

# **Mora Montravers**

Henry James

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# Mora Montravers

Henry James

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## 1

They were such extraordinary people to have been so odiously stricken that poor Traffle himself, always, at the best though it was indeed just now at the worst what his wife called horribly philosophic, fairly grimaced back, in private, at so flagrant a show of the famous, the provokedly vicious, 'irony', the thing he had so often read about in clever stories, with which the usually candid countenance of their fate seemed to have begun of a sudden to bristle. Ah, that irony of fate often admired by him as a phrase and recognized as a truth so that if he himself ever wrote a story it should certainly and most strikingly *be* about that he fairly saw it leer at them now, could quite positively fancy it guilty of a low wink at them, in their trouble, out of that vast visage of the world that was made up for them of the separate stony stares or sympathising smirks presented by the circle of their friends. When he could get away from Jane he would pause in his worried walk about the house or the garden, always, since he could now seldom leave her to brood alone for longer than that and, while he shook his keys or his loose coin restlessly and helplessly in the pockets into which his hands had come to be inveterately and foolishly thrust, suffer his own familiar face, or the chance reflection of it in some gloomy glass, to respond distortedly to the grim and monstrous joke. He moved from room to room as he easily could, at present, since their catastrophe; for when he thus sounded the depths of slumbering mirrors it was more than ever as if they were all 'spare' rooms, dreary and unapplied, and as if Jane and he were quartered in them, even year after year, quite as on some dull interminable visit.

The joke was at all events in its having befallen *them*, him and his admirable, anxious, conscientious wife, who, living on their sufficient means in their discreet way, liked, respected, and even perhaps a bit envied, in the Wimbledon world (with so much good old mahogany and so many Bartolozzis, to say nothing of their collection of a dozen family miniatures) to have to pick up again as best they could which was the way Jane put it the life that Miss Montravers, their unspeakable niece, though not, absolutely not and never, as every one would have it, their adopted daughter, had smashed into smithereens by leaving their roof, from one day to the other, to place herself immediately under the protection, or at least under the inspiration, of a little painter—man commonly called Puddick, who had no pretensions to being a gentleman and had given her lessons. If she had acted, unquestionably, according to her remarkable nature, this added no grace to the turn of the wheel of their fortune which was, so deplorably, that any fledgling of their general nest (and Mora was but gone twenty—one and really clever with her brush) should *have* such a nature. It wasn't that, since her coming to them at fifteen, they had been ever, between themselves, at their ease about her glossed over as everything had somehow come to be by the treacherous fact of her beauty. She had been such a credit to them that way that if it hadn't put them, as earnest

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observers, quite off their guard, the dazzle and charm of it appeared mostly to have misled their acquaintance. That was the worst cruelty for them, that with such a personal power to please she shouldn't, even on some light irregular line, have flown, as might have been conceived, higher. These things were dreadful, were even grotesque, to say; but what wasn't so now after his difficult, his critical, his distinctly conclusive and, above all, as he secretly appraised it, his unexpectedly and absurdly interesting interview with Mr Puddick? This passage, deplorably belated by Mora's own extraordinary artful action, had but just taken place, and it had sent him back to Jane saddled with the queerest and most difficult errand of his life.

He hadn't, however, on his return, at once sought her in the drawing-room though her plan of campaign had been that they should fly their flag as high as ever, and, changing none of their refined habits, sit in that bow-windowed place of propriety, even as in a great glazed public cage, as much as ever he had sneaked away again to tip-toe, with his pensive private humour, over the whole field; observing in her society, for the most part, the forms of black despair and grim participation, if even at the same time avoiding inconsiderate grossness; but at bottom, since his moments with Puddick, almost ready to take, as a man of the world, the impartial, the detached, in fact hang it! even the amused view. It hadn't as yet made a shade of difference in his tone that Mora was Jane's niece, and not even her very own, but only the child of her half-sister, whose original union with Malcolm Montravers had moreover made a break between them that had waited for healing till after the ill-starred husband's death, and the eve of that of the perfectly disillusioned wife; but in these slightly rueful, though singularly remedial, dips into thoughtful solitude he had begun at last to treat himself to luxuries that he could feel he was paying for. Mora was, accurately speaking, no sharer of his blood, and he absolutely denied her the right not alone socially to dishonour, but, beyond a mere ruffle of the surface, morally to discompose him; mixed with which rather awkwardly, not to say perhaps a bit perversely, was the sense that as the girl was showing up, unmistakably, for one of the most curious of 'cases' the term Puddick himself had used about her she wouldn't be unlikely to reward some independent, some intelligent notice.

He had never from the first, to do himself or to do *her* justice, felt he had really known her, small, cool, supposedly childish, yet not a bit confiding, verily not a bit appealing, presence as she was; but clearly he should know her now, and to do so might prove indeed a job. Not that he wanted to be *too* cold-blooded about her that is in the way of enlightened appreciation, the detachment of the simply scandalised state being another matter; for this was somehow to leave poor Jane, and poor Jane's gloom of misery, in the lurch. But once safely back from the studio, Puddick's own where he hadn't been sure, upon his honour, that some coarse danger mightn't crop up he indulged in a surreptitious vow that if any 'fun', whether just freely or else more or less acutely speaking, was to come of the matter, he'd be blamed if he'd be wholly deprived of it. The possibility of an incalculable sort of interest in fact, quite a refined sort, could there be refinement in such doings had somehow come out with Puddick's at once saying: "Certainly, sir, I'll marry her if you and Mrs Traffle absolutely insist and if Mora herself (the great point!) can be brought round to look at it in that way. But I warn you that if I do, and that if she makes that concession, I shall probably lose my hold of her which won't be best, you know, for anyone concerned. You don't suppose I don't *want* to make it all right, do you?" the surprising young man had gone on. "The question's only of what *is* right or what will be if we keep our heads and take time with such an extraordinary person as Mora, don't you see? to deal with. You must grant me," Mr Puddick had wound up, "that she's a rum case."

## 2

What he had first felt, of course, was the rare coolness of it, the almost impudent absence of any tone of responsibility; which had begun by seeming to make the little painter-man's own case as 'rum', surely, as one could imagine it. He had gone, poor troubled Traffle, after the talk, straight to his own studio, or to the rather chill and vague, if scrupulously neat, pavilion at the garden-end, which he had put up eight years ago in the modest

hope that it would increasingly inspire him; since it wasn't making preparations and invoking facilities that constituted swagger, but, much rather, behaving as if one's powers could boldly dispense with them. He was certain Jane, would come to him there on hearing of him from the parlour-maid, to whom he had said a word in the hall. He wasn't afraid no of having to speak a little as he felt; but, though well aware of his wife's impatience, he wasn't keen, either, for any added intensity of effort to abound only in Mrs Traffle's sense. He required space and margin, he required a few minutes' time, to say to himself frankly that this dear dismal lady *had* no sense none at least of their present wretched question that was at all worth developing; since he of course couldn't possibly remark it to poor Jane. He had perhaps never remarked for his own private benefit so many strange things as between the moment of his letting himself again into the perpetually swept and garnished temple of his own perfunctory aesthetic rites, where everything was ready to his hand and only that weak tool hung up, and his glimpse of Jane, from the smaller window, as she came down the garden walk. Puddick's studio had been distinctly dirty, and Puddick himself, from head to foot, despite his fine pale little face and bright, direct, much more searching than shifting look, almost as spotty as the large morsel of rag with which he had so oddly begun to rub his fingers while standing there to receive Mora's nearest male relative; but the canvas on his easel, the thing that even in the thick of his other adventure was making so straight a push for the Academy, almost embarrassed that relative's eyes, not to say that relative's conscience, by the cleanness of its appeal. Traffle hadn't come to admire his picture or to mark how he didn't muddle where not muddling was vital; he had come to denounce his conduct, and yet now, perhaps most of all, felt the strain of having pretended so to ignore what would intensely have interested him. Thanks to this barren artifice, to the after-effect of it on his nerves, his own preposterous place, all polish and poverty, pointed such a moral as he had never before dreamed of. Spotless it might be, unlike any surface or aspect presented under the high hard Puddick north-light, since it showed no recording trace, no homely smear since it had had no hour of history. That was the way truth showed and history came out in spots: by them, and by nothing else, you knew the real, as you knew the leopard, so that the living creature and the living life equally had to have them. Stuffed animals and weeping woman were well, another question. He had gathered, on the scene of his late effort that Mora didn't weep, that she was still perfectly pleased with her shocking course; her complacency indeed remained at such a pitch as to make any question of her actual approach, on whatever basis, or any rash direct challenge of her, as yet unadvisable. He was at all events, after another moment, in presence of Jane's damp severity; *she* never ceased crying, but her tears froze as they fell though not, unfortunately, to firm ice, any surface that would bear the weight of large argument. The only thing for him, none the less, was to carry the position with a rush, and he came at once to the worst.

"He'll do it he's willing; but he makes a most striking point I mean given the girl as we know her and as he of course by this time must. He keeps his advantage, he thinks, by not forcing the note don't you see?" Traffle himself under the quick glow of his rush actually saw more and more. "He's feeling his way he used that expression to me; and again I haven't to tell you, any more than he really had to tell me, that with Mora one has to sit tight. He puts on us, in short, the responsibility."

He had felt how more than ever her 'done' yellow hair done only in the sense of an elaborately unbecoming conformity to the spasmodic prescriptions, undulations and inflations of the day, not in that of any departure from its pale straw-coloured truth was helped by her white invalidical shawl to intensify those reminders of their thin ideals, their bloodless immunity, their generally compromised and missed and forfeited frankness, that every other feature of their domestic scene had just been projecting for him. "Responsibility we responsible?" She gaped with the wonder of it.

"I mean that we should be if anything were to happen by our trying to impose on her *our* view of her one redemption. I give it you for his own suggestion and thereby worth thinking of."

But Jane could take nothing in. "He suggests that he needn't marry her, and you agree with him? Pray, what is there left to 'happen'," she went on before he could answer, "after her having happened so completely to disgrace herself?"

He turned his back a moment—he had shortly before noticed a framed decoration, a 'refined' Japanese thing that gave accent, as he would have said, to the neatness of his mouse-grey wall, and that needed straightening. Those spare apprehensions had somehow, it was true, suddenly been elbowed out of his path by richer ones; but he obeyed his old habit. "She can leave him, my dear; that's what she can do—and not, you may well believe, to come back to us."

"If she *will* come I'll take her—even now," said Jane Traffle; "and who can ask of me more than that?"

He slid about a little, sportively, on his polished floor, as if he would have liked to skate, while he vaguely, inaudibly hummed. "Our difficulty is that she doesn't ask the first blessed thing of us. We've been, you see, too stupid about her. Puddick doesn't say it, but he knows it—that I felt. She feels what she is—and so does he."

"What she is? She's an awful little person"—and Mrs Traffle stated it with a cold finality she had never yet used.

"Well then, that's what she feels!—even though it's probably not the name she employs in connection with it. She has tremendously the sense of life."

"That's bad," cried Jane, "when you haven't—not even feebly—the sense of decency."

"How do you know, my dear," he returned, "when you've never had it?" And then as she but stared, since he couldn't mean she hadn't the sense of decency, he went on, really quite amazed at himself: "People must have both if possible, but if they can only have one I'm not sure that that one, as we've had it—not at all 'feebly', as you say!—is the better of the two. What do we know about the sense of life—when it breaks out with real freedom? It has never broken out here, my dear, for long enough to leave its breath on the window-pane. But they've got it strong down there in Puddick's studio."

She looked at him as if she didn't even understand his language, and she flopped thereby into the trap set for her by a single word. "Is she living *in* the studio?"

He didn't avoid her eyes. "I don't know where she's living."

"And do I understand that you didn't ask him?"

"It was none of my business—I felt that there in an unexpected way; I couldn't somehow *not* feel it—and I suggest, my dear, accordingly, that it's also none of yours. I wouldn't answer, if you really want to know," he wound up, hanging fire an instant, but candidly bringing it out—"I wouldn't answer, if you really want to know, for their relations."

Jane's eyebrows mounted and mounted. "Whoever in the world would?"

He waited a minute, looking off at his balanced picture—though not as if now really seeing it. "I'm not talking of what the vulgar would say—or *are* saying, of course, to their fill. I'm not talking of what those relations may be. I'm talking—well," he said, "of what they mayn't."

"You mean they may be innocent?"

"I think it possible. They're, as he calls it, a 'rum' pair. They're not like us."

"If we're not like them," she broke in, "I grant you I hope not."

