The Papers

Henry James

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There was a longish period −− the dense duration of a London winter, cheered, if cheered it could be called, with lurid electric, with fierce 'incandescent' flares and glares −− when they repeatedly met, at feeding−time, in a small and not quite savoury pothouse a stone's−throw from the Strand. They talked always of pothouses, of feeding−time −− by which they meant any hour between one and four of the afternoon; they talked of most things, even of some of the greatest, in a manner that gave, or that they desired to show as giving, in respect to the conditions of their life, the measure of their detachment, their contempt, their general irony. Their general irony, which they tried at the same time to keep gay and to make amusing at least to each other, was their refuge from the want of savour, the want of napkins, the want, too often, of shillings, and of many things besides that they would have liked to have. Almost all they had with any security was their youth, complete, admirable, very nearly invulnerable, or as yet inattackable; for they didn't count their talent, which they had originally taken for granted and had since then lacked freedom of mind, as well indeed as any offensive reason, to reappraise. They were taken up with other questions and other estimates −− the remarkable limits, for instance, of their luck, the remarkable smallness of the talent of their friends. They were above all in that phase of youth and in that state of aspiration in which 'luck' is the subject of most frequent reference, as definite as the colour red, and in which it is the elegant name for money when people are as refined as they are poor. She was only a suburban young woman in a sailor hat, and he a young man destitute, in strictness, of occasion for a 'topper'; but they felt that they had in a peculiar way the freedom of the town, and the town, if it did nothing else, gave a range to the spirit. They sometimes went, on excursions that they groaned at as professional, far afield from the Strand, but the curiosity with which they came back was mostly greater than any other, the Strand being for them, with its ampler alternative Fleet Street, overwhelmingly the Papers, and the Papers being, at a rough guess, all the furniture of their consciousness.

The Daily Press played for them the part played by the embowered nest on the swaying bough for the parent birds that scour the air. It was, as they mainly saw it, a receptacle, owing its form to the instinct more remarkable, as they held the journalistic, than that even of the most highly organised animal, into which, regularly, breathlessly, contributions had to be dropped −− odds and ends, all grist to the mill, all somehow digestible and convertible, all conveyed with the promptest possible beak and the flutter, often, of dreadfully fatigued little wings. If there had been no Papers there would have been no young friends for us of the figure we hint at, no chance mates, innocent and weary, yet acute even to penetration, who were apt to push off their plates and rest their elbows on the table in the interval between the turn−over of the pint−pot and the call for the awful glibness of their score. Maud Blandy drank beer −− and welcome, as one may say; and she smoked cigarettes when privacy permitted, though she drew the line at this in the right place, just as she flattered herself she knew how to draw it, journalistically, where other delicacies were concerned. She was fairly a product of the day −− so fairly that she might have been born afresh each morning, to serve, after the fashion of certain agitated ephemeral insects, only till the morrow. It was as if a past had been wasted on her and a future were not to be fitted; she was really herself, so far at least as her great preoccupation went, an edition, an 'extra special', coming out at the loud hours and living its life, amid the roar of vehicles, the hustle of pavements, the shriek of newsboys, according to the quantity of shock to be administered, thanks to the varying temper of Fleet Street, to the nerves of the nation. Maud was a shocker, in short, in petticoats, and alike for the thoroughfare, the club, the suburban train and the humble home; though it must honestly be added that petticoats were not of her essence. This was one of the reasons, in an age of 'emancipations', of her intense actuality, as well as, positively, of a good fortune to which, however impersonal she might have appeared, she was not herself in a position to do full justice; the felicity of her having about her naturally so much of the young bachelor that she was saved the disfigurement of any marked straddling or elbowing. It was literally true of her that she would have pleased less, or at least have offended more, had she been obliged, or been prompted, to assert −− all too vainly, as it would have been sure to be −− her superiority to sex. Nature, constitution, accident, whatever we happen to call it, had relieved her of this care; the struggle for life, the competition with men, the taste of the day, the fashion of the hour had made her superior, or had at any rate made her indifferent, and she had no difficulty in remaining so. The thing was therefore, with the

aid of an extreme general flatness of person, directness of step and simplicity of motive, quietly enough done, without a grace, a weak inconsequence, a stray reminder to interfere with the success; and it is not too much to say that the success −− by which I mean the plainness of the type −− would probably never have struck you as so great as at the moments of our young lady's chance comradeship with Howard Bight. For the young man, though his personal signs had not, like his friend's, especially the effect of one of the stages of an evolution, might have been noted as not so fiercely or so freshly a male as to distance Maud in the show.

She presented him in truth, while they sat together, as comparatively girlish. She fell naturally into gestures, tones, expressions, resemblances, that he either suppressed, from sensibility to her personal predominance, or that were merely latent in him through much taking for granted. Mild, sensitive, none too solidly nourished, and condemned, perhaps by a deep delusion as to the final issue of it, to perpetual coming and going, he was so resigned to many things, and so disgusted even with many others, that the least of his cares was the cultivation of a bold front. What mainly concerned him was its being bold enough to get him his dinner, and it was never more void of aggression than when he solicited in person those scraps of information, snatched at those floating particles of news, on which his dinner depended. Had he had time a little more to try his case, he would have made out that if he liked Maud Blandy, it was partly by the impression of what she could do for him: what she could do for herself had never entered into his head. The positive quantity, moreover, was vague to his mind; it existed, that is, for the present, but as the proof of how, in spite of the want of encouragement, a fellow could keep going. She struck him in fact as the only encouragement he had, and this altogether by example, since precept, frankly, was deterrent on her lips, as speech was free, judgement prompt, and accent not absolutely pure. The point was that, as the easiest thing to be with her, he was so passive that it almost made him graceful and so attentive that it almost made him distinguished. She was herself neither of these things, and they were not of course what a man had most to be; whereby she contributed to their common view the impatiences required by a proper reaction, forming thus for him a kind of protective hedge behind which he could wait. Much waiting, for either, was, I hasten to add, always in order, inasmuch as their novitiate seemed to them interminable and the steps of their ladder fearfully far apart. It rested −− the ladder −− against the great stony wall of the public attention −− a sustaining mass which apparently wore somewhere, in the upper air, a big, thankless, expressionless face, a countenance equipped with eyes, ears, an uplifted nose and a gaping mouth −− all convenient if they could only be reached. The ladder groaned meanwhile, swayed and shook with the weight of the close−pressed climbers, tier upon tier, occupying the upper, the middle, the nethermost rounds and quite preventing, for young persons placed as our young friends were placed, any view of the summit. It was meanwhile moreover only Howard Bight's perverse view −− he was confessedly perverse −− that Miss Blandy had arrived at a perch superior to his own.

