it was not to take her far.

"Well, if it does—?"

"He means what will you do then?" I observed, as she had nothing to say.

"Mr Beston will see," she at last replied with a perceptible lack of point.

He took this up in a flash. "My dear young lady, it's *you* who'll see; and when you've seen you'll forgive me. Only wait till you do!" He was already at the door, as if he quite believed in what he should gain by the gain, from this moment, of time. He stood there but an instant — he looked from one of us to the other. "It will be a ripping little thing!" he remarked; and with that he left us gaping.

8

The first use I made of our rebound was to say with intensity: "What *will* you do if he does?"

"Does publish the picture?" There was an instant charm to me in the privacy of her full collapse and the sudden high tide of our common defeat. "What *can* I? It's all very well; but there's nothing to be done. I want never to see him again. There's only something," she went on, "that *you* can do."

"Prevent him? — get it back? I'll do, be sure, my utmost; but it will be difficult without a row."

"What do you mean by a row?" she asked.

"I mean it will be difficult without publicity. I don't think we want publicity."

She turned this over. "Because it will advertise him?"

"His magnificent energy. Remember what I just now told him. He's the right side."

"And we're the wrong!" she laughed. "We mustn't make that known — I see. But, all the same, save my sketch!"

I held her hands. "And if I do?"

"Ah, get it back first!" she answered, ever so gently and with a smile, but quite taking them away.

I got it back, alas! neither first nor last; though indeed at the end this was to matter, as I thought and as I found, little enough. Mr Beston rose to his full height and was not to abate an inch even on my offer of another article on a subject notoriously unobjectionable. The only portrait of John Delavoy was going, as he had said, to take, and nothing was to stand in its way. I besieged his office, I waylaid his myrmidons, I haunted his path, I poisoned, I tried to flatter myself, his life; I wrote him at any rate letters by the dozen and showed him up to his friends and his enemies. The only thing I didn't do was to urge Miss Delavoy to write to her solicitors or to the newspapers. The final result, of course, of what I did and what I didn't was to create, on the subject of the sole copy of so rare an original, a curiosity that, by the time *The Cynosure* appeared with the reproduction, made the month's sale, as I was destined to learn, take a tremendous jump. The portrait of John Delavoy, prodigiously 'paragraphed' in advance and with its authorship flushing through, was accompanied by a page or two, from an anonymous hand, of the pleasantest, liveliest comment. The press was genial, the success immense, current criticism had never flowed so full, and it was universally felt that the handsome thing had been done. The process employed by Mr Beston had left, as he had promised, nothing to be desired; and the sketch itself, the next week, arrived in safety, and with only a smutch or two, by the post. I placed my article, naturally, in another magazine, but was disappointed, I confess, as to what it discoverably did in literary circles for its subject. This ache, however, was muffled. There was a worse victim than I, and there was consolation of a sort in our having out together the question of literary circles. The great orb of *The Cynosure*, wasn't that a literary circle? By the time we had fairly to face this question we had achieved the union that — at least for resistance or endurance — is supposed to be strength.

THE END