"We've no imagination, you see," he quietly explained "whereas they have it on tap, for the sort of life they lead down there, all the while." He seemed wistfully to figure it out. "For us only one kind of irregularity is possible for them, no doubt, twenty kinds."

Poor Jane listened this time and so intently that after he had spoken she still rendered his obscure sense the tribute of a wait. "You think it's possible she's not living with him?"

"I think anything possible."

"Then what in the world did she want?"

"She wanted in the first place to get away from *us*. We didn't like her "

"Ah, we never let her see it!" Jane could triumphantly make *that* point.

It but had for him, however, an effect of unconscious comedy. "No, that was it and she wanted to get away from everything we did to prevent her; from our solemn precautions *against* her seeing it. We didn't understand her, or we should have understood how much she must have wanted to. We were afraid of her in short, and she wanted not to see our contortions over it. Puddick isn't beautiful though he has a fine little head and a face with some awfully good marks; but he's a Greek god, for statuesque calm, compared with us. He isn't afraid of her."

Jane drew herself elegantly up. "I understood you just now that it's exactly what he *is*!"

Traffle reflected. "That's only for his having to deal with her in our way. Not if he handles her in his own."

"And what, pray, is his own?"

Traffle, his hands in his pockets, resumed his walk, touching with the points of his shoes certain separations between the highly-polished planks of his floor. "Well, why should we have to know?"

"Do you mean we're to wash our hands of her?"

He only circulated at first but quite sounding a low whistle of exhilaration. He felt happier than for a long time; broken as at a blow was the formation of ice that had somehow covered all his days, the whole ground of life, what he would have called the things under. There they were, the things under. He could see them now; which was practically what he after a little replied. "It will be so interesting." He pulled up, none the less, as he turned, before her poor scared and mottled face, her still suffused eyes, her 'dressed' head parading above these miseries.

She vaguely panted, as from a dance through bush and briar. "But *what*, Sidney, will be?"

"To see what becomes of her. Without our muddling." Which was a term, however, that she so protested against his use of that he had on the spot, with more kindness than logic, to attenuate, admitting her, right to ask him who could do less less than take the stand she proposed; though indeed coming back to the matter that evening after dinner (they never really got away from it; but they had the consciousness now of false starts in other directions, followed by the captive returns that were almost as ominous of what might still be before them as the famous tragic *rentrée* of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette from Varennes); when he brought up, for their common relief, the essential fact of the young woman's history as they had suffered it to shape itself: her coming to them bereft and homeless, addressed, packed and registered after the fashion of a postal packet; their natural flutter of dismay and apprehension, but their patient acceptance of the charge; the five flurried governesses she had had in three years, who had so bored her and whom she had so deeply disconcerted; the remarkable disposition for drawing and daubing that she had shown from the first and that had led them to consent to her haunting of a class, in town,

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that had made her acquainted with the as yet wholly undistinguished young artist, Walter Puddick, who, with a couple of other keen and juvenile adventurers of the brush, 'criticised', all at their ease, according to the queer new licence of the day, and with nobody to criticise *them*, eighty supposed daughters of gentlemen; the uncontrolled spread of her social connection in London, on the oddest lines, as a proof of this prosecution of her studies; her consequent prolonged absences, her strange explanations and deeper duplicities, and presently her bolder defiances; with her staying altogether, at last, one fine day, under pretext of a visit at Highgate, and writing them at the end of the week, during which they had been without news of her, that her visit was to Mr Puddick and his 'set', and was likely to be of long duration, as he was 'looking after her', and there were plenty of people in the set to help, and as she, above all, wanted nothing more: nothing more, of course, than her two hundred and seventy a year, the scant remainder of her mother's fortune that she had come into the use of, under that battered lady's will, on her eighteenth birthday, and through which her admirers, every member of the, set, no doubt, wouldn't have found her least admirable. Puddick wouldn't be paying for her, by the blessing of heaven *that*, Traffle recognized, would have been ground for anything; the case rather must be the other way round. She was 'treating' the set, probably, root and branch magnificently; so no wonder she was having success and liking it. Didn't Jane recognize, therefore, how in the light of this fact almost any droll *different* situation different from the common and less edifying turn of such affairs might here prevail? He could imagine even a fantastic delicacy; not on the part of the set at large perhaps, but on that of a member or two.

What Jane most promptly recognized, she showed him in answer to this, was that, with the tone he had so extraordinarily begun to take on the subject, his choice of terms left her staring. Their ordeal would have to be different indeed from anything she had yet felt it for it to affect her as droll, and Mora's behaviour to repudiate at every point and in some scarce conceivable way its present appearance for it to strike her either as delicate or as a possible cause of delicacy. In fact she could have but her own word Mora was a monster.

"Well," he laughed quite brazen about it now "if she is it's because she has paid for it! Why the deuce did her stars, unless to make her worship gods entirely other than Jane Traffle's, rig her out with a name that puts such a premium on adventures? 'Mora Montravers' it paints the whole career for you, She *is*, one does feel, her name; but how couldn't she be? She'd dishonour it and its grand air if she weren't."

"Then by that reasoning you admit," Mrs Traffle returned with more of an argumentative pounce than she had perhaps ever achieved in her life, "that she *is* misconducting herself."

It pulled him up but ten seconds. "It isn't, love, that she's misconducting herself it's that she's conducting, positively, and by her own lights doubtless quite responsibly, Miss Montravers through the pre-appointed circle of that young lady's experience." Jane turned on this a desolate back; but he only went on. "It would have been better for us perhaps if she could have been a Traffle but, failing that, I think I should, on the ground that sinning at all one should sin boldly, have elected for Montravers outright. That *does* the thing it gives the unmistakable note. And if 'Montravers' made it probable 'Mora' don't you see, dearest? made it sure. Would you *wish* her to change to Puddick?" This brought her round again, but as the affirmative hadn't quite leaped to her lips he found time to continue. "Unless indeed they can make some arrangement by which he takes *her* name. Perhaps we can work it that way!"

His suggestion was thrown out as for its positive charm; but Jane stood now, to do her justice, as a rock. "She's doing something that, surely, no girl in the world ever did before in preferring, as I so strangely understand you, that her lover *shouldn't* make her the obvious reparation. But is her reason her dislike of his vulgar name?"

"That has no weight for *you*, Jane?" Traffle asked in reply.

Jane dismally shook her head. "Who, indeed, as you say, are *we*? Her reason if it is her reason is vulgarer still."



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He didn't believe it could be Mora's reason, and though he had made, under the impression of the morning, a brave fight, he had after reflection to allow still for much obscurity in their question. But he had none the less retained his belief in the visibly uncommon young man, and took occasion to make of his wife an inquiry that hadn't hitherto come up in so straight a form and that sounded of a sudden rather odd. "Are you at all *attached* to her? Can you give me your word for *that*?"

She faced him again like a waning wintry moon. "Attached to Mora? Why, she's my sister's child."

"Ah, that, my dear, is no answer! Can you assure me on your honour that you're conscious of anything you can call real affection for her?"

Jane blankly brooded. "What has that to do with it?"

"I think it has everything. If we don't feel a tenderness."

"*You* certainly strike me as feeling one!" Mrs Traffle sarcastically cried.

He weighed it, but to the effect of his protesting. "No, not enough for me to demand of her to marry to spare my sensibility."

His wife continued to gloom. "What is there in what she has done to *make* us tender?"

"Let us admit then, if there's nothing, that it has made us tough! Only then we must *be* tough. If we're having the strain and the pain of it let us also have the relief and the fun."

"Oh, the 'fun'!" Jane wailed; but adding soon after: "If she'll marry him I'll forgive her."

"Ah, that's not enough!" he pronounced as they went to bed.

## 3

Yet he was to feel too the length that even forgiving her would have to go for Jane at least when, a couple of days later, they both, from the drawing-room window, saw, to their liveliest astonishment, the girl alight at the gate. She had taken a fly from the station, and their attention caught her as she paused apparently to treat with the cabman of the question of his waiting for her or coming back. It seemed settled in a moment that he should wait; he didn't remount his box, and she came in and up the garden-path. Jane had already flushed, and with violence, at the apparition, and in reply to her companion's instant question had said: "Yes, I'll see her if she has come back."

"Well, she has come back."

"She's keeping her cab she hasn't come to stay." Mrs Traffle had gained a far door of retreat.

"You won't speak to her?"

"Only if she has come to stay. Then volumes!"

He had remained near the window, held fast there by the weight of indefinite obligation that his wife's flight from

the field shifted to his shoulders. "But if she comes back to stay what can Puddick do?"

This kept her an instant. "To stay till he marries her is what I mean."

"Then if she asks for you as she only must am I to tell her that?"

Flushed and exalted, her hand on the door, Jane had for this question a really grand moment. "Tell her that if he will she shall come in with your assent for my four hundred."

"Oh, oh!" he ambiguously sounded while she whisked away, and the door from the hall was at the same time thrown open by the parlour-maid. "Miss Montravers!" announced, with a shake of anguish, that domestic, whose heightened colour and scared eyes conformed to her mistress's example. Traffle felt his own cheek, for that matter, unnaturally glow, and the very first of his observations as Mora was restored to his sight might have been that she alone of them all wore her complexion with no difference. There was little doubt moreover that this charming balance of white and pink couldn't have altered but to its loss; and indeed when they were left alone the whole immediate effect for him of the girl's standing there in immediate bright silence was that of her having come simply to reaffirm her extraordinary prettiness. It might have been just to say: "You've thought, and you think, all sorts of horrible things about me, but observe how little my appearance matches them, and in fact keep up coarse views if you can in the light of my loveliness." Yet it wasn't as if she had changed, either, even to the extent of that sharper emphasis: he afterward reflected, as he lived over this passage, that he must have taken for granted in her, with the life she was leading, so to call it, some visibility of boldness, some significant surface of which absurd supposition her presence, at the end of three minutes, had disabused him to the point of making all the awkwardness his and leaving none at all for her. That was a side of things, the awkward, that she clearly meant never again to recognize in conversation though certainly from the first, ever, she had brushed it by lightly enough. She was in truth exactly the same except for her hint that they might have forgotten how pretty she *could* be; and he further made sure she would incur neither pains nor costs for any new attempt on them. The Mora they had always taken her for would serve her perfectly still; that young woman was bad enough, in all conscience, to hang together through anything that might yet happen.

So much he was to feel she had conveyed, and that it was the little person presenting herself, at her convenience, on these terms who had been all the while, in their past, their portentous inmate since what had the portent been, by the same token, but exactly of this? By the end of three minutes more our friend's sole thought was to conceal from her that he had looked for some vulgar sign such as, reported to Wimbledon tea-tables, could be confidentially mumbled about: he was almost as ashamed of that elderly innocence as if she had caught him in the fact of disappointment at it. Meanwhile she had expressed her errand very simply and serenely. "I've come to see you because I don't want to lose sight of you my being no longer with you is no reason for that." She was going to ignore, he saw and she would put it through: she was going to ignore everything that suited her, and the quantity might become prodigious. Thus it would rest upon *them*, poor things, to disallow, if they must, the grace of these negatives in which process she would watch them flounder without help. It opened out before him a vertiginous view of a gulf; the abyss of what the ignoring would include for the convenient general commerce; of what might lie behind, in fine, should the policy foreshadow the lurking quantity. He knew the vague void for one he should never bridge, and that to put on emphasis where Mora chose to neglect it would he work only for those who 'gathered samphire' like the unfortunates in *King Lear*, or those who, by profession, planted lightning-rods at the tips of tremendous towers. He was committed to pusillanimity, which would yet have to figure for him, before he had done with it, he knew, as a gallant independence, by letting ten minutes go without mention of Jane. Mora had put him somehow into the position of having to explain that her aunt wouldn't see her precisely that was the mark of the girl's attitude; but he'd be hanged if he'd do anything of the sort.