She had hitherto recognised in herself indeed but a tighter clutch and a grimmer purpose; she had recognised, she believed, in keen moments, a vocation; she had recognised that there had been eleven of them at home, with herself as youngest, and distinctions by that time so blurred in her that she might as easily have been christened John. She had recognised truly, most of all, that if they came to talk they both were nowhere; yet this was compatible with her insisting that Howard had as yet comparatively had the luck. When he wrote to people they consented, or at least they answered; almost always, for that matter, they answered with greed, so that he was not without something of some sort to hawk about to buyers. Specimens indeed of human greed −− the greed, the great one, the eagerness to figure, the snap at the bait of publicity, he had collected in such store as to stock, as to launch, a museum. In this museum the prize object, the high rare specimen, had been for some time established; a celebrity of the day enjoying, uncontested, a glass case all to himself, more conspicuous than any other, before which the arrested visitor might rebound from surprised recognition. Sir A. B. C. Beadel−Muffet K.C.B., M.P., stood forth there as large as life, owing indeed his particular place to the shade of direct acquaintance with him that Howard Bight could boast, yet with his eminent presence in such a collection but too generally and notoriously justified. He was universal and ubiquitous, commemorated, under some rank rubric, on every page of every public print every day in every year, and as inveterate a feature of each issue of any self−respecting sheet as the name, the date, the tariffed advertisements. He had always done something, or was about to do something, round which the honours of announcement clustered, and indeed, as he had inevitably thus become a subject of fallacious report, one half of his chronicle appeared to consist of official contradiction of the other half. His activity −− if it had not better been called his passivity −− was beyond any other that figured in the public eye, for

no other assuredly knew so few or such brief intermittences. Yet, as there was the inside as well as the outside view of his current history, the quantity of it was easy to analyse for the possessor of the proper crucible. Howard Bight, with his arms on the table, took it apart and put it together again most days in the year, so that an amused comparison of notes on the subject often added a mild spice to his colloquies with Maud Blandy. They knew, the young pair, as they considered, many secrets, but they liked to think that they knew none quite so scandalous as the way that, to put it roughly, this distinguished person maintained his distinction.

It was known certainly to all who had to do with the Papers, a brotherhood, a sisterhood of course interested −− for what was it, in the last resort, but the interest of their bread and butter? −− in shrouding the approaches to the oracle, in not telling tales out of school. They all lived alike on the solemnity, the sanctity of the oracle, and the comings and goings, the doings and the undoings, the intentions and retractations of Sir A. B. C. Beadel−Muffet K.C.B., M.P., were in their degree a part of that solemnity. The Papers, taken together the glory of the age, were, though superficially multifold, fundamentally one, so that any revelation of their being procured or procurable to float an object not intrinsically buoyant would very logically convey discredit from the circumference −− where the revelation would be likely to be made −− to the centre. Of so much as this our grim neophytes, in common with a thousand others, were perfectly aware; but something in the nature of their wit, such as it was, or in the condition of their nerves, such as it easily might become, sharpened almost to acerbity their relish of so artful an imitation of the voice of fame. The fame was all voice, as they could guarantee who had an ear always glued to the speaking−tube; the items that made the sum were individually of the last vulgarity, but the accumulation was a triumph −− one of the greatest the age could show −− of industry and vigilance. It was after all not true that a man had done nothing who for ten years had so fed, so dyked and directed and distributed the fitful sources of publicity. He had laboured, in his way, like a navvy with a spade; he might be said to have earned by each night's work the reward, each morning, of his small spurt of glory. Even for such a matter as its not being true that Sir A. B. C. Beadel−Muffet K.C.B., M.P., was to start on his visit to the Sultan of Samarcand on the 23rd, but being true that he was to start on the 29th, the personal attention required was no small affair, taking the legend with the fact, the myth with the meaning, the original artless error with the subsequent earnest truth −− allowing in fine for the statement still to come that the visit would have to be relinquished in consequence of the visitor's other pressing engagements, and bearing in mind the countless channels to be successively watered. Our young man, one December afternoon, pushed an evening paper across to his companion, keeping his thumb on a paragraph at which she glanced without eagerness. She might, from her manner, have known by instinct what it would be, and her exclamation had the note of satiety. “Oh, he's working them now?"

"If he has begun he'll work them hard. By the time that has gone round the world there'll be something else to say. 'We are authorised to state that the marriage of Miss Miranda Beadel−Muffet to Captain Guy Devereux, of the Fiftieth Rifles, will not take place.' Authorised to state −− rather! when every wire in the machine has been pulled over and over. They're authorised to state something every day in the year, and the authorisation is not difficult to get. Only his daughters, now that they're coming on, poor things −− and I believe there are many −− will have to be chucked into the pot and produced on occasions when other matter fails. How pleasant for them to find themselves hurtling through the air, clubbed by the paternal hand, like golf−balls in a suburb! Not that I suppose they don't like it −− why should one suppose anything of the sort?" Howard Bight's impression of the general appetite appeared to−day to be especially vivid, and he and his companion were alike prompted to one of those slightly violent returns on themselves and the work they were doing which none but the vulgar−minded altogether avoid. "People −− as I see them −− would almost rather be jabbered about unpleasantly than not be jabbered about at all: whenever you try them −− whenever, at least, I do −− I'm confirmed in that conviction. It isn't only that if one holds out the mere tip of the perch they jump at it like starving fish; it is that they leap straight out of the water themselves, leap in their thousands and come flopping, open−mouthed and goggle−eyed, to one's very door. What is the sense of the French expression about a person's making des yeux de carpe? It suggests the eyes that a young newspaper−man seems to see all round him, and I declare I sometimes feel that, if one has the courage not to blink at the show, the gilt is a good deal rubbed off the gingerbread of one's early illusions. They all do it, as the song is at the music−halls, and it's some of one's surprises that tell one most. You've thought there were some high souls that didn't do it −− that wouldn't, I mean, to work the oracle, lift a little finger of their own. But, Lord bless you, give them a chance −− you'll find some of the greatest the greediest. I give you my word for it, I haven't a scrap of faith left in a single human creature. Except, of course," the young

man added, "the grand creature that you are, and the cold, calm, comprehensive one whom you thus admit to your familiarity. We face the music. We see, we understand; we know we've got to live, and how we do it. But at least, like this, alone together, we take our intellectual revenge, we escape the indignity of being fools dealing with fools. I don't way we shouldn't enjoy it more if we were. But it can't be helped; we haven't the gift −− the gift, I mean, of not seeing. We do the worst we can for the money."

"You certainly do the worst you can," Maud Blandy soon replied, "when you sit there, with your wanton wiles, and take the spirit out of me. I require a working faith, you know. If one isn't a fool, in our world, where is one?"

"Oh, I say!" her companion groaned without alarm. "Don't you fail me, mind you."