It was therefore like giving poor Jane basely away, his not, to any tune, speaking for her and all the more that their visitor sat just long enough to let his helplessness grow and reach perfection. By this facility it was he who showed and for her amusement and profit all the change she kept him from imputing to herself. He presented

her she held him up to himself as presenting her with a new uncle, made over, to some loss of dignity, on purpose for her; and nothing could less have suited their theory of his right relation than to have a private understanding with her at his wife's expense. However, gracefully grave and imperturbable, inimitably armed by her charming correctness; as she sat there, it would be her line in life, he was certain, to reduce many theories, solemn Wimbledon theories about the scandalous person, to the futility of so much broken looking-glass. Not naming her aunt since *he* didn't she had of course to start, for the air of a morning call, some other hare or two; she asked for news of their few local friends quite as if these good people mightn't ruefully have 'cut' her, by what they had heard, should they have met her out on the road. She spoke of Mr Puddick with perfect complacency, and in particular held poor Traffle very much as some master's fiddle-bow might have made him hang on the semi-tone of a silver string when she referred to the visit he had paid the artist and to the latter's having wondered whether he liked what he saw. *She* liked, more and more, Mora intimated, what was offered to her own view; Puddick was going to do, she was sure, such brilliant work so that she hoped immensely he would come again. Traffle found himself, yes it was positive staying his breath for this; there was, in fact, a moment, that of her first throwing off her free 'Puddick', when it wouldn't have taken much more to make him almost wish that, for rounded perfection, she'd say 'Walter' at once. He would scarce have guaranteed even that there hadn't been just then some seconds of his betraying that imagination in the demoralised eyes that her straight, clear, quiet beams sounded and sounded, against every presumption of what might have been. What essentially happened, at any rate, was that by the time she went she had not only settled him in the sinister attitude of having lost all interest in her aunt, but had made him give her for the profane reason of it that he was gaining so much in herself.

He rushed in again, for that matter, to a frank clearance the moment he had seen the girl off the premises, attended her, that is, back to her fly. He hadn't at this climax remarked to her that she must come again which might have meant either of two or three incoherencies and have signified thereby comparatively little; he had only fixed on her a rolling eye for it rolled, he strangely felt, without leaving her; which had the air of signifying heaven knew what. She took it, clearly, during the moment she sat there before her start, for the most rather than for the least it might mean; which again made him gape with the certitude that ever thereafter she would make him seem to have meant what she liked. She had arrived in a few minutes at as wondrous a recipe or as quick an aspiration for this as if she had been a confectioner using some unprecedented turn of the ladle for some supersubtle cream. He was a proved conspirator from that instant on, which was practically what he had qualified Jane, within ten minutes if Jane had only been refreshingly sharper to pronounce him. For what else in the world did it come to, his failure of ability to attribute any other fine sense to Mora's odd 'step' than the weird design of just giving them a lead? They were to leave her alone, by her sharp prescription, and she would show them once for all how to do it. Cutting her dead wasn't leaving her alone any idiot could do that; conversing with her affably was the privilege she offered, and the one he had so effectually embraced he made a clean breast of this that he had breathed to her no syllable of the message left with him by her aunt.

"Then you mean," this lady now inquired, "that I'm to go and call upon her, at that impossible place, just as if she were the pink of propriety and we had no exception whatever to take to her conduct? Then you mean," Mrs Traffle had pursued with a gleam in her eye of more dangerous portent than any he had ever known himself to kindle there "then you mean that I'm to grovel before a chit of a creature on whom I've lavished every benefit, and to whom I've actually offered every indulgence, and who shows herself, in return for it all, by what I make out from your rigmarole, a fiend of insolence as well as of vice?"

The danger described by Sidney Traffle was not that of any further act of violence from Jane than this freedom of address to him, unprecedented in their long intercourse this sustained and, as he had in a degree to allow, not unfounded note of sarcasm; such a resort to which, on his wife's part, would, at the best, mark the prospect for him, in a form flushed with novelty, of much conscious self-discipline. What looked out of her dear foolish face, very much with the effect of a new and strange head boldly shown at an old and familiar pacific window, was just the assurance that he might hope for no abashed sense in her of differing from him on all this ground as she had never differed on any. It was as if now, unmistakably, she *liked* to differ, the ground being her own and he scarce

more than an unwarranted poacher there. Of course it *was* her own, by the fact, first, of Mora's being her, not his, sister's child; and, second, by all the force with which her announced munificence made it so. He took a moment to think how he could best meet her challenge, and then reflected that there was, happily, nothing like the truth *his* truth, of which it was the insidious nature to prevail. "What she wanted, I make out, was but to give us the best pleasure she could think of. The pleasure, I mean, of our not only recognizing how little we need worry about her, but of our seeing as well how pleasant it may become for us to keep in touch with her."

These words, he was well aware, left his wife given her painful narrowness a bristling quiver of retorts to draw from; yet it was not without a silent surprise that he saw her, with her irritated eyes on him, extract the bolt of finest point. He had rarely known her to achieve that discrimination before. "The pleasure then, in her view, you 'make out' since you make out such wonders! is to be all for us only?"

He found it fortunately given him still to smile. "That will depend, dear, on our appreciating it enough to make things agreeable to *her* in order to get it. But as she didn't inquire for you," he hastened to add, "I don't no, I don't advise your going to see her *even* for the interest I speak of!" He bethought himself. "We must wait a little."

"Wait till she gets worse?"

He felt after a little that he should be able now always to command a kindly indulgent tone. "I'll go and see her if you like."

"Why in the world should I like it? Is it your idea for the pleasure you so highly appreciate, and heaven knows what you mean by it! to cultivate with her a free relation of your own?"

"No" he promptly turned "I suggest it only as acting *for* you. Unless," he went on, "you decidedly wish to act altogether for yourself."

For some moments she made no answer; though when she at last spoke it was as if it *were* an answer. "I shall send for Mr Puddick."

"And whom will you send?"

"I suppose I'm capable of a note," Jane replied.

"Yes, or you might even telegraph. But are you sure he'll come?"

"Am I sure, you mean," she asked, "that his companion will let him? I can but try, at all events, and shall at any rate have done what I can."

"I think he's afraid of her "

Traffle had so begun, but she had already taken him up. "And you're not, you mean and that's why you're so eager?"

"Ah, my dear, my dear?" He met it with his strained grimace. "Let us by all means," he also, however, said, "have him if we can."

On which it was, for a little, that they strangely faced each other. She let his accommodation lie while she kept her eyes on him, and in a moment she had come up, as it were, elsewhere. "If I thought you'd see her !"

"That I'd see her?" for she had paused again.

"See her and go on with her well, without my knowledge," quavered poor Jane, "I assure you you'd seem to me even worse than her. So will you promise me?" she ardently added.

"Promise you what, dear?" He spoke quite mildly.

"Not to see her in secret which I believe would kill me."

"Oh, oh, oh, love!" Traffle smiled while she positively glared.

## 4

Three days having elapsed, however, he had to feel that things had considerably moved on his being privileged to hear his wife, in the drawing-room, where they entertained Mr Puddick at tea, put the great question straighter to that visitor than he himself, Sidney Traffle, could either have planned or presumed to do. Flushed to a fever after they had beat about the bush a little, Jane didn't flinch from her duty. "What I want to know in plain terms, if you please, is whether or no you're Mora's lover?" 'Plain terms' she did have inspirations! so that under the shock he turned away, humming, as ever, in his impatience, and, the others being seated over the vain pretence of the afternoon repast, left the young man to say what he might. It was a fool's question, and there was always a gape for the wisest (the greater the wisdom and the greater the folly) in any apprehension of such. As if he were going to say, remarkable Puddick, not less remarkable in his way than Mora to say, that is, anything that would suit Jane; and as if it didn't give her away for a goose that she should assume he was! Traffle had never more tiptoed off to the far end of the room, whether for pretence of a sudden interest in his precious little old Copley Fielding or on any other extemporized ground, than while their guest momentarily hung fire; but though he winced it was as if he now liked to wince the occasions she gave him for doing so were such a sign of his abdication. He had wholly stepped aside, and she could flounder as she would: he had found exactly the formula that saved his dignity, that expressed his sincerity, and that yet didn't touch his curiosity. "I see it would be indelicate for me to go further yes, love, I do see *that*"; such was the concession he had resorted to for a snap of the particular tension of which we a moment ago took the measure. This had entailed Jane's gravely pronouncing him, for the first time in her life, ridiculous; as if, in common sense! She used that term also with much freedom now; at the same time that it hadn't prevented her almost immediately asking him if *he* would mind writing her letter. Nothing could suit him more, from the moment she was ostensibly to run the show as for her benefit he promptly phrased the matter than that she should involve herself in as many inconsistencies as possible; since if he did such things in spite of his scruple this was as nothing to her needing him at every step in spite of her predominance.

His delicacy was absurd for her because Mora's indecency had made this, by her logic, the only air they could now breathe; yet he knew how it nevertheless took his presence to wind her up to her actual challenge of their guest. Face to face with that personage alone she would have failed of the assurance required for such crudity; deeply unprepared as she really was, poor dear, for the crudity to which she might, as a consequence, have opened the gates. She lived altogether thus and nothing, to her husband's ironic view, he flattered himself, could be droller in perpetual yearning, deprecating, in bewildered and muddled communion with the dreadful law of crudity; as if in very truth, to *his* amused sense, the situation hadn't of necessity to be dressed up to the eyes for them in every sort of precaution and paraphrase. Traffle had privately reached the point of seeing it, at its high pitch of mystery and bravery, absolutely defy any common catchword. The one his wife had just employed struck him, while he hunched his shoulders at the ominous pause she had made inevitable for sturdy Puddick, as the vulgarest, and he had time largely to blush before an answer came. He had written, explicitly on Jane's behalf, to

request the favour of an interview, but had been careful not to intimate that it was to put that artless question. To have dragged a busy person, a serious person, out from town on the implication of his being treated for reward to so *bête* an appeal no, one surely couldn't appear to have been concerned in that. Puddick had been under no obligation to come one might honestly have doubted whether he would even reply. However, his power of reply proved not inconsiderable, as consorted with his having presented himself not a bit ruefully or sulkily, but all easily and coolly, and even to a visible degree in a spirit of unprejudiced curiosity. It was as if he had practically forgotten Traffle's own invasion of him at his studio in addition to which who indeed knew what mightn't have happened between the Chelsea pair in a distracting or freshly epoch-making way since then? and was ready to show himself for perfectly good-natured, but for also naturally vague about what they could want of him again. "It depends, ma'am, on the sense I understand you to attach to that word," was in any case the answer to which he at his convenience treated Jane.

"I attach to it the only sense," she returned, "that could force me by *my* understanding of it to anything so painful as this inquiry. I mean are you so much lovers as to make it indispensable you should immediately marry?"

"Indispensable to who, ma'am?" was what Traffle heard their companion now promptly enough produce. To which, as it appeared to take her a little aback, he added: "Indispensable to *you*, do you mean, Mrs Traffle? Of course, you see, I haven't any measure of *that*."

"Should you have any such measure" and with it she had for her husband the effect now of quite 'speaking up' "if I were to give you my assurance that my niece will come into money when the proper means are taken of making her connection with you a little less or perhaps I should say altogether less distressing and irregular?"

The auditor of this exchange rocked noiselessly away from his particular point of dissociation, throwing himself at random upon another, before Mr Puddick appeared again to have made up his mind, or at least to have adjusted his intelligence; but the movement had been on Traffle's part but the instinct to stand off more and more a vague effort of retreat that didn't prevent the young man's next response to pressure from ringing out in time to overtake him. "Is what you want me to understand then that you'll handsomely pay her if she marries me? Is it to tell me that that you asked me to come?" It was queer, Sidney felt as he held his breath, how he kept liking this inferior person the better the better for his carrying himself so little like any sort of sneak for every minute spent in his company. They had brought him there at the very best to patronise him, and now would simply have to reckon with his showing clearly for so much more a person 'of the world' than they. Traffle, it was true, was becoming, under the precious initiation opened to him by Mora, whether directly or indirectly, much more a man of the world than ever yet: as much as that at least he could turn over in his secret soul while their visitor pursued. "Perhaps you also mean, ma'am, that you suppose me to require that knowledge to determine my own behaviour in the sense that if she comes in for money I may clutch at the way to come into it too?" He put this as the straightest of questions; yet he also, it was marked, followed up that side-issue further, as if to fight shy of what Jane wanted most to know. "Is it your idea of me that I haven't married her because she isn't rich enough, and that on what you now tell me I may think better of it? Is that how you see me, Mrs Traffle?" he asked, at his quiet pitch, without heat.

It might have floored his hostess a little, to her husband's vision, but she seemed at once to sit up, on the contrary, so much straighter, that he, after hearing her, immediately turned round. "Don't you *want*, Mr Puddick, to be able to marry a creature so beautiful and so clever?"

This was somehow, suddenly, on Jane's part, so prodigious, for art and subtlety, Traffle recognized, that he had come forward again and a remarkable thing had followed. Their guest had noticed his return and now looked up at him from over the tea-table, looked in a manner so direct, so intelligent, so quite amusedly critical, that, afresh, before he knew it, he had treated the little fact as the flicker of a private understanding between them, and had just cynically for it was scarce covertly smiled back at him in the independence of it. So there he was again,

Sidney Traffle; after having tacitly admitted to Mora that her aunt was a goose of geese compared to himself and *her* he was at present putting that young woman's accomplice up to the same view of his conjugal loyalty, which might be straightway reported to the girl. Well, what was he, all the same, to do? Jane *was*, on all the ground that now spread immeasurably about them, a goose of geese: all that had occurred was that she more showily displayed it; and that she might indeed have had a momentary sense of triumph when the best that their friend first found to meet her withal proved still another evasion of the real point. "I don't think, if you'll allow me to say so, Mrs Traffle, that you've any right to ask me, in respect to Miss Montravers, what I 'want' or that I'm under any obligation to tell you. I've come to you, quite in the dark, because of Mr Traffle's letter, and so that you shouldn't have the shadow of anything to complain of. But please remember that I've neither appealed to you in any way, nor put myself in a position of responsibility toward you."

So far, but only so far, however, had he successfully proceeded before Jane was down upon him in her new trenchant form. "It's not of your responsibility to us I'm talking, but all of your responsibility to *her*. We efface ourselves," she all effectively bridled, "and we're prepared for every reasonable sacrifice. But we do still a little care what becomes of the child to whom we gave up years of our life. If you care enough for her to live with her, don't you care enough to work out some way of making her your very own by the aid of such help as we're eager to render? Or are we to take from you, as against that, that even thus with the way made easy, she's so amazingly constituted as to prefer, in the face of the world, your actual terms of intercourse?"

The young man had kept his eyes on her without flinching, and so he continued after she had spoken. He then drank down what remained of his tea and, pushing back his chair, got up. He hadn't the least arrogance, not the least fatuity of type save so far as it might be offensive in such a place to show a young head modelled as with such an intention of some one of the finer economic uses, and a young face already a little worn as under stress of that economy but he couldn't help his looking, while he pulled down his not very fresh waistcoat, just a trifle like a person who had expected to be rather better regaled. This came indeed, for his host, to seeing that he looked bored; which was again, for that gentleman, a source of humiliation. What style of conversation, comparatively, on showing of it, wouldn't he and Mora all the while be having together? If they would only invite *him*, their uncle or rather no, when it came to that, not a bit, worse luck, their uncle if they would only invite him, their humble admirer, to tea! During which play of reflection and envy, at any rate, Mr Puddick had prepared to take his leave. "I don't think I can talk to you, really, about my 'terms of intercourse' with any lady." He wasn't superior, exactly wasn't so in fact at all, but was nevertheless crushing, and all the more that his next word seemed spoken, in its persistent charity, for their help. "If it's important you should get at that sort of thing it strikes me you should do so by the lady herself."

Our friend, at this, no longer stayed his hand. "Mrs Traffle doesn't see her," he explained to their companion "as the situation seems to present itself."

"You mean Mora doesn't see me, my dear!" Mrs Traffle replied with spirit.

He met it, however, with a smile and a gallant inclination. "Perhaps I mean that she only unsuccessfully tries to."

"She doesn't then take the right way!" Mora's aunt tossed off.

Mr Puddick looked at her blandly. "Then you lose a good deal, ma'am. For if you wish to learn from me how much I admire your niece," he continued straight, "I don't in the least mind answering to that that you may put my sentiments at the highest. I *adore* Miss Montravers," he brought out, after a slight catch of his breath, roundly and impatiently. "I'd do anything in the world for her."

"Then do you pretend," said Jane, with a rush, as if to break through this opening before she was checked, "then do you pretend that you're living with her in innocence?"

Sidney Traffle had a groan for it a hunched groan in which he exhaled the anguish, as he would have called it, of his false position; but Walter Puddick only continued, in his fine unblinking way, to meet Jane's eyes. "I repudiate absolutely your charge of my 'living' with her or of her living with me. Miss Montravers is irreproachable and immaculate."

"All appearances to the contrary notwithstanding?" Mrs Traffle cried. "You'd do anything in the world for her, and she'd by the same token, I suppose, do anything in the world for you, and yet you ask me to believe that, all the while, you are, together, in this extraordinary way, doing nothing in the world?" With which, to his further excruciation, her husband, with eyes averted from her, felt her face turn, as for a strained and unnatural intensity of meaning, upon himself. "He attempts, dear, to prove too much! But I only desire," she continued to their guest, "that you should definitely understand how far I'm willing to go."

"It *is* rather far you know," Sidney, at this, in spite of everything, found himself persuasively remarking to Puddick.

It threw his wife straight upon him, and he felt her there, more massively weighted than he had ever known her, while she said: "I'll make it four hundred and fifty. Yes, a year," she then exaltedly pursued to their visitor. "I pass you my word of honour for it. That's what I'll allow Mora as your wife."

Traffle watched him, under this and the more that an odd spasm or shade had come into his face; which in turn made our friend wish the more to bridge somehow the dark oddity of their difference. What was all the while at bottom sharpest for him was that they might somehow pull more together. "That, you see," he fluted for conciliation, "is her aunt's really, you know, I think, rather magnificent message for her."

The young man took in clearly, during a short silence, the material magnificence while Traffle again noted how almost any sort of fineness of appreciation could show in his face. "I'm sure I'm much obliged to you," he presently said.

"You don't refuse to let her have it, I suppose?" Mrs Traffle further proceeded.

Walter Puddick's clear eyes clear at least as his host had hitherto judged them seemed for the minute attached to the square, spacious sum. "I don't refuse anything. I'll give her your message."

"Well," said Jane, "that's the assurance we've wanted." And she gathered herself as for relief, on her own side, at his departure.

He lingered but a moment which was long enough, however, for her husband to see him, as with an intenser twinge of the special impatience just noted in him, look, all unhappily, from Mora's aunt to Mora's uncle. "Of course I can't mention to her such a fact. But I wish, all the same," he said with a queer sick smile, "that you'd just simply let us alone."

He turned away with it, but Jane had already gone on. "Well, you certainly seem in sufficient possession of the right way to make us!"

Walter Puddick, picking up his hat and with his distinctly artistic and animated young back presented though how it came to show so strikingly for such Sidney Traffle couldn't have said reached one of the doors of the room which was not right for his egress; while Sidney stood divided between the motion of correcting and guiding him and the irresistible need of covering Jane with a last woeful reproach. For he had seen something, had caught it from the sharp flicker of trouble finally breaking through Puddick's face, caught it from the fact that yes, positively the upshot of their attack on him was a pair of hot tears in his eyes. They stood for queer, deep things, assuredly, these tears; they spoke portentously, since that was her note, of wonderful Mora; but there was



an indelicacy in the pressure that had thus made the source of them public. "You *have* dished us now!" was what, for a Parthian shot, Jane's husband would have liked to leave with her; and what in fact he would have articulately phrased if he hadn't rather given himself to getting their guest with the least discomfort possible out of the room. Into the hall he ushered him, and there absurd, incoherent person as he had again to know himself for vaguely yet reassuringly, with an arm about him, patted him on the back. The full force of this victim's original uttered warning came back to him; the probable perfect wisdom of his plea that, since he had infinitely to manage, *their* line, the aunt's and the uncle's, was just to let him feel his way; the gage of his sincerity as to this being the fact of his attachment. Sidney Traffle seemed somehow to feel the fullest force of both these truths during the moment his young friend recognized the intention of his gesture; and thus for a little, at any rate, while the closed door of the drawing-room and the shelter of the porch kept them unseen and unheard from within, they faced each other for the embarrassment that, as Traffle would have been quite ready to put it, they had in common. Their eyes met their eyes, their conscious grin their grin; hang it, yes, the screw *was* on Mora's lover. Puddick's recognition of his sympathy well, proved that he needed something, though he didn't need interference from the outside; which couldn't, any way they might arrange it, seem delicate enough. Jane's obtrusion of her four hundred and fifty affected Traffle thus as singularly gross; though part of that association might proceed for him, doubtless, from the remark in which his exasperated sensibility was, the next thing, to culminate.

"I'm afraid I can't explain to you," he first said, however, "why it is that in spite of my indoctrination, my wife fails to see that there's only one answer a gentleman may make to the so intimate question she put to you."

"I don't know anything about that; I wasn't at all making her a conventional reply. But I don't mind assuring you, on my sacred honour "

So Walter Puddick was going on, but his host, with a firm touch of his arm, and very handsomely, as that host felt, or at least desired to feel, wouldn't have it. "Ah, it's none of my business; I accept what you've said, and it wouldn't matter to you if I didn't. Your situation's evidently remarkable," Traffle all sociably added, "and I don't mind telling you that I, for one, have confidence in your tact. I recognized, that day I went to see you, that this was the only thing to do, and have done my best, ever since, to impress it on Mrs Traffle. She replies to me that I talk at my ease, and the appearances *are* such, I recognize, that it would be odd she shouldn't mind them. In short she had shown you how much she does mind them. I tell her," our friend pursued, "that we mustn't weigh appearances too much against realities and that *of* those realities," he added, balancing again a little on his toes and clasping his waist with his hands, which at the same time just worked down the back of his waistcoat, "you must be having your full share." Traffle liked, as the effect of this, to see his visitor look at him harder; he felt how the ideal turn of their relation would be that he should show all the tact he *was* so incontestably showing, and yet at the same time not miss anything that would be interesting. "You see of course for yourself how little, after all, she knows Mora. She doesn't appreciate the light hand that you must have to have with her and that, I take it," Sidney Traffle smiled, "is what you contend for with us."

"I don't contend for anything with you, sir," said Walter Puddick.

"Ah, but you do want to be let alone," his friend insisted.

The young man turned graver in proportion to this urbanity. "Mrs Traffle has closed my mouth."

"By laying on you, you mean, the absolute obligation to report her offer ?" That lady's representative continued to smile, but then it was that he yet began to see where fine freedom of thought translated into act at least would rather grotesquely lodge him. He hung fire, none the less, but for an instant; even though not quite saying what he had been on the point of. "I should like to feel at liberty to put it to you that if, in your place, I felt that a statement of Mrs Traffle's overture would probably, or even possibly, dish me, I'm not sure I should make a scruple of holding my tongue about it. But of course I see that I can't very well go so far without looking to you as if my motive might be mixed. You might naturally say that I can't *want* my wife's money to go out of the house."

## Mora Montravers

Puddick had an undissimulated pause for the renewed effort to do justice to so much elegant arrangement of the stiff truth of his case; but his intelligence apparently operated, and even to the extent of showing him that his companion really meant, more and more, as well as well, that is, to *him* as it was humanly conceivable that Mrs Traffle's husband *could* mean. "Your difficulty's different from mine, and from the appearance I incur in carrying Miss Montravers her aunt's message as a clear necessity and at any risk."

"You mean that your being conscientious about it may look as if the risk you care least to face is that of not with a little patience coming in yourself for the money?" After which, with a glitter fairly sublime in its profession of his detachment from any stupid course: "You can be sure, you know, that *I'd* be sure !"

"Sure I'm not a pig?" the young man asked in a manner that made Traffle feel quite possessed at last of his confidence.

"Even if you keep quiet I shall know you're not, and shall believe also you won't have thought me one." To which, in the exaltation produced by this, he next added: "Isn't she, with it all with all she has done for you I mean splendidly fond of you?"

The question proved, however, but one of those that seemed condemned to cast, by their, action, a chill; which was expressed, on the young man's part, with a certain respectful dryness. "How do you know, sir, what Miss Montravers has done for me?"

Sidney Traffle felt himself enjoy, on this, a choice of replies one of which indeed would have sprung easiest from his lips. "Oh now, come!" seemed for the instant what he would have liked most to hear himself say; but he renounced the pleasure even though making up for it a little by his actual first choice. "Don't I know at least that she left the honourable shelter of this house for you?"

Walter Puddick had a wait. "I never asked it of her."

"You didn't seduce her, no and even her aunt doesn't accuse you of it. But that she should have given up well, what she *has* given up, moderately as you may estimate it," Traffle again smiled "surely has *something* to say about her case?"

"What has more to say than anything else," Puddick promptly returned to this, "is that she's the very cleverest and most original and most endowed, and in every way most wonderful, person I've known in all my life."

His entertainer fairly glowed, for response, with the light of it. "Thank you, then!" Traffle thus radiated.

"Thank you for nothing!" cried the other with a short laugh and set into motion down the steps and the garden walk by this final attestation of the essential impenetrability even of an acutest young artist's *vie intime* with a character sketchable in such terms.

Traffle accompanied him to the gate, but wondering, as they went, if it was quite inevitable one should come back to feeling, as the result of every sort of brush with people who were really living, like so very small a boy. No, no, one must stretch to one's tallest again. It restored one's stature a little then that one didn't now mind that this demonstration would prove to Jane, should she be waiting in the drawing-room and watching for one's return, that one had retained their guest for so much privacy in the porch. "Well, take care what you do!" Traffle bravely brought out for good-bye.