They looked at each other across their clean platters, and, little as the light of romance seemed superficially to shine in them or about them, the sense was visibly enough in each of being involved in the other. He would have been sharply alone, the softly sardonic young man, if the somewhat dry young woman hadn't affected him, in a way he was even too nervous to put to the test, as saving herself up for him; and the consciousness of absent resources that was on her own side quite compatible with this economy grew a shade or two less dismal with the imagination of his somehow being at costs for her. It wasn't an expense of shillings −− there was not much question of that; what it came to was perhaps nothing more than that, being as he declared himself, 'in the know', he kept pulling her in too, as if there had been room for them both. He told her everything, all his secrets. He talked and talked, often making her think of herself as a lean, stiff person, destitute of skill or art, but with ear enough to be performed to, sometimes strangely touched, at moments completely ravished, by a fine violinist. He was her fiddler and genius; she was sure neither of her taste nor of his tunes, but if she could do nothing else for him she could hold the case while he handled the instrument. It had never passed between them that they could draw nearer, for they seemed near, near verily for pleasure, when each, in a decent young life, was so much nearer to the other than to anything else. There was no pleasure known to either that wasn't further off. What held them together was in short that they were in the same boat, a cockle−shell in a great rough sea, and that the movements required for keeping it afloat not only were what the situation safely permitted, but also made for reciprocity and intimacy. These talks over greasy white slabs, repeatedly mopped with moist grey cloths by young women in black uniforms, with inexorable braided 'buns' in the nape of weak necks, these sessions, sometimes prolonged, in halls of oilcloth, among penal−looking tariffs and pyramids of scones, enabled them to rest on their oars; the more that they were on terms with the whole families, chartered companies, of food−stations, each a race of innumerable and indistinguishable members, and had mastered those hours of comparative elegance, the earlier and the later, when the little weary ministrants were limply sitting down and the occupants of the red benches bleakly interspaced. So it was, that, at times, they renewed their understanding, and by signs, mannerless and meagre, that would have escaped the notice of witnesses. Maud Blandy had no need to kiss her hand across to him to show she felt what he meant; she had moreover never in her life kissed her hand to anyone, and her companion couldn't have imagined it of her. His romance was so grey that it wasn't romance at all; it was a reality arrived at without stages, shades, forms. If he had been ill or stricken she would have taken him −− other resources failing −− into her lap; but would that, which would scarce even have been motherly, have been romantic? She nevertheless at this moment put in her plea for the general element. "I can't help it, about Beadel−Muffet; it's too magnificent −− it appeals to me. And then I've a particular feeling about him −− I'm waiting to see what will happen. It is genius, you know, to get yourself so celebrated for nothing −− to carry out your idea in the face of everything. I mean your idea of being celebrated. It isn't as if he had done even one little thing. What has he done when you come to look?"

"Why, my dear chap, he has done everything. He has missed nothing. He has been in everything, of everything, at everything, over everything, under everything, that has taken place for the last twenty years. He's always present, and, though he never makes a speech, he never fails to get alluded to in the speeches of others. That's doing it cheaper than anyone else does it, but it's thoroughly doing it −− which is what we're talking about. And so far," the young man contended, "from its being 'in the face' of anything, it's positively with the help of everything, since the Papers are everything and more. They're made for such people, though no doubt he's the person who has known best how to use them. I've gone through one of the biggest sometimes, from beginning to end −− it's quite a thrilling little game −− to catch him once out. It has happened to me to think I was near it when, on the last column of the last page −− I count 'advertisements', heaven help us, out! −− I've found him as large as

life and as true as the needle to the pole. But at last, in a way, it goes, it can't help going, of itself. He comes in, he breaks out, of himself; the letters, under the compositor's hand, form themselves, from the force of habit, into his name −− any connection for it, any context, being as good as any other, and the wind, which he has originally 'raised', but which continues to blow, setting perpetually in his favour. The thing would really be now, don't you see, for him to keep himself out. That would be, on my honour, it strikes me −− his getting himself out −− the biggest fact in his record."

The girl's attention, as her friend developed the picture, had become more present. "He can't get himself out. There he is." She had a pause; she had been thinking. "That's just my idea."

"Your idea? Well, an idea's always a blessing. What do you want for it?"

She continued to turn it over as if weighing its value. "Something perhaps could be done with it −− only it would take imagination."

He wondered, and she seemed to wonder that he didn't see. "Is it a situation for a 'ply'!"

"No, it's too good for a ply −− yet it isn't quite good enough for a short story."

"It would do then for a novel?"

"Well, I seem to see it," Maud said −− "and with a lot in it to be got out. But I seem to see it as a question not of what you or I might be able to do with it, but of what the poor man himself may. That's what I meant just now," she explained, "by my having a creepy sense of what may happen for him. It has already more than once occurred to me. Then," she wound up, "we shall have real life, the case itself."

"Do you know you've got imagination?" Her friend, rather interested, appeared by this time to have seized her thought.

"I see him having for some reason, very imperative, to seek retirement, lie low, to hide, in fact, like a man 'wanted', but pursued all the while by the lurid glare that he has himself so started and kept up, and at last literally devoured ('like Frankenstein', of course!) by the monster he has created."

"I say, you have got it!" −− and the young man flushed, visibly, artistically, with the recognition of elements which his eyes had for a minute earnestly fixed. "But it will take a lot of doing."

"Oh," said Maud, "we shan't have to do it. He'll do it himself."

"I wonder." Howard Bight really wondered. "The fun would be for him to do it for us. I mean for him to want us to help him somehow to get out."

"Oh, 'us'!" the girl mournfully sighed.

"Why not, when he comes to us to get in?"

Maud Blandy stared. "Do you mean to you personally? You surely know by this time that no one ever 'comes' to me."

"Why, I went to him in the first instance; I made up to him straight, I did him 'at home', somewhere, as I've surely mentioned to you before, three years ago. He liked, I believe −− for he's really a delightful old ass −− the way I did it; he knows my name and has my address, and has written me three or four times since, with his own hand, a request to be so good as to make use of my (he hopes) still close connection with the daily Press to rectify the rumour that he has reconsidered his opinion on the subject of the blankets supplied to the Upper Tooting Workhouse Infirmary. He has reconsidered his opinion on no subject whatever −− which he mentions, in the interest of historic truth, without further intrusion on my valuable time. And he regards that sort of thing as a commodity that I can dispose of −− thanks to my 'close connection' −− for several shillings."

"And can you?"

"Not for several pence. They're all tariffed, but he's tariffed low −− having a value, apparently, that money doesn't represent. He's always welcome, but he isn't always paid for. The beauty, however, is in his marvellous memory, his keeping us all so apart and not muddling the fellow to whom he has written that he hasn't done this, that or the other with the fellow to whom he has written that he has. He'll write to me again some day about something else −− about his alleged position on the date of the next school−treat of the Chelsea Cabmen's Orphanage. I shall seek a market for the precious item, and that will keep us in touch; so that if the complication you have the sense of in your bones does come into play −− the thought's too beautiful! −− he may once more remember me. Fancy his coming to one with a 'What can you do for me now?'". Bight lost himself in the happy vision; it gratified so his cherished consciousness of the 'irony of fate' −− a consciousness so cherished that he never could write ten lines without use of the words.

Maud showed however at this point a reserve which appeared to have grown as the possibility opened out. "I believe in it −− it must come. It can't not. It's the only end. He doesn't know; nobody knows −− the simple−minded all: only you and I know. But it won't be nice, remember."

"It won't be funny?"

"It will be pitiful. There'll have to be a reason."

"For his turning round?" the young man nursed the vision. "More or less −− I see what you mean. But except for a 'ply' will that so much matter? His reason will concern himself. What will concern us will be his funk and his helplessness, his having to stand there in the blaze, with nothing and nobody to put it out. We shall see him, shrieking for a bucket of water, wither up in the central flame."

Her look had turned sombre. "It makes one cruel. That is it makes you. I mean our trade does."

"I dare say −− I see too much. But I'm willing to chuck it."

"Well," she presently replied, "I'm not willing to, but it seems pretty well on the cards that I shall have to. I don't see too much. I don't see enough. So, for all the good it does me−−!"

She had pushed back her chair and was looking round for her umbrella. "Why, what's the matter?" Howard Bight too blankly inquired.

She met his eyes while she pulled on her rusty old gloves. "Well, I'll tell you another time."