"Oh, I shall tell her," Puddick replied under the effect of his renewed pat of the back; and even, standing there an instant, had a further indulgence.

"She loathes my unfortunate name of course; but she's such an incalculable creature that my information possibly may fetch her."

There was a final suddenness of candour in it that made Traffle gape. "Oh, our names, and hers ! But is her loathing of yours then all that's the matter?"

Walter Puddick stood some seconds; he might, in pursuance of what had just passed, have been going to say things. But he had decided again the next moment for the fewest possible. "No!" he tossed back as he walked off.

## 5

"We seem to have got so beautifully used to it," Traffle remarked more than a month later to Jane "we seem to have lived into it and through it so, and to have suffered and surmounted the worst, that, upon my word, I scarce see what's the matter now, or what, that's so very dreadful, it's doing or has done for us. We haven't the interest of her, no," he had gone on, slowly pacing and revolving things according to his wont, while the sharer of his life, tea being over and the service removed, reclined on a sofa, perfectly still and with her eyes rigidly closed; "we've lost that, and I agree that it was great I mean the interest of the number of ideas the situation presented us with. That has dropped by our own act, evidently; we must have simply settled the case, a month ago, in such a way as that we shall have no more acquaintance with it; by which I mean no more of the fun of it. I, for one, confess I miss the fun put it only at the fun of our having had to wriggle so with shame, or, call it if you like, to live so under arms, against prying questions and the too easy exposure of our false explanations; which only proves, however, that, as I say, the worst that has happened to us appears to be that we're going to find life tame again as tame as it was before ever Mora came into it so immensely to enrich and agitate it. She has gone out of it, obviously, to leave it flat and forlorn tasteless after having had for so many months the highest flavour. If, by her not thanking you even though she declined, by her not acknowledging in any way your as I admit altogether munificent offer, it seems indicated that we should hold her to have definitely enrolled herself in the deplorable 'flaunting' class, we must at least recognize that she doesn't flaunt at *us*, at whomever else she may; and that she has in short cut us as neatly and effectively as, in the event of her conclusive, her supreme contumacy, we could have aspired to cut *her*. Never was a scandal, therefore, less scandalous more naturally a disappointment, that is, to our good friends, whose resentment of this holy calm, this absence of any echo of any convulsion, of any sensation of any kind to be picked up, strikes me as ushering in the only form of ostracism our dissimulated taint, our connection with lurid facts that *might* have gone on making us rather eminently worth while, will have earned for us. But aren't custom and use breaking us in to the sense even of *that* anti-climax, and preparing for us future years of wistful, rueful, regretful thought of the time when everything was nice and dreadful?"

Mrs Traffle's posture was now, more and more, certainly, this recumbent sightless stillness; which she appeared to have resorted to at first after the launching, that is, of her ultimatum to Mr Puddick as a sign of the intensity with which she awaited results. There had been no results, alas, there were none from week to week; never was the strain of suspense less gratefully crowned; with the drawback, moreover, that they could settle to nothing not even to the alternative, that of the cold consciousness of slighted magnanimity, in which Jane had assumed beforehand that she should find her last support. Her husband circled about her couch, with his eternal dim whistle, at a discreet distance as certain as if he turned to catch her in the act that when his back was presented in thoughtful retreat her tightened eyes opened to rest on it with peculiar sharpness. She waited for the proof that she had intervened to advantage the advantage of Mora's social future and she had to put up with Sidney's watching her wait. So he, on his side, lived under her tacit criticism of that attention; and had they asked themselves, the comfortless pair as it's in fact scarce conceivable that they didn't what it would practically have cost them to receive their niece without questions, they might well have judged their present ordeal much the dearer. When Sidney had felt his wife glare at him undetectedly for a fortnight he knew at least what it meant, and

if she had signified how much he might have to pay for it should he presume again to see Mora alone, she was now, in their community of a quietude that had fairly soured on their hands, getting ready to quarrel with him for his poverty of imagination about that menace. Absolutely, the conviction grew for him, she would have liked him better to do something, even something inconsiderate of her to the point of rudeness, than simply parade there in the deference that left her to languish. The fault of this conspicuous propriety, which gave on her nerves, was that it did nothing to refresh their decidedly rather starved sense of their case; so that Traffle was frankly merciless frankly, that is, for himself in his application of her warning. There was nothing he would indeed have liked better than to call on Mora quite, as who should say, in the friendly way to which her own last visit at Wimbledon had set so bright an example. At the same time, though he revelled in his acute reflection as to the partner of his home "I've only to go, and then come back with some 'new fact', *à la Dreyfus*, in order to make her sit up in a false flare that will break our insufferable spell" he was yet determined that the flare, certain to take place sooner or later, should precede his act; so large a licence might he then obviously build upon it. His excursions to town were on occasion, even, in truth, not other than perverse determined, that is, he was well aware, by their calculated effect on Jane, who could imagine in his absence, each time, that he might be 'following something up' (an expression that had in fact once slipped from her), might be having the gumption, in other words, to glean a few straws for their nakeder nest; imagine it, yes, only to feel herself fall back again on the mere thorns of consistency.

It wasn't, nevertheless, that he took all his exercise to this supersubtle tune; the state of his own nerves treated him at moments to larger and looser exactions; which is why, though poor Jane's sofa still remained his centre of radiation, the span of his unrest sometimes embraced half London. He had never been on such fidgety terms with his club, which he could neither not resort to, from his suburb, with an unnatural frequency, nor make, in the event, any coherent use of; so that his suspicion of his not remarkably carrying it off there was confirmed to him, disconcertingly, one morning when his dash townward had been particularly wild, by the free address of a fellow-member prone always to overdoing fellowship and who had doubtless for some time amusedly watched his vague gyrations "I say, Traff, old man, what in the world, this time, have you got 'on'?" It had never been anything but easy to answer the ass, and was easier than ever now "On'? You don't suppose I dress, do you, to come to meet *you*?" yet the effect of the nasty little mirror of his unsatisfied state so flashed before him was to make him afresh wander wide, if wide half the stretch of Trafalgar Square could be called. He turned into the National Gallery, where the great Masters were tantalising more by their indifference than by any offer of company, and where he could take up again his personal tradition of a lawless range. One couldn't be a *raffiné* at Wimbledon no, not with any comfort; but he quite liked to think how he had never been anything less in the great museum, distinguished as he thus was from those who gaped impartially and did the place by schools. *His* sympathies were special and far-scattered, just as the places of pilgrimage he most fondly reverted to were corners unnoted and cold, where the idol in the numbered shrine sat apart to await him.

So he found himself at the end of five minutes in one of the smaller, one of the Dutch rooms in a temple bare in very fact at that moment save for just one other of the faithful. This was a young person visibly young, from the threshold of the place, in spite of the back presented for an instant while a small picture before which she had stopped continued to hold her; but who turned at sound of his entering footfall, and who then again, as by an alertness in this movement, engaged his eyes. With which it was remarkably given to Traffle to feel himself recognize even almost to immediate, to artless extravagance of display, two things; the first that his fellow-votary in the unprofaned place and at the odd morning hour was none other than their invincible Mora, surprised, by this extraordinary fluke, in her invincibility, and the second (oh, his certainty of *that*!) that she was expecting to be joined there by no such pale fellow-adventurer as her whilom uncle. It amazed him, as it also annoyed him, on the spot, that his heart, for thirty seconds, should be standing almost still; but he wasn't to be able afterward to blink it that he had at once quite gone to pieces, any slight subsequent success in recovering himself to the contrary notwithstanding. Their happening thus to meet was obviously a wonder it made him feel unprepared; but what especially did the business for him, he subsequently reflected, was again the renewed degree, and for that matter the developed kind, of importance that the girl's beauty gave her. Dear Jane, at home, as he knew and as Mora herself probably, for that matter, did was sunk in the conviction that she was leading a life; but

whatever she was doing it was clearly the particular thing she might best be occupied with. How could anything be better for a lovely creature than thus to grow from month to month in loveliness? so that she was able to stand there before him with no more felt inconvenience than the sense of the mere tribute of his eyes could promptly rectify.

That ministered positively to his weakness the justice he did on the spot to the rare shade of human felicity, human impunity, human sublimity, call it what one would, surely dwelling in such a consciousness. How could a girl have to think long, have to think more than three-quarters of a second, under any stress whatever, of anything in the world but that her presence was an absolute incomparable value? The prodigious thing, too, was that it had had in the past, and the comparatively recent past that one easily recalled, to content itself with counting twenty times less: a proof precisely that any conditions so determined could only as a matter of course have been odious and, at the last, outrageous to her. Goodness knew with what glare of graceless inaction this rush of recognitions was accompanied in poor Traffle; who was later on to ask himself whether he had showed to less advantage in the freshness of his commotion or in the promptly enough subsequent rage of his coolness. The commotion, in any case, had doubtless appeared more to paralyze than to agitate him, since Mora had had time to come nearer while he showed for helplessly planted. He hadn't even at the moment been proud of his presence of mind, but it was as they afterward haunted his ear that the echoes of what he at first found to say were most odious to him.

"I'm glad to take your being here for a sign you've not lost your interest in Art" that might have passed if he hadn't so almost feverishly floundered on. "I hope you keep up your painting with such a position as you must be in for serious work: I always thought, you know, that you'd do something if you'd stick to it. In fact, we quite miss your not bringing us something to admire as you sometimes did; we haven't, you see, much of an art-atmosphere now. I'm glad you're fond of the Dutch that little Metsu over there that I think you were looking at is a pet thing of my own; and, if my living to do something myself hadn't been the most idiotic of dreams, something in *his* line though of course a thousand miles behind him was what I should have tried to go in for. You see at any rate where missing as I say our art-atmosphere I have to come to find one. Not such a bad place certainly" so he had hysterically gabbled; "especially at this quiet hour as I see you yourself quite feel. I just turned in though it does discourage! I hope, however, it hasn't that effect on *you*," he knew himself to grin with the last awkwardness; making it worse the next instant by the gay insinuation: "I'm bound to say it isn't how you look discouraged!"

It reeked for him with reference even while he said it for the truth was but too intensely, too insidiously, somehow, that her confidence implied, that it in fact bravely betrayed, grounds. He was to appreciate this wild waver, in retrospect, as positive dizziness in a narrow pass the abyss being naturally on either side; that abyss of the facts of the girl's existence which he must thus have seemed to rush into, a smirking, a disgusting tribute to them through his excessive wish to show how clear he kept of them. The terrible, the fatal truth was that she made everything too difficult or that this, at any rate, was how she enjoyed the exquisite privilege of affecting him. She watched him, she saw him splash to keep from sinking, with a pitiless cold sweet irony; she gave him rope as a syren on a headland might have been amused at some bather beyond his depth and unable to swim. It was all the fault his want of ease was of the real extravagance of his idea of not letting her spy even the tip of the tail of any 'freedom' with her; thanks to which fatality she had indeed the game in her own hands. She exhaled a distinction it glanced out of every shade of selection, every turn of expression, in her dress, though she had always, for that matter, had the genius of felicity there which was practically the 'new fact' all Wimbledon had been awaiting; and yet so perverse was their relation that to mark at all any special consideration for it was to appear just to make the allusion he was most forbidding himself. It was hard, his troubled consciousness told him, to be able neither to overlook her new facts without brutality nor to recognize them without impertinences; and he was frankly at the end of his resources by the time he ceased beating the air. Then it was, yes, then it was perfectly, as if she had patiently let him show her each of his ways of making a fool of himself; when she still said nothing a moment and yet still managed to keep him ridiculous as if for certainty on that head. It was true that when she at last spoke she swept everything away.

"It's a great chance my meeting you for what you so kindly think of me."

She brought that out as if he had been uttering mere vain sounds to which she preferred the comparative seriousness of the human, or at least of the mature, state, and her unexpectedness it was that thus a little stiffened him up. "What I think of you? How do you know what I think?"

She dimly and charmingly smiled at him, for it wasn't really that she was harsh. She was but infinitely remote the syren on her headland dazzlingly in view, yet communicating, precisely, over such an abyss. "Because it's so much more, you mean, than you know yourself? If you don't know yourself, if you know as little as, I confess, you strike me as doing," she, however, at once went on, "I'm more sorry for you than anything else; even though at the best, I dare say, it must seem odd to you to hear me so patronizing." It was borne in upon him thus that she would now make no difference, to his honour to that of his so much more emancipated spirit at least between her aunt and her uncle; so much should the poor uncle enjoy for his pains. He should stand or fall with fatal Jane for at this point he was already sure Jane had been fatal; it was in fact with fatal Jane tied as a millstone round his neck that he at present knew himself sinking. "You try to make grabs at some idea, but the simplest never occurs to you."

"What do you call the simplest, Mora?" he at this heard himself whine.

"Why, my being simply a good girl. You gape at it" he was trying exactly not to "as if it passed your belief; but it's really all the while, to my own sense, what has been the matter with me. I mean, you see, a good creature wanting to live at peace. Everything, however, occurs to you but that and in spite of my trying to show you. You never understood," she said with her sad, quiet lucidity, "what I came to see you for two months ago." He was on the point of breaking in to declare that the reach of his intelligence at the juncture of which she spoke had been quite beyond expression; but he checked himself in time, as it would strike her but as a vague weak effort to make exactly the distinction that she held cheap. No, he wouldn't give Jane away now he'd suffer anything instead; the taste of what he should have to suffer was already there on his lips it came over him, to the strangest effect of desolation, of desolation made certain, that they should have lost Mora for ever, and that this present scant passage must count for them as her form of rupture. Jane had treated her the other day treated her, that is, through Walter Puddick, who would have been, when all was said, a faithful agent to *their* form, their form save on the condition attached, much too stiff a one, no doubt; so that he was actually having the extraordinary girl's answer. What they thought of her was that she was Walter Puddick's mistress the only difference between them being that whereas her aunt fixed the character upon her as by the act of tying a neatly-inscribed luggage-tag to a bandbox, he himself flourished about with *his* tag in his hand and a portentous grin for what he could do with it if he would. She brushed aside alike, however, vulgar label and bewildered formula; she but took Jane's message as involving an insult, and if she treated him, as a participant, with any shade of humanity, it was indeed that she was the good creature for whom she had a moment ago claimed credit. Even under the sense of so supreme a pang poor Traffle could value his actual, his living, his wonderful impression, rarest treasure of sense, as what the whole history would most have left with him. It was all he should have of her in the future the mere memory of these dreadful minutes in so noble a place, minutes that were shining easy grace on her part and helpless humiliation on his; wherefore, tragically but instinctively, he gathered in, as for preservation, every grain of the experience. That was it; they had given her, without intending it, still wider wings of freedom; the clue, the excuse, the pretext, whatever she might call it, for shaking off any bond that had still incommoded her. She was spreading her wings that was what he saw as if she hovered, rising and rising, like an angel in a vision; it was the picture that he might, if he chose, or mightn't, make Jane, on his return, sit up to. Truths, these, that for our interest in him, or for our grasp of them, press on us in succession, but that within his breast were quick and simultaneous; so that it was virtually without a wait he heard her go on. "Do try that's really all I want to say to keep hold of my husband."

"Your husband?" He *did* gape.

## Mora Montravers

She had the oddest charming surprise her nearest approach to familiarity. "Walter Puddick. Don't you know I'm married?" And then, as for the life of him he still couldn't but stare: "Hasn't he told you?"

"Told us? Why, we haven't seen him "

"Since the day you so put the case to him? Oh, I should have supposed !" She would have supposed, obviously, that he might in some way have communicated the fact; but she clearly hadn't so much as assured herself of it. "Then there exactly he is he doesn't seem, poor dear, to know what to do." And she had on his behalf, apparently, a moment of beautiful, anxious, yet at the same time detached and all momentary thought. "That's just then what I mean."

"My dear child," Traffle gasped, "what on earth *do* you mean?"

"Well" and she dropped for an instant comparatively to within his reach "that it's where you *can* come in. Where in fact, as I say, I quite wish you would!"

All his wondering attention for a moment hung upon her. "Do you ask me, Mora, to *do* something for you?"

"Yes" and it was as if no 'good creature' had ever been so beautiful, nor any beautiful creature ever so good "to make him your care. To see that he does get it."

"Get it?" Traffle blankly echoed.

"Why, what you promised him. My aunt's money."

He felt his countenance an exhibition. "She promised it, Mora, to *you*."

"If I married him, yes because I wasn't fit for her to speak to till I should. But if I'm now proudly Mrs Puddick "

He had already, however, as with an immense revulsion, a long jump, taken her up: "You are, you *are* ?" He gaped at the difference it made, and in which then, immensely, they seemed to recover her.

"Before all men and the Registrar."

"The Registrar?" he again echoed; so that, with another turn of her humour, it made her lift her eyebrows at him.

"You mean it doesn't hold if *that's* the way ?"

"It holds, Mora, I suppose, any way that makes a real marriage. It is," he hopefully smiled, "real?"

"Could anything be more real," she asked, "than to have become such a thing?"

"Walter Puddick's wife?" He kept his eyes on her pleadingly. "Surely, Mora, it's a *good* thing clever and charming as he is." Now that Jane had succeeded, his instinct, of a sudden, was to back her up.

Mrs Puddick's face and the fact was it was strange, in the light of her actual aspect, to think of her and name her so showed, however, as ready a disposition. "If he's as much as that then why were you so shocked by my relations with him?"

He panted he cast about. "Why, we didn't doubt of his distinction of what it was at any rate likely to become."

"You only doubted of mine?" she asked with her harder look.

He threw up helpless arms, he dropped them while he gazed at her. "It doesn't seem to me possible any one can ever have questioned your gift for doing things in your own way. And if you're now married," he added with his return of tentative presumption and his strained smile, "your own way opens out for you, doesn't it? as never yet."

Her eyes, on this, held him a moment, and he couldn't have said now what was in them. "I think it does. I'm seeing," she said "I shall see. Only" she hesitated but for an instant "for that it's necessary you shall look after him."

They stood there face to face on it during a pause that, lighted by her radiance, gave him time to take from her, somehow, larger and stranger things than either might at all intelligibly or happily have named. "Do you ask it of me?"

"I ask it of you," said Mrs Puddick after a wait that affected him as giving his contribution to her enjoyment of that title as part of her reason.

He held out, however contribution or no contribution another moment. "Do you beg me very hard?"

Once more she hung fire but she let him have it. "I beg you very hard."

It made him turn pale. "Thank you," he said; and it was as if now he didn't care what monstrous bargain he passed with her which was fortunate, for that matter, since, when she next spoke, the quantity struck him as looming large.

"I want to be free."

"How can you not?" said Sidney Traffle, feeling, to the most extraordinary tune, at one and the same time both sublime and base; and quite vague, as well as indifferent, as to which character prevailed.

"But I don't want him, you see, to suffer."

Besides the opportunity that this spread before him, he could have blessed her, could have embraced her, for 'you see'. "Well, I promise you he shan't suffer if I can help it."

"Thank you," she said in a manner that gave him, if possible, even greater pleasure yet, showing him as it did, after all, what an honest man she thought him. He even at that point had his apprehension of the queerness of the engagement that, as an honest man, he was taking the engagement, since she so 'wanted to be free', to relieve her, so far as he devotedly might, of any care hampering this ideal; but his perception took a tremendous bound as he noticed that their interview had within a moment become exposed to observation. A reflected light in Mora's face, caught from the quarter behind him, suddenly so advised him and caused him to turn, with the consequence of his seeing a gentleman in the doorway by which he had entered a gentleman in the act of replacing the hat raised to salute Mrs Puddick and with an accompanying smile still vivid in a clear, fresh, well-featured face. Everything took for Sidney Traffle a sharper sense from this apparition, and he had, even while the fact of the nature of his young friend's business there, the keeping of an agreeable appointment in discreet conditions, stood out for him again as in its odd insolence of serenity and success, the consciousness that whatever his young friend was doing, whatever she was 'up to', he was now quite as much in the act of backing her as the gentleman in the doorway, a slightly mature, but strikingly well-dressed, a pleasantly masterful-looking gentleman, a haunter of the best society, one could be sure, was waiting for him to go. Mora herself, promptly, had that apprehension, and conveyed it to him, the next thing, in words that amounted, with their sweet conclusive look, to a decent dismissal. "Here's what's of *real* importance to me," she seemed to say; "so, though I count on you, I needn't keep



you longer." But she took time in fact just to revert. "I've asked him to go to you; and he will, I'm sure, he *will*: by which you'll have your chance, don't fear! Good-bye." She spoke as if this 'chance' were what he would now at once be most yearning for; and thus it was that, while he stayed but long enough to let his eyes move again to the new, the impatient and distinctly 'smart', yes, unmistakably, this time, not a bit Bohemian candidate for her attention, and then let them come back to herself as for some grasp of the question of a relation already so developed, there might have hung itself up there the prospect of an infinite future of responsibility about Walter Puddick if only as a make-weight perhaps to the extinction of everything else. When he had turned his back and begun humbly to shuffle, as it seemed to him, through a succession of shining rooms where the walls bristled with eyes that watched him for mockery, his sense was of having seen the last of Mora as completely as if she had just seated herself in the car of a rising balloon that would never descend again to earth.

## 6

It was before that aspect of the matter, at any rate, that Sidney Traffle made a retreat which he would have had to regard as the most abject act of his life hadn't he just savingly been able to regard it as the most lucid. The aftertaste of that quality of an intelligence in it sharp even to soreness was to remain with him, intensely, for hours to the point in fact (which says all) of rendering necessary a thoughtful return to his club rather than a direct invocation of the society of his wife. He ceased, for the rest of the day there, to thresh about; that phase, sensibly, was over for him; he dropped into a deep chair, really exhausted, quite spent, and in this posture yielded to reflections too grave for accessory fidgets. They were so grave, or were at least so interesting, that it was long since he had been for so many hours without thinking of Jane of whom he didn't even dream after he had at last inevitably, reacting from weeks of tension that were somehow ended for ever, welcomed a deep foodless doze which held him till it was time to order tea. He woke to partake, still meditatively, of that repast yet, though late the hour and quite exceptional the length of his absence, with his domestic wantonness now all gone and no charm in the thought of how Jane would be worried. He probably shouldn't be wanton, it struck him, ever again in his life; that tap had run dry had suffered an immense, a conclusive diversion from the particular application of its flow to Jane.

This truth indeed, I must add, proved of minor relevance on his standing before that lady, in the Wimbledon drawing-room, considerably after six o'clock had struck, and feeling himself in presence of revelations prepared not only to match, but absolutely to ignore and override, his own. He hadn't put it to himself that if the pleasure of stretching her on the rack appeared suddenly to have dropped for him this was because 'it' by which he would have meant everything else was too serious; but *had* he done so he would at once have indulged in the amendment that he himself certainly was. His wife had in any case risen from the rack, the 'bed of steel' that, in the form of her habitual, her eternal, her plaintive, aggressive sofa, had positively a pushed-back and relegated air an air to the meaning of which a tea-service that fairly seemed to sprawl and that even at such an hour still almost unprecedentedly lingered, added the very accent of recent agitations. He hadn't been able not to consult himself a little as to the strength of the dose, or as to the protraction of the series of doses, in which he should administer the squeezed fruit, the expressed and tonic liquor, of his own adventure; but the atmosphere surrounding Jane herself was one in which he felt questions of that order immediately drop. The atmosphere surrounding Jane had been, in fine, on no occasion that he could recall, so perceptibly thick, so abruptly rich, so charged with strange aromas; he could really almost have fancied himself snuff up from it a certain strength of transient tobacco, the trace of a lately permitted cigarette or two at the best rarest of accidents and strangest of discords in that harmonious whole. Had she, gracious goodness, been smoking with somebody? a possibility not much less lurid than this conceived extravagance of the tolerated, the independent pipe.

Yes, absolutely, she eyed him through a ranker medium than had ever prevailed between them by any perversity of his; eyed him quite as if prepared, in regular tit-for-tat fashion, to stretch *him*, for a change, on his back, to let

him cool his heels in that posture while she sauntered in view pointedly enough for him to tell her how he liked it. Something had happened to her in his absence that made her quite indifferent, in other words, to what might have happened to any one else at all; and so little had he to fear asperity on the score of his selfish day off that she didn't even see the advantage to her, for exasperation of his curiosity, of holding him at such preliminary arm's-length as would be represented by a specious 'scene'. She would have liked him, he easily recognized, to burst with curiosity, or, better still, to grovel with it, before she should so much as throw him a sop; but just this artless pride in her it was that, by the very candour of its extravagance, presently helped him to a keen induction. He had only to ask himself what could have occurred that would most of all things conduce to puffing her up with triumph, and then to reflect that, thoroughly to fill that bill, as who should say, she must have had a contrite call from Mora. He knew indeed, consummately, how superior a resource to morbid contrition that young woman was actually cultivating; in accordance with which the next broadest base for her exclusive command of the situation and she clearly claimed nothing else would be the fact that Walter Puddick had been with her and that she had had him (and to the tune of odd revelry withal to which their disordered and unremoved cups glaringly testified) all to herself. Such an interview with him as had so uplifted her that she distractedly had failed to ring for the parlour-maid, with six o'clock ebbing in strides this did tell a story, Traffle ruefully recognized, with which it might well verily yet be given her to work on him. He was promptly to feel, none the less, how he carried the war across her border, poor superficial thing, when he decided on the direct dash that showed her she had still to count with him.