He kept his place, still lounging, contented where she had again become restless. "Don't you call it seeing enough to see −− to have had so luridly revealed to you −− the doom of Beadel−Muffet?"

"Oh, he's not my business, he's yours. You're his man, or one of his men −− he'll come back to you. Besides, he's a special case, and, as I say, I'm too sorry for him."

"That's a proof then of what you do see."

Her silence for a moment admitted it, though evidently she was making, for herself, a distinction, which she didn't express. "I don't then see what I want, what I require. And he," she added, "if he does have some reason, will have to have an awfully strong one. To be strong enough it will have to be awful."

"You mean he'll have done something?"

"Yes, that may remain undiscovered if he can only drop out of the papers, sit for a while in darkness. You'll know what it is; you'll not be able to help yourself. But I shan't want to, for anything."

She had got up as she said it, and he sat looking at her, thanks to her odd emphasis, with an interest that, as he also rose, passed itself off as a joke. "Ah, then, you sweet sensitive thing, I promise to keep it from you."

2

They met again a few days later, and it seemed the law of their meetings that these should take place mainly within moderate eastward range of Charing Cross. An afternoon performance of a play translated from the Finnish, already several times given, on a series of Saturdays, had held Maud for an hour in a small, hot, dusty theatre where the air hung as heavy about the great 'trimmed' and plumed hats of the ladies as over the flora and fauna of a tropical forest; at the end of which she edged out of her stall in the last row, to join a small band of unattached critics and correspondents, spectators with ulterior views and pencilled shirtcuffs, who, coming together in the lobby for an exchange of ideas, were ranging from 'Awful rot' to 'Rather jolly'. Ideas, of this calibre, rumbled and flashed, so that, lost in the discussion, our young woman failed at first to make out that a gentleman on the other side of the group, but standing a little off, had his eyes on her for some extravagant, though apparently quite respectable, purpose. He had been waiting for her to recognise him, and as soon as he had caught her attention he came round to her with an eager bow. She had by this time entirely placed him −− placed him as the smoothest and most shining subject with which, in the exercise of her profession, she had yet experimented; but her recognition was accompanied with a pang that his amiable address made but the sharper. She had her reason for awkwardness in the presence of the rosy, glossy, kindly, but discernibly troubled personage whom she had waited on 'at home' at her own suggestion −− promptly welcomed −− and the sympathetic element in whose 'personality', the Chippendale, the photographic, the autographic elements in whose flat in the Earl's Court Road, she had commemorated in the liveliest prose of which she was capable. She had described with humour his favourite make of Kodak, she had touched upon his favourite manner of spending his Sundays and had extorted from him the shy confession that he preferred after all the novel of adventure to the novel of subtlety. Her embarrassment was therefore now the greater as, touching to behold, he so clearly had approached her with no intention of asperity, not even at first referring at all to the matter that couldn't have been gracefully explained.

She had seen him originally −− had had the instinct of it in making up to him −− as one of the happy of the earth, and the impression of him 'at home', on his proving so good−natured about the interview, had begotten in her a sharper envy, a hungrier sense of the invidious distinctions of fate, than any her literary conscience, which she deemed rigid, had yet had to reckon with. He must have been rich, rich by such estimates as hers; he at any rate had everything, while she had nothing −− nothing but the vulgar need of offering him to brag, on his behalf, for money, if she could get it, about his luck. She hadn't in fact got money, hadn't so much as managed to work in her stuff anywhere; a practical comment sharp enough on her having represented to him −− with wasted pathos, she was indeed soon to perceive −− how 'important' it was to her that people should let her get at them. This dim celebrity had not needed that argument; he had not only, with his alacrity, allowed her, as she had said, to try her hand, but had tried with her, quite feverishly, and all to the upshot of showing her that there were even greater outsiders than herself. He could have put down money, could have published, as the phrase was −− a bare two columns −− at his own expense; but it was just a part of his rather irritating luxury that he had a scruple about that, wanted intensely to taste the sweet, but didn't want to owe it to any wire−pulling. He wanted the golden apple straight from the tree, where it yet seemed so unable to grow for him by any exuberance of its own. He had breathed to her his real secret −− that to be inspired, to work with effect, he had to feel he was appreciated, to have it all somehow come back to him. The artist, necessarily sensitive, lived on encouragement, on knowing and being reminded that people cared for him a little, cared even just enough to flatter him a wee bit. They had talked that over, and he had really, as he called it, quite put himself in her power. He had whispered in her ear that it might be very weak and silly, but that positively to be himself, to do anything, certainly to do his best, he required the breath of sympathy. He did love notice, let alone praise −− there it was. To be systematically ignored −− well, blighted him at the root. He was afraid she would think he had said too much, but she left him with his leave, none the less, to repeat a part of it. They had agreed that she was to bring in prettily, somehow, that he did love praise; for just the right way he was sure he could trust to her taste.

She had promised to send him the interview in proof, but she had been able, after all, to send it but in type−copy. If she, after all, had had a flat adorned −− as to the drawing−room alone −− with eighty−three

photographs, and all in plush frames; if she had lived in the Earl's Court Road, had been rosy and glossy and well filled out; and if she had looked withal, as she always made a point of calling it when she wished to refer without vulgarity to the right place in the social scale. 'unmistakeably gentle' −− if she had achieved these things she would have snapped her fingers at all other sweets, have sat as tight as possible and let the world wag, have spent her Sundays in silently thanking her stars, and not have cared to know one Kodak, or even one novelist's 'methods', from another. Except for his unholy itch he was in short so just the person she would have liked to be that the last consecration was given for her to his character by his speaking quite as if he had accosted her only to secure her view of the strange Finnish 'soul'. He had come each time −− there had been four Saturdays; whereas Maud herself had had to wait till to−day, though her bread depended on it, for the roundabout charity of her publicly bad seat. It didn't matter why he had come −− so that he might see it somewhere printed of him that he was 'a conspicuously faithful attendant' at the interesting series; it only mattered that he was letting her off so easily, and yet that there was a restless hunger, odd on the part of one of the filled−out, in his appealing eye, which she now saw not to be a bit intelligent, though that didn't matter either. Howard Bight came into view while she dealt with these impressions, whereupon she found herself edging a little away from her patron. Her other friend, who had but just arrived and was apparently waiting to speak to her, would be a pretext for a break before the poor gentleman should begin to accuse her of having failed him. She had failed herself so much more that she would have been ready to reply to him that he was scarce the one to complain; fortunately, however, the bell sounded the end of the interval and her tension was relaxed. They all flocked back to their places, and her camarade −− she knew enough often so to designate him −− was enabled, thanks to some shifting of other spectators, to occupy a seat beside her. He had brought with him the breath of business; hurrying from one appointment to another he might have time but for a single act. He had seen each of the others by itself, and the way he now crammed in the third, after having previously snatched the fourth, brought home again to the girl that he was leading the real life. Her own was a dull imitation of it. Yet it happened at the same time that before the curtain rose again he had, with a "Who's your fat friend?" professed to have caught her in the act of making her own brighter.

" 'Mortimer Marshal'?" he echoed after she had, a trifle dryly, satisfied him. "Never heard of him."

"Well, I shan't tell him that. But you have," she said; "you've only forgotten. I told you after I had been to him."

Her friend thought −− it came back to him. "Oh yes, and showed me what you had made of it. I remember your stuff was charming."