He didn't offer her, as he looked about, the mere obvious "I see you've had visitors, or a visitor, and have smoked a pipe with them and haven't bored yourself the least mite" he broke straight into: "He has come out here again then, the wretch, and you've done him more justice? You've done him a good deal, my dear," he laughed in the grace of his advantage, "if you've done him even half as much as he appears to have done your tea-table!" For this the quick flash-light of his imagination that's what it *was* for her to have married an imaginative man was just the drop of a flying-machine into her castle court while she stood on guard at the gate. She gave him a harder look, and he feared he might kindle by too great an ease as he was far from prematurely wishing to do her challenge of his own experience. Her flush of presumption turned in fact, for the instant, to such a pathetically pale glare that, before he knew it, conscious of his resources and always coming characteristically round to indulgence as soon as she at all gave way, he again magnanimously abdicated. "He came to say it's no use?" he went on, and from that moment knew himself committed to secrecy. It had tided him over the few seconds of his danger that of Jane's demanding of him what he had been up to. He didn't want to be asked, no; and his not being asked guarded his not yes positively lying; since what most of all now filled his spirit was that he shouldn't himself positively *have* to speak. His not doing so would be his keeping something all to himself as Jane would have liked, for the six-and-a-half minutes of her strained, her poor fatuous chance, to keep her passage with Puddick; or to do this, in any case, till he could feel her resist what would certainly soon preponderantly make for her wish to see him stare at her producible plum. It wasn't, moreover, that he could on his own side so fully withstand wonder; the wonder of this new singular ground of sociability between persons hitherto seeing so little with the same eyes. There were things that fitted fitted somehow the fact of the young man's return, and he could feel in his breast-pocket, when it came to that, the presence of the very key to almost any blind or even wild motion, as a sign of trouble, on poor Puddick's part; but what and where was the key to the mystery of Jane's sudden pride in his surely at the best very queer communication? The eagerness of this pride it was, at all events, that after a little so worked as to enable him to breathe again for his own momentarily menaced treasure. "They're married they've been married a month; not a bit as one would have wished, or by any form decent people recognize, but with the effect, at least, he tells me, that she's now legally his wife and he legally her husband, so that neither can marry any one else, and that and that "

"And that she has taken his horrid name, under our pressure, in exchange for her beautiful one the one that so fitted her and that we ourselves when all was said, did like so to keep repeating, in spite of everything, you won't deny, for the pleasant showy thing, compared with our own and most of our friends', it was to have familiarly about?" He took her up with this, as she had faltered a little over the other sources of comfort provided for them by the union so celebrated; in addition to which his ironic speech gained him time for the less candid, and thereby

more cynically indulgent, profession of entire surprise. And he immediately added: "They've gone in for the mere civil marriage?"

"She appears to have consented to the very least of one that would do: they looked in somewhere, at some dingy office, jabbered a word or two to a man without h's and with a pen behind his ear, signed their names, and then came out as good as you and me; very much as you and I the other day sent off that little postal–packet to Paris from our grocer's back–shop."

Traffle showed his interest he took in the news. "Well, you know, you didn't make Church a condition."

"No fortunately not. I was clever enough," Jane bridled, "for that."

She had more for him, her manner showed she had that to which the bare fact announced was as nothing; but he saw he must somehow, yes, pay by knowing nothing more than he could catch at by brilliant guesses. That had after an instant become a comfort to him: it would legitimate dissimulation, just as this recognised necessity would make itself quickly felt as the mere unregarded underside of a luxury. "And they're at all events, I take it," he went on, "sufficiently tied to be divorced."

She kept him but only for a moment. "Quite sufficiently, I gather; and that," she said, "may come."

She made him, with it, quite naturally start. "Are they thinking of it already?"

She looked at him another instant hard, as with the rich expression of greater stores of private knowledge than she could adapt all at once to his intelligence. "You've no conception not the least of how he feels."

Her husband hadn't hereupon, he admitted to himself, all artificially to gape. "Of course I haven't, love." Now that he had decided not to give his own observation away and this however Puddick might 'feel' he should find it doubtless easy to be affectionate. "But he had been telling *you* all about it?"

"He has been here nearly two hours as you of course, so far as that went, easily guessed. Nominally at first he had come out to see you; but he asked for me on finding you absent, and when I had come in to him seemed to want nothing better "

"Nothing better than to stay and stay, Jane?" he smiled as he took her up. "Why in the world should he? What I ask myself," Traffle went on, "is simply how in the world you yourself could bear it." She turned away from him, holding him now, she judged, in a state of dependence; she reminded him even of himself, at similar moments of her own *asservissement*, when he turned his back upon her to walk about and keep her unsatisfied; an analogy markedly perceptible on her pausing a moment as under her first impression of the scattered tea–things and then ringing to have them attended to. Their domestic, retarded Rebecca, almost fiercely appeared, and her consequent cold presence in the room and inevitably renewed return to it, by the open door, for several minutes, drew out an interval during which he felt nervous again lest it should occur to his wife to wheel round on him with a question. She did nothing of the sort, fortunately; she was as stuffed with supersessive answers as if she were the latest number of a penny periodical: it was only a matter still of his continuing to pay his penny. She wasn't, moreover, his attention noted, trying to be portentous; she was much rather secretly and perversely serene the basis of which condition did a little tax his fancy. What on earth had Puddick done to her since he hadn't been able to bring her out Mora that had made her distinguishably happier beneath the mere grimness of her finally scoring at home than she had been for so many months? The best she could have learned from him Sidney might even at this point have staked his life upon it wouldn't have been that she could hope to make Mrs Puddick the centre of a grand rehabilitative tea–party. "Why then," he went on again, "if they were married a month ago and he was so ready to stay with you two hours, hadn't he come sooner?"

"He didn't come to tell me they were married not on purpose for that," Jane said after a little and as if the fact itself were scarce more than a trifle compared at least with others she was possessed of, but that she didn't yet mention.

"Well" Traffle frankly waited now "what in the world *did* he come to tell you?"

She made no great haste with it. "His fears."

"What fears at present?" he disingenuously asked.

"'At present?' Why, it's just 'at present' that he feels he has got to look out." Yes, she was distinctly, she was strangely placid about it. "It's worse to have them now that she's his wife, don't you understand?" she pursued as if he were really almost beginning to try her patience. "His difficulties aren't over," she nevertheless condescended further to mention.

She was irritating, decidedly; but he could always make the reflection that if she had been truly appointed to wear him out she would long since have done so. "What difficulties," he accordingly continued, "are you talking about?"

"Those my splendid action for he grants perfectly that it *is* and will remain splendid have caused for him." But her calmness, her positive swagger of complacency over it, *was* indeed amazing.

"Do you mean by your having so forced his hand?" Traffle had now no hesitation in risking.

"By my having forced *hers*," his wife presently returned. "By my glittering bribe, as he calls it."

He saw in a moment how she liked what her visitor had called things; yet it made him, himself, but want more. "She found your bribe so glittering that she couldn't resist it?"

"She couldn't resist it." And Jane sublimely stalked. "She consented to perform the condition attached as I've mentioned to you for enjoying it."

Traffle artfully considered. "If she has met you on that arrangement where do the difficulties come in?"

Jane looked at him a moment with wonderful eyes. "For me? They don't come in!" And she again turned her back on him.

It really tempted him to permit himself a certain impatience which in fact he might have shown hadn't he by this time felt himself more intimately interested in Jane's own evolution than in Mrs Puddick's, or even, for the moment, in Mora's. That interest ministered to his art. "You must tell me at your convenience about yours, that is about your apparently feeling yourself now so beautifully able to sink yours. What I'm asking you about is his if you've put them so at their ease."

"I haven't put them a bit at their ease!" and she was at him with it again almost as in a glow of triumph.

He aimed at all possible blankness. "But surely four hundred and fifty more a year!"

"Four hundred and fifty more is nothing to her."

"Then why the deuce did she marry him for it? since she apparently couldn't bring herself to without it."

Mora Montravers

"She didn't marry him that she herself should get my allowance she married him that *he* should."

At which Traffle had a bit genuinely to wonder. "It comes at any rate to the same if you pay it to her."

Nothing, it would seem, could possibly have had on Jane's state of mind a happier effect. "I shan't pay it to her."

Her husband could again but stare. "You *won't*, dear?" he deprecated.

"I don't," she nobly replied. And then as at last for one of her greater cards: "I pay it to *him*."

"But if he pays it to *her*?"

"He doesn't. He explains."

Traffle cast about. "Explains a to Mora?"

"Explains to me. He *has*," she almost defiantly bridled, "perfectly explained."

Her companion smiled at her. "Ah, *that* then is what took him two hours!" He went on, however, before she could either attenuate or amplify: "It must have taken him that of course, to arrange with you as I understand? for his monopolising the money?"

She seemed to notify him now that from her high command of the situation she could quite look down on the spiteful sarcastic touch. "We have plenty to arrange. We have plenty to discuss. We shall often if you want to know have occasion to meet." After which, "Mora," she quite gloriously brought forth, "hates me worse than ever."

He opened his eyes to their widest. "For settling on her a substantial fortune?"

"For having" and Jane had positively a cold smile for it "believed her not respectable."

"Then *was* she?" Traffle gaped.

It did turn on him the tables! "Mr Puddick continues to swear it." But even though so gracefully patient of him she remained cold.

"You yourself, however, haven't faith?"

"No," said Mrs Traffle.

"In his word, you mean?"

She had a fine little wait. "In her conduct. In his knowledge of it."

Again he had to rise to it. "With other persons?"

"With other persons. Even then."

Traffle thought. "But even when?"

"Even from the first," Jane grandly produced.

"Oh, oh, oh!" he found himself crying with a flush. He had had occasion to colour in the past for her flatness, but never for such an audacity of point. Wonderful, all round, in the light of reflection, seemed what Mora was doing for them. "It won't be her husband, at all events, who has put you up to *that!*"

She took this in as if it might have been roguishly insinuating in respect to her own wit though not, as who should say, to make any great use of it. "It's what I read "

"What you 'read' ?" he asked as she a little hung fire.

"Well, into the past that from far back so troubled me. I had plenty to tell *him!*" she surprisingly went on.

"Ah, my dear, to the detriment of his own wife?" our friend broke out.

It earned him, however, but her at once harder and richer look. Clearly she was at a height of satisfaction about something it spread and spread more before him. "For all that really, you know, she *is* now his wife!"

He threw himself amazedly back. "You mean she practically isn't?" And then as her eyes but appeared to fill it out: "Is that what you've been having from him? and is that what we've done?"

She looked away a little she turned off again. "Of course I've wanted the full truth as to what I've done."

Our friend could imagine that, at strict need; but wondrous to him with it was this air in her as of the birth of a new detachment. "What you've 'done', it strikes me, might be a little embarrassing for us; but you speak as if you really quite enjoyed it!"

This was a remark, he had to note, by which she wasn't in the least confounded; so that if he had his impression of that odd novelty in her to which allusion has just been made, it might indeed have been quite a new Jane who now looked at him out of her conscious eyes. "He likes to talk to me, poor dear."

She treated his observation as if that quite met it which couldn't but slightly irritate him; but he hadn't in the least abjured self-control, he was happy to feel, on his returning at once: "And you like to talk with *him*, obviously since he appears so beautifully and quickly to have brought you round from your view of him as merely low."

She flushed a little at this reminder, but it scarcely pulled her up. "I never thought him low" she made no more of it than that; "but I admit," she quite boldly smiled, "that I did think him wicked."

"And it's now your opinion that people can be wicked without being low?"

Prodigious, really, he found himself make out while she just hesitated, the opinions over the responsibility of which he should yet see her and all as a consequence of this one afternoon of his ill-inspired absence ready thus unnaturally to smirk at him. "It depends," she complacently brought out, "on the kind."

"On the kind of wickedness?"

"Yes, perhaps. And" it didn't at all baffle her "on the kind of people."

"I see. It's all, my dear, I want to get at for a proper understanding of the extraordinary somersault you appear to have turned. Puddick has just convinced you that *his* immoralities are the right ones?"