"I see you remember nothing," Maud a little more dryly said. "I didn't show you what I had made of it. I've never made anything. You've not seen my stuff, and nobody has. They won't have it."

She spoke with a smothered vibration, but, as they were still waiting, it had made him look at her; by which she was slightly the more disconcerted. "Who won't?"

"Everyone, everything won't. Nobody, nothing will. He's hopeless, or rather I am. I'm no good. And he knows it."

"O −− oh!" the young man kindly but vaguely protested. "Has he been making that remark to you?"

"No −− that's the worst of it. He's too dreadfully civil. He thinks I can do something."

"Then why do you say he knows you can't?"

She was impatient; she gave it up. "Well, I don't know what he knows −− except that he does want to be loved."

"Do you mean he has proposed to you to love him?"

"Loved by the great heart of the public −− speaking through its natural organ. He wants to be −− well, where Beadel−Muffet is."

"Oh, I hope not!" said Bight with grim amusement.

His friend was struck with his tone. "Do you mean it's coming on for Beadel−Muffet −− what we talked about?" And then as he looked at her so queerly that her curiosity took a jump: "It really and truly is? Has anything happened?"

"The rummest thing in the world −− since I last saw you. We're wonderful, you know, you and I together −− we see. And what we see always takes place, usually within the week. It wouldn't be believed. But it will do for us. At any rate it's high sport."

"Do you mean," she asked, "that his scare has literally begun?"

He meant, clearly, quite as much as he said. "He has written to me again he wants to see me, and we've an appointment for Monday."

"Then why isn't it the old game?"

"Because it isn't. He wants to gather from me, as I have served him before, if something can't be done. On a souvent besoin d'un plus petit que soi. Keep quiet, and we shall see something."

This was very well; only his manner visibly had for her the effect of a chill in the air. "I hope," she said, "you're going at least to be decent to him."

"Well, you'll judge. Nothing at all can be done −− it's too ridiculously late. And it serves him right. I shan't deceive him, certainly, but I might as well enjoy him."

The fiddles were still going, and Maud had a pause. "Well, you know you've more of less lived on him. I mean it's the kind of thing you are living on."

"Precisely −− that's just why I loathe it."

Again she hesitated. "You mustn't quarrel, you know, with your bread and butter."

He looked straight before him, as if she had been consciously, and the least bit disagreeably, sententious. "What in the world's that but what I shall just be not doing? If our bread and butter is the universal push I consult our interest by not letting it trifle with us. They're not to blow hot and cold −− it won't do. There he is −− let him get out himself. What I call sport is to see if he can."

"And not −− poor wretch −− to help him?"

But Bight was ominously lucid. "The devil is that he can't be helped. His one idea of help, from the day he opened his eyes, has been to be prominently −− damn the word! −− mentioned: it's the only kind of help that exists in connection with him. What therefore is a fellow to do when he happens to want it to stop −− wants a special sort of prominence that will work like a trap in a pantomime and enable him to vanish when the situation requires it? Is one to mention that he wants not to be mentioned −− never, never, please, any more? Do you see the success of that, all over the place, do you see the headlines in the American papers? No, he must die as he has lived −− the Principal Public Person of his time."

"Well," she sighed, "it's all horrible." And then without a transition: "What do you suppose has happened to him?"

"The dreadfulness I wasn't to tell you?"

"I only mean if you suppose him in a really bad hole."

The young man considered. "It can't certainly be that he has had a change of heart −− never. It may be nothing worse than that the woman he wants to marry has turned against it."

"But I supposed him −− with his children all so boomed −− to be married."

"Naturally; else he couldn't have got such a boom from the poor lady's illness, death and burial. Don't you remember two years ago? −− 'We are given to understand that Sir A. B. C. Beadel−Muffet K.C.B., M.P., particularly desires that no flowers be sent for the late Hon. Lady Beadel−Muffet's funeral.' And then, the next day: 'We are authorised to state that the impression, so generally prevailing, that Sir A. B. C. Beadel−Muffet has expressed an objection to flowers in connection with the late Hon. Lady Beadel−Muffet's obsequies, rests on a misapprehension of Sir A. B. C. Beadel−Muffet's markedly individual views. The floral tributes already delivered in Queen's Gate Gardens, and remarkable for number and variety, have been a source of such gratification to the bereaved gentleman as his situation permits.' With a wind−up of course for the following week −− the inevitable few heads of remark, on the part of the bereaved gentleman, on the general subject of Flowers at Funerals as a Fashion, vouchsafed, under pressure possibly indiscreet, to a rising young journalist always thirsting for the authentic word."

"I guess now," said Maud, after an instant, "the rising young journalist. You egged him on."

"Dear, no. I panted in his rear."

"It makes you," she added, "more than cynical."

"And what do you call 'more than' cynical?"

"It makes you sardonic. Wicked," she continued; "devilish."

"That's it −− that is cynical. Enough's as good as a feast." But he came back to the ground they had quitted. "What were you going to say he's prominent for, Mortimer Marshal?"

She wouldn't, however, follow him there yet, her curiosity on the other issue not being spent. "Do you know then as a fact, that he's marrying again, the bereaved gentleman?"

Her friend, at this, showed impatience. "My dear fellow, do you see nothing? We had it all, didn't we, three months ago, and then we didn't have it, and then we had it again; and goodness knows where we are. But I throw out the possibility. I forget her bloated name, but she may be rich, and she may be decent. She may make it a condition that he keeps out −− out, I mean, of the only things he has really ever been 'in'."

"The Papers?"

"The dreadful, nasty, vulgar Papers. She may put it to him −− I see it dimly and queerly, but I see it −− that he must get out first, and then they'll talk; then she'll say yes, then he'll have the money. I see it −− and much more sharply −− that he wants the money, needs it, I mean, badly, desperately, so that this necessity may very well make the hole in which he finds himself. Therefore he must do something −− what he's trying to do. It supplies the motive that our picture, the other day, rather missed."

Maud Blandy took this in, but it seemed to fail to satisfy her. "It must be something worse. You make it out that, so that your practical want of mercy, which you'll not be able to conceal from me, shall affect me as less inhuman."

"I don't make it out anything, and I don't care what it is; the queerness, the grand 'irony' of the case is itself enough for me. You, on your side, however, I think, make it out what you call 'something worse', because of the romantic bias of your mind. You 'see red'. Yet isn't it, after all, sufficiently lurid that he shall lose his blooming bride?"

"You're sure," Maud appealed, "that he'll lose her?"

"Poetic justice screams for it; and my whole interest in the matter is staked on it."

But the girl continued to brood. "I thought you contend that nobody's half 'decent'. Where do you find a woman to make such a condition?"

"Not easily, I admit." The young man thought. "It will be his luck to have found her. That's his tragedy, say, that she can financially save him, but that she happens to be just the one freak, the creature whose stomach has turned. The spark −− I mean of decency −− has got, after all, somehow to be kept alive; and it may be lodged in this particular female form."

"I see. But why should a female form that's so particular confess to an affinity with a male form that's so fearfully general? As he's all self−advertisement, why isn't it much more natural to her simply to loathe him?"

"Well, because, oddly enough, it seems that people don't."

"You do," Maud declared. "You'll kill him."