"No, love nothing will ever convince me that any immoralities deserve that name. But some," she went on, "only seem wrong till they're explained."

"And those are the ones that, as you say, he has been explaining?" Traffle asked with a glittering, cheerful patience.

"He has explained a great deal, yes" Jane bore up under it; "but I think that, by the opportunity for a good talk with him, I've at last understood even more. We weren't, you see, before," she obligingly added, "in his confidence."

"No, indeed," her husband opined, "we could scarcely be said to be. But now we are, and it makes the difference?"

"It makes the difference to *me*," Jane nobly contented herself with claiming. "If I've been remiss, however," she showed herself prepared to pursue, "I must make it up. And doubtless I *have* been."

"Remiss," he stared, "when you're in full enjoyment of my assent to our making such sacrifices for her?"

She gave it, in her superior way, a moment's thought. "I don't mean remiss in act; no, that, thank goodness, we haven't been. But remiss in feeling," she quite unbearably discriminated.

"Ah, that, *par exemple*," he protested, "I deny that I've been for a moment!"

"No" and she fairly mused at him; "you seemed to have all sorts of ideas; while I," she conceded, "had only one, which, so far as it went, was good. But it didn't go far enough."

He watched her a moment. "I doubtless don't know what idea you mean," he smiled, "but how far does it go now?"

She hadn't, with her preoccupied eyes on him, so much as noticed the ironic ring of it. "Well, you'll see for yourself. I mustn't abandon him."

"Abandon Puddick? Who the deuce then ever said you must?"

"Didn't *you* a little," she blandly inquired, "all the while you were so great on our not 'interfering'?"

"I was great if great you call it only," he returned, "so far as I was great for our just a little understanding."

"Well, what I'm telling you is that I think I do at present just a little understand."

"And doesn't it make you feel just a little badly?"

"No" she serenely shook her head; "for my intention was so good. He does justice now," she explained, "to my intention; or he will very soon he quite let me *see* that, and it's why I'm what you call 'happy'. With which," she wound up, "there's so much more I can still do. There are bad days, you see, before him and then he'll have only me. For if she *was* respectable," Jane proceeded, reverting as imperturbably to their question of a while back, "she's certainly not nice now."

He'd be hanged, Traffle said to himself, if he wouldn't look at her hard. "Do you mean by not coming to thank you?" And then as she but signified by a motion that this she had now made her terms with: "What else then is the matter with her?"

"The matter with her," said Jane on the note of high deliberation and competence, and not without a certain pity for his own want of light, "the matter with her is that she's quite making her preparations, by what he's convinced, for leaving him."

"Leaving him?" he met it with treasures of surprise.

These were nothing, however, he could feel, to the wealth of authority with which she again gave it out. "Leaving him."

"A month after marriage?"

"A month after their form; and she seems to think it handsome, he says, that she waited the month. *That*," she added, "is what he came above all that we should know."

He took in, our friend, many things in silence; but he presently had his comment. "We've done our job then to an even livelier tune than we could have hoped!"

Again this moral of it all didn't appear to shock her. "He doesn't reproach me," she wonderfully said.

"I'm sure it's very good of him then!" Traffle cried.

But her blandness, her mildness, was proof. "My dear Sidney, Walter *is* very good."

She brought it out as if she had made, quite unaided, the discovery; though even this, perhaps, was not what he most stared at. "Do you call him Walter?"

"Surely" and she returned surprise for surprise "isn't he my nephew?"

Traffle bethought himself. "You recognize the Registrar then for *that*."

She could perfectly smile back. "I don't know that I would if our friend weren't so interesting."

It was quite for Sidney Traffle, at this, as if he hadn't known up to that moment, filled for him with her manner of intimating her reason, what sort of a wife for coolness and other things he rejoiced in. Really he had to take time and to throw himself, while he did so, into pretences. "The Registrar?"

"Don't be a goose, dear!" she showed she could humour him at last; and it was perhaps the most extraordinary impression he had ever in his life received. "But you'll see," she continued in this spirit. "I mean how I shall interest you." And then as he but seemed to brood at her: "Interest you, I mean, in my interest for I shan't content myself," she beautifully professed, "with your simply not minding it."

"Minding your interest?" he frowned.

"In my poor ravaged, lacerated, pathetic nephew. I shall expect you in some degree to share it."

"Oh, I'll share it if you like, but you must remember how little I'm responsible."

She looked at him abysmally. "No it *was* mainly me. He brings that home to me, poor dear. Oh, he doesn't scare me!" she kept it up; "and I don't know that I want him to, for it seems to clear the whole question, and really to ease me a little, that he should put everything before me, his grievance with us, I mean, and that I should know just how he has seen our attitude, or at any rate mine. I was stupid the other day when he came he saw but a part



of it then. It's settled," she further mentioned, "that I shall go to him."

"Go to him ?" Traffle blankly echoed.

"At his studio, dear, you know," Jane promptly supplied. "I want to see his work for we had some talk about that too. He has made me care for it."

Her companion took these things in even so many of them as there now seemed to be: they somehow left him, in point of fact, so stranded. "Why not call on *her* at once?"

"That will be useless when she won't receive me. Never, never!" said Jane with a sigh so confessedly superficial that her husband found it peculiarly irritating.

"He has brought *that* 'home' to you?" he consequently almost jibed.

She winced no more, however, than if he had tossed her a flower. "Ah, what he has made me realize is that if he has definitely lost her, as he feels, so we ourselves assuredly have, for ever and a day. But he doesn't mean to lose sight of her, and in that way "

"In that way?" Traffle waited.

"Well, I shall always hear whatever there may be. And there's no knowing," she developed as with an open and impartial appetite, "what that mayn't come to."

He turned away with his own conception of this possible expansive quantity and a sore sense of how the combinations of things were appointed to take place without his aid or presence, how they kept failing to provide for him at all. It was his old irony of fate, which seemed to insist on meeting him at every turn. Mora had testified in the morning to no further use for him than might reside in his making her shuffled-off lover the benevolent business of his life; but even in this cold care, clearly, he was forestalled by a person to whom it would come more naturally. It was by his original and independent measure that the whole case had become interesting and been raised above the level of a mere vulgar scandal; in spite of which he could now stare but at the prospect of exclusion, and of his walking round it, through the coming years to walk vaguely round and round announcing itself thus at the best as the occupation of his future in wider and remoter circles. As against this, for warmth, there would nestle in his breast but a prize of memory, the poor little secret of the passage at the Gallery that the day had bequeathed him. He might propose to hug this treasure of consciousness, to make it, by some ingenuity he couldn't yet forecast, his very own; only it was a poor thing in view of their positive privation, and what Jane was getting out of the whole business *her* ingenuity it struck him he could quite forecast would certainly be a comparative riot of sympathy. He stood with his hands in his pockets and gazed a little, very sightlessly that is with an other than ranging vision, even though not other than baffled one too out of the glimmering square of the window. Then, however, he recalled himself, slightly shook himself, and the next moment had faced about with a fresh dissimulation. "If you talk of her leaving him, and he himself comes in for all your bounty, what then is she going to live upon."

"On her wits, he thinks and fears; on her beauty, on her audacity. Oh, it's a picture !" Jane was now quite unshrinkingly able to report from her visitor. Traffle, morally fingering, as it were, the mystic medal under his shirt, was at least equally qualified, on his side, to gloom all yearningly at her; but she had meanwhile testified further to her consistent command of their position. "He believes her to be more than ever *not* 'respectable'."

"How, 'more than ever', if respectable was what she *was*?"

"It was what she wasn't!" Jane returned.

## Mora Montravers

He had a prodigious shrug it almost eased him for the moment of half his impatience. "I understood that you told me a moment ago the contrary."

"Then you understood wrong. All I said was that he says she was but that I don't believe him."

He wondered, following. "Then how does he come to describe her as less so?"

Jane straightened it out Jane surpassed herself. "He doesn't describe her as less so than she 'was' I only put her at that. *He* " oh, she was candid and clear about it! "simply puts her at less so than she might be. In order, don't you see," she luminously reasoned, "that we shall have it on our conscience that we took the case out of his hands."

"And you allowed to him then that that's how we do have it?"

To this her face lighted as never yet. "Why, it's just the point of what I tell you that I feel I *must*."

He turned it over. "But why so if you're right?"

She brought up her own shoulders for his density. "I haven't been right. I've been wrong."

He could only glare about. "In holding her then already to have fallen ?"

"Oh, dear, no, not that! In having let it work me up. Of course I can but take from him now," she elucidated, "what he insists on."

Her husband measured it. "Of course, in other words, you can but believe she was as bad as possible and yet pretend to him he has persuaded you of the contrary?"

"Exactly, love so that it shall make us worse. As bad as he wants us," she smiled.

"In order," Traffle said after a moment, "that he may comfortably take the money?"

She welcomed this gleam. "In order that he may comfortably take it."

He could but gaze at her again. "You *have* arranged it!"

"Certainly I have and that's why I'm calm. He considers, at any rate," she continued, "that it will probably be Sir Bruce. I mean that she'll leave him for."

"And who in the world is Sir Bruce?"

She consulted her store of impressions. "Sir Bruce Bagley, Bart., I think he said."

Traffle fitted it in silence. "A soldier?" he then asked.

"I'm uncertain but, as I seem to remember, a patron. He buys pictures."

Traffle could privately imagine it. "And that's how she knows him?"

Jane, allowed for his simplicity. "Oh, how she 'knows' people !"

It still held him, however, an instant. "What sort of a type?"

She seemed to wonder a little at his press of questions, but after just facing it didn't pretend to more than she knew. She was, on this basis of proper relations that she had settled, more and more willing, besides, to oblige. "I'll find out for you."

It came in a tone that made him turn off. "Oh, I don't mind." With which he was back at the window.

She hovered she didn't leave him; he felt her there behind him as if she had noted a break in his voice or a moisture in his eyes a tribute to a natural pang even for a not real niece. He wouldn't renew with her again, and would have been glad now had she quitted him; but there grew for him during the next moments the strange sense that, with what had so bravely happened for her to the point of the triumph of displaying it to him inclusive the instinct of compassion worked in her; though whether in respect of the comparative solitude to which her duties to 'Walter' would perhaps more or less relegate him, or on the score of his having brought home to him, as she said, so much that was painful, she hadn't yet made up her mind. This, after a little, however, she discreetly did; she decided in the sense of consideration for his nerves. She lingered he felt her more vaguely about; and in the silence that thus lasted between them he felt also, with its importance, the determination of their life for perhaps a long time to come. He was wishing she'd go he was wanting not then again to meet her eyes; but still more than either of these things he was asking himself, as from time to time during the previous months he had all subtly and idly asked, what would have been the use, after all, of so much imagination as constantly worked in him. Didn't it let him into more deep holes than it pulled him out of? Didn't it make for him more tight places than it saw him through? Or didn't it at the same time, not less, give him all to himself a life, exquisite, occult, dangerous and sacred, to which everything ministered and which nothing could take away?

He fairly lost himself in that aspect which it was clear only the vision and the faculty themselves could have hung there, of a sudden, so wantonly before him; and by the moment attention for nearer things had re-emerged he seemed to know how his wife had interpreted his air of musing melancholy absence. She had dealt with it after her own fashion; had given him a moment longer the benefit of a chance to inquire or a peal afresh; and then, after brushing him good-humouredly, in point of fact quite gaily, with her skirts, after patting and patronizing him gently with her finger-tips, very much as he had patted and patronized Walter Puddick that day in the porch, had put him in his place, on the whole matter of the issue of their trouble, or at least had left him in it, by a happy last word. She had judged him more upset, more unable to conclude or articulate, about Mora and Sir Bruce, than she, with her easier power of rebound, had been; and her final wisdom, indeed her final tenderness, would be to show him cheerful and helpful mercy. "No, then, I see I mustn't rub it in. You shan't be worried. I'll keep it all to myself, dear." With which she would have floated away with which and some other things he was sensibly, relievingly alone. But he remained staring out at the approach of evening and it was of the other things he was more and more conscious while the vague grey prospect held him. Even while he had looked askance in the greyness at the importunate fiend of fancy it was riding him again as the very genius of twilight; it played the long reach of its prompt lantern over Sir Bruce Bagley, the patron of promising young lives. He wondered about Sir Bruce, recalling his face and his type and his effect his effect, so immediate, on Mora; wondered how he had proceeded, how he would still proceed, how far perhaps even they had got by that time. Lord, the fun some people did have! Even Jane, with her conscientious new care even Jane, unmistakably, was in for such a lot.