He just turned a flushed cheek to her, and she saw that she had touched something that lived in him. "We can," he consciously smiled, "deal death. And the beauty is that it's in a perfectly straight way. We can lead them on. But have you ever seen Beadel−Muffet for yourself?" he continued.

"No. How often, please, need I tell you that I've seen nobody and nothing?"

"Well, if you had you'd understand."

"You mean he's so fetching?"

"Oh, he's great. He's not 'all' self−advertisement −− or at least he doesn't seem to be: that's his pull. But I see, you female humbug," Bight pursued, "how much you'd like him yourself."

"I want, while I'm about it, to pity him in sufficient quantity."

"Precisely. Which means, for a woman, with extravagance and to the point of immorality."

"I ain't a woman," Maud Blandy sighed. "I wish I were!"

"Well, about the pity," he went on; "you shall be immoral, I promise you, before you've done. Doesn't Mortimer Marshal," he asked, "take you for a woman?"

"You'll have to ask him. How," she demanded, "does one know those things?" And she stuck to her Beadel−Muffet. "If you're to see him on Monday shan't you then get to the bottom of it?"

"Oh, I don't conceal from you that I promise myself larks, but I won't tell you, positively I won't," Bight said, "what I see. You're morbid. If it's only bad enough −− I mean his motive −− you'll want to save him."

"Well, isn't that what you're to profess to him that you want?"

"Ah," the young man returned, "I believe you'd really invent a way."

"I would if I could." And with that she dropped it. "There's my fat friend," she presently added, as the entr'acte

still hung heavy and Mortimer Marshal, from a row much in advance of them, screwed himself round in his tight place apparently to keep her in his eye.

"He does then," said her companion, "take you for a woman. I seem to guess he's 'littery'."

"That's it; so badly that he wrote that 'littery' ply Corisanda, you must remember, with Beatrice Beaumont in the principal part, which was given at three matinées in this very place and which hadn't even the luck of being slated. Every creature connected with the production, from the man himself and Beatrice herself down to the mothers and grandmothers of the sixpenny young women, the young women of the programmes, was interviewed both before and after, and he promptly published the piece, pleading guilty to the 'littery' charge −− which is the great stand he takes and the subject of the discussion."

Bight had wonderingly followed. "Of what discussion?"

"Why, the one he thinks there ought to have been. There hasn't been any, of course, but he wants it, dreadfully misses it. People won't keep it up −− whatever they did do, though I don't myself make out that they did anything. His state of mind required something to start with, which has got somehow to be provided. There must have been a noise made, don't you see? to make him prominent; and in order to remain prominent, he has got to go for his enemies. The hostility to his ply, and all because it's 'littery', we can do nothing without that; but it's uphill work to come across it. We sit up nights trying, but we seem to get no for'arder. The public attention would seem to abhor the whole matter even as nature abhors a vacuum. We've nothing to go upon, otherwise we might go far. But there we are."

"I see," Bight commented. "You're nowhere at all."

"No; it isn't even that, for we're just where Corisanda, on the stage and in the closet, put us at a stroke. Only there we stick fast −− nothing seems to happen, nothing seems to come or to be capable of being made to come. We wait."

"Oh, if he waits with you!" Bight amicably jibed.

"He may wait for ever?"

"No, but resignedly. You'll make him forget his wrongs."

"Ah, I'm not of that sort, and I could only do it by making him come into his rights. And I recognise now that that's impossible. There are different cases, you see, whole different classes of them, and his is the opposite to Beadel−Muffet's."

Howard Bight gave a grunt. "Why the opposite if you also pity him? I'll be hanged," he added, "if you won't save him too."

But she shook her head. She knew. "No; but it's nearly, in its way, as lurid. Do you know," she asked, "what he has done?"

"Why, the difficulty appears to be that he can't have done anything. He should strike once more −− hard, and in the same place. He should bring out another ply."

"Why so? You can't be more than prominent, and he is prominent. You can't do more than subscribe, in your prominence, to thirty−seven 'press−cutting' agencies in England and America, and, having done so, you can't do more than sit at home with your ear on the postman's knock, looking out for results. There comes in the tragedy −− there are no results. Mortimer Marshal's postman doesn't knock; the press−cutting agencies can't find anything to cut. With thirty−seven, in the whole English−speaking world, scouring millions of papers for him in vain, and with a big slice of his private income all the while going to it, the 'irony' is too cruel, and the way he looks at one, as in one's degree responsible, does make one wince. He expected, naturally, most from the Americans, but it's they who have failed him worst. Their silence is that of the tomb, and it seems to grow, if the silence of the tomb can grow. He won't admit that the thirty−seven look far enough or long enough, and he writes them, I infer, angry letters, wanting to know what the deuce they suppose he has paid them for. But what are they either, poor things, to do?"

"Do? They can print his angry letters. That, at least, will break the silence, and he'll like it better than nothing."

This appeared to strike our young woman. "Upon my word, I really believe he would." Then she thought better of it. "But they'd be afraid, for they do guarantee, you know, that there's something for everyone. They claim it's their strength −− that there's enough to go round. They won't want to show that they break down."

"Oh, well," said the young man, "if he can't manage to smash a pane of glass somewhere−−!"

"That's what he thought I would do. And it's what I thought I might," Maud added; "otherwise I wouldn't have approached him. I did it on spec, but I'm no use. I'm a fatal influence. I'm a non−conductor."

She said it with such plain sincerity that it quickly took her companion's attention. "I say!" he covertly murmured. "Have you a secret sorrow?"

"Of course I've a secret sorrow." And she stared at it, stiff and a little sombre, not wanting it to be too freely handled, while the curtain at last rose to the lighted stage.

3

She was later on more open about it, sundry other things, not wholly alien, having meanwhile happened. One of these had been that her friend had waited with her to the end of the Finnish performance and that it had then, in the lobby, as they went out, not been possible for her not to make him acquainted with Mr Mortimer Marshal. This gentleman had clearly waylaid her and had also clearly divined that her companion was of the Papers −− papery all through; which doubtless had something to do with his having handsomely proposed to them to accompany him somewhere to tea. They hadn't seen why they shouldn't, it being an adventure, all in their line like another; and he had carried them, in a four−wheeler, to a small and refined club in the region which was as the fringe of the Piccadilly region, where even their own presence scarce availed to contradict the implication of the exclusive. The whole occasion, they were further to feel, was essentially a tribute to their professional connection, especially that side of it which flushed and quavered, which panted and pined in their host's personal nervousness. Maud Blandy now saw it vain to contend with his delusion that she, underfed and unprinted, who had never been so conscious as during these bribed moments of her non−conducting quality, was papery to any purpose −− a delusion that exceeded, by her measure, every other form of pathos. The decoration of the tea−room was a pale, aesthetic green, the liquid in the delicate cups a copious potent amber; the bread and butter was thin and golden, the muffins a revelation to her that she was barbarously hungry. There were ladies at other tables with other gentlemen −− ladies with long feather boas and hats not of the sailor pattern, and gentlemen whose straight collars were doubled up much higher than Howard Bight's and their hair parted far more at the side. The talk was so low, with pauses somehow so not of embarrassment that it could only have been earnest, and the air, an air of privilege and privacy to our young woman's sense, seemed charged with fine things taken for granted. If it hadn't been for Bight's company she would have grown almost frightened, so much seemed to be offered her for something she couldn't do. That word of Bight's about smashing a window−pane had lingered with her; it had made her afterwards wonder, while they sat in their stalls, if there weren't some brittle surface in range of her own elbow. She had to fall back on the consciousness of how her elbow, in spite of her type, lacked practical point, and that was just why the terms in which she saw her services now, as she believed, bid for, had the effect of scaring her. They came out most, for that matter, in Mr Mortimer Marshal's dumbly−insistent eyes, which seemed to be perpetually saying: "You know what I mean when I'm too refined −− like everything here, don't you see? −− to say it out. You know there ought to be something about me somewhere, and that really, with the opportunities, the facilities you enjoy, it wouldn't be so much out of your way just to −− well, reward this little attention."

The fact that he was probably every day, in just the same anxious flurry and with just the same superlative delicacy, paying little attentions with an eye to little rewards, this fact by itself but scantily eased her, convinced as she was that no luck but her own was as hopeless as his. He squared the clever young wherever he could get at them, but it was the clever young, taking them generally, who fed from his hand and then forgot him. She didn't forget him; she pitied him too much, pitied herself, and was more and more, as she found, now pitying everyone; only she didn't know how to say to him that she could do, after all, nothing for him. She oughtn't to have come, in the first place, and wouldn't if it hadn't been for her companion. Her companion was increasingly sardonic −− which was the way in which, at best, she now increasingly saw him; he was shameless in acceptance, since, as she knew, as she felt at his side, he had come only, at bottom, to mislead and to mystify. He was, as she wasn't, on the Papers and of them, and their baffled entertainer knew it without either a hint on the subject from herself or a need, on the young man's own lips, of the least vulgar allusion. Nothing was so much as named, the whole connection was sunk; they talked about clubs, muffins, afternoon performances, the effect of the Finnish soul upon the appetite, quite as if they had met in society. Nothing could have been less like society −− she innocently supposed at least −− than the real spirit of their meeting; yet Bight did nothing that he might do to keep the affair within bounds. When looked at by their friend so hard and so hintingly, he only looked back, just as dumbly, but just as intensely and, as might be said, portentously; ever so impenetrably, in fine, and ever so wickedly. He didn't smile −− as if to cheer −− the least little bit; which he might be abstaining from on purpose to make his promises solemn: so, as he tried to smile −− she couldn't, it was all too dreadful −− she wouldn't meet her friend's eyes, but kept looking, heartlessly, at the 'notes' of the place, the hats of the ladies, the tints of the rugs, the intenser

Chippendale, here and there, of the chairs and tables, of the very guests, of the very waitresses. It had come to her early: "I've done him, poor man, at home, and the obvious thing now will be to do him at his club." But this inspiration plumped against her fate even as an imprisoned insect against the window−glass. She couldn't do him at his club without decently asking leave; whereby he would know of her feeble feeler, feeble because she was so sure of refusals. She would rather tell him, desperately, what she thought of him than expose him to see again that she was herself nowhere, herself nothing. Her one comfort was that, for the half−hour −− it had made the situation quite possible −− he seemed fairly hypnotised by her colleague; so that when they took leave he as good as thanked her for what she had this time done for him. It was one of the signs of his infatuated state that he clearly viewed Bight as a mass of helpful cleverness, though the cruel creature, uttering scarce a sound, had only fixed him in a manner that might have been taken for the fascination of deference. He might perfectly have been an idiot for all the poor gentleman knew. But the poor gentleman saw a possible 'leg up' in every bush; and nothing but impertinence would have convinced him that she hadn't brought him, compunctiously as to the past, a master of the proper art. Now, more than ever, how he would listen for the postman!

The whole occasion had broken so, for busy Bight, into matters to be attended to before Fleet Street warmed to its work, that the pair were obliged, outside, to part company on the spot, and it was only on the morrow, a Sunday, that they could taste again of that comparison of notes which made for each the main savour, albeit slightly acrid, of their current consciousness. The air was full, as from afar, of the grand indifference of spring, of which the breath could be felt so much before the face could be seen, and they had bicycled side by side out to Richmond Park as with the impulse to meet it on its way. They kept a Sunday, when possible, sacred to the Suburbs as distinguished from the Papers −− when possible being largely when Maud could achieve the use of the somewhat fatigued family machine. Many sisters contended for it, under whose flushed pressure it might have been seen spinning in many different directions. Superficially, at Richmond, our young couple rested −− found a quiet corner to lounge deep in the Park, with their machines propped by one side of a great tree and their associated backs sustained by another. But agitation, finer than the finest scorching, was in the air for them; it was made sharp, rather abruptly, by a vivid outbreak from Maud. It was very well, she observed, for her friend to be clever at the expense of the general 'greed'; he saw it in the light of his own jolly luck, and what she saw, as it happened, was nothing but the general art of letting you starve, yourself, in your hole. At the end of five minutes her companion had turned quite pale with having to face the large extent of her confession. It was a confession for the reason that in the first place it evidently cost her an effort that pride had again and again successfully prevented, and because in the second she had thus the air of having lived overmuch on swagger. She could scarce have said at this moment what, for a good while, she had really lived on, and she didn't let him know now to complain either of her privation or of her disappointments. She did it to show why she couldn't go with him when he was so awfully sweeping. There were at any rate apparently, all over, two wholly different sets of people. If everyone rose to his bait no creature had ever risen to hers; and that was the grim truth of her position, which proved at the least that there were two quite different kinds of luck. They told two different stories of human vanity; they couldn't be reconciled. And the poor girl put it in a nutshell. "There's but one person I've ever written to who has so much as noticed my letter."

He wondered, painfully affected −− it rather overwhelmed him; he took hold of it at the easiest point. "One person−−?"

"The misguided man we had tea with. He alone −− he rose."

"Well then, you see that when they do rise they are misguided. In other words they're donkeys."

"What I see is that I don't strike the right ones and that I haven't therefore your ferocity; that is my ferocity, if I have any, rests on a different ground. You'll say that I go for the wrong people; but I don't, God knows −− witness Mortimer Marshal −− fly too high. I picked him out, after prayer and fasting, as just the likeliest of the likely −− not anybody a bit grand and yet not quite a nobody; and by an extraordinary chance I was justified. Then I pick out others who seem just as good, I pray and fast, and no sound comes back. But I work through my ferocity too," she stiffly continued, "though at first it was great, feeling as I did that when my bread and butter was in it people had no right not to oblige me. It was their duty −− what they were prominent for −− to be interviewed, so as to keep me going; and I did as much for them any day as they would be doing for me."

Bight heard her, but for a moment said nothing. "Did you tell them that? I mean to say to them it was your little all?"

"Not vulgarly −− I know how. There are ways of saying it's 'important'; and I hint it just enough to see that the importance fetches them no more than anything else. It isn't important to them. And I, in their place," Maud went on, "wouldn't answer either; I'll be hanged if ever I would. That's what it comes to, that there are two distinct lots, and that my luck, being born so, is always to try the snubbers. You were born to know by instinct the others. But it makes me more tolerant."

"More tolerant of what?" her friend asked.

"Well, of what you described to me. Of what you rail at."

"Thank you for me!" Bight laughed.

"Why not? Don't you live on it?"

"Not in such luxury −− you surely must see for yourself −− as the distinction you make seems to imply. It isn't luxury to be nine−tenths of the time sick of everything. People moreover are worth to me but tuppence apiece; there are too many, confound them −− so many that I don't see really how any can be left over for your superior lot. It is a chance," he pursued −− "I've had refusals too −− though I confess they've sometimes been of the funniest. Besides, I'm getting out of it," the young man wound up. "God knows I want to. My advice to you," he added in the same breath, "is to sit tight. There are as good fish in the sea−−!"

She waited a moment. "You're sick of everything and you're getting out of it; it's not good enough for you, in other words, but it's still good enough for me. Why am I to sit tight when you sit so loose?"

"Because what you want will come −− can't help coming. Then, in time, you'll also get out of it. But then you'll have had it, as I have, and the good of it."

"But what, really, if it breeds nothing but disgust," she asked, "do you call the good of it?"

"Well, two things. First the bread and butter, and then the fun. I repeat it −− sit tight."

"Where's the fun," she asked again, "of learning to despise people?"

"You'll see when it comes. It will all be upon you, it will change for you any day. Sit tight, sit tight."

He expressed such confidence that she might for a minute have been weighing it. "If you get out of it, what will you do?"

"Well, imaginative work. This job has made me at least see. It has given me the loveliest tips."

She had still another pause. "It has given me −− my experience has −− a lovely tip too."

"And what's that?"

"I've told you before −− the tip of pity. I'm so much sorrier for them all −− panting and gasping for it like fish out of water −− than I am anything else."

He wondered. "But I thought that was what just isn't your experience."

"Oh, I mean then," she said impatiently , "that my tip is from yours. It's only a different tip. I want to save them."

"Well," the young man replied, and as if the idea had had a meaning for him, "saving them may perhaps work out as a branch. The question is can you be paid for it?"

"Beadel−Muffet would pay me," Maud suddenly suggested.

"Why, that's just what I'm expecting," her companion laughed, "that he will, after to−morrow −− directly or indirectly −− do me."

"Will you take it from him then only to get him in deeper, as that's what you perfectly know you'll do? You won't save him; you'll lose him."

"What then would you, in the case," Bight asked, "do for your money?"

Well, the girl thought. "I'd get him to see me −− I should have first, I recognize, to catch my hare −− and then I'd work up my stuff. Which would be boldly, quite by a master−stroke, a statement of his fix −− of the fix, I mean, of his wanting, his supplicating to be dropped. I'd give out that it would really oblige. Then I'd send my copy about, and the rest of the matter would take care of itself. I don't say you could do it that way −− you'd have a different effect. But I should be able to trust the thing, being mine, not to be looked at, or, if looked at, chucked straight into the basket. I should so have, to that extent, handled the matter, and I should so, by merely touching it, have broken the spell. That's my one line −− I stop things off by touching them. There'd never be a word about him more."

Her friend, with his legs out and his hands locked at the back of his neck, had listened with indulgence. "Then hadn't I better arrange it for you that Beadel−Muffet shall see you?"

"Oh, not after you've damned him!"

"You want to see him first?"

"It will be the only way −− to be of any use to him. You ought to wire him in fact not to open his mouth till he has seen me."

"Well, I will," said Bight at last. "But, you know, we shall lose something very handsome −− his struggle, all in vain, with his fate. Noble sport, the sight of it all." He turned a little, to rest on his elbow, and, cycling suburban young man as he was, he might have been, outstretched under his tree, melancholy Jacques looking off into a forest glade, even as sailor−hatted Maud, in −− for elegance −− a new cotton blouse and a long−limbed angular attitude, might have prosefully suggested the mannish Rosalind. He raised his face in appeal to her. "Do you really ask me to sacrifice it?"

"Rather than sacrifice him? Of course I do."

He said for a while nothing more; only, propped on his elbow, lost himself again in the Park. After which he turned back to her. "Will you have me?" he suddenly asked.

"'Have you'−−?"

"Be my bonny bride. For better, for worse, I hadn't, upon my honour," he explained with obvious sincerity, "understood you were so down."

"Well, it isn't so bad as that," said Maud Blandy.

"So bad as taking up with me?"

"It isn't as bad as having let you know −− when I didn't want you to."

He sank back again with his head dropped, putting himself more at his ease. "You're too proud −− that's what's the matter with you. And I'm too stupid."

"No, you're not," said Maud grimly. "Not stupid."

"Only cruel, cunning, treacherous, cold−blooded, vile?" He drawled the words out softly, as if they sounded fair.

"And I'm not stupid either," Maud Blandy went on. "We just, poor creatures −− well, we just know."

"Of course we do. So why do you want us to drug ourselves with rot? to go on as if we didn't know?"

She made no answer for a moment; then she said: "There's good to be known too."

"Of course, again. There are all sorts of things, and some much better than others. That's why," the young man added, "I just put that question to you."

"Oh no, it isn't. You put it to me because you think I feel I'm no good."

"How so, since I keep assuring you that you've only to wait? How so, since I keep assuring you that if you do wait it will all come with a rush? But say I am sorry for you," Bight lucidly pursued; "how does that prove either that my motive is base or that I do you a wrong?"

The girl waived this question, but she presently tried another. "Is it your idea that we should live on all the people−−?"

"The people we catch? Yes, old man, till we can do better."

"My conviction is," she soon returned, "that if I were to marry you I should dish you. I should spoil the business. It would fall off; and, as I can do nothing myself, then where should we be?"

"Well," said Bight, "we mightn't be quite so high up in the scale of the morbid."

"It's you that are morbid," she answered. "You've, in your way −− like everyone else, for that matter, all over the place −− 'sport' on the brain."

"Well," he demanded, "what is sport but success? What is success but sport?"

"Bring that out somewhere. If it be true," she said, "I'm glad I'm a failure."

After which, for a longish space, they sat together in silence, a silence finally broken by a word from the young man. "But about Mortimer Marshal −− how do you propose to save him?"

It was a change of subject that might, by its so easy introduction of matter irrelevant, have seemed intended to dissipate whatever was left of his proposal of marriage. That proposal, however, had been somehow both too much in the tone of familiarity to linger and too little in that of vulgarity to drop. It had had no form, but the mild air kept perhaps thereby the better the taste of it. This was sensibly moreover in what the girl found to reply. "I think, you know, that he'd be no such bad friend. I mean that, with his appetite, there would be something to be done. He doesn't half hate me."

"Ah, my dear," her friend ejaculated, "don't, for God's sake, be low."

But she kept it up. "He clings to me. You saw. It's hideous, the way he's able to 'do' himself."

Bight lay quiet, then spoke as with a recall of the Chippendale Club. "Yes, I couldn't 'do' you as he could. But if you don't bring it off−−?"

"Why then does he cling? Oh, because, all the same, I'm potentially the Papers still. I'm at any rate the nearest he has got to them. And then I'm other things."

"I see."

"I'm so awfully attractive," said Maud Blandy. She got up with this and, shaking out her frock, looked at her resting bicycle, looked at the distances possibly still to be gained. Her companion paused, but at last also rose, and by that time she was awaiting him, a little gaunt and still not quite cool, as an illustration of her last remark. He stood there watching her, and she followed this remark up. "I do, you know, really pity him."

It had almost a feminine fineness, and their eyes continued to meet. "Oh, you'll work it!" And the young man went to his machine.

4

It was not till five days later that they again came together, and during these days many things had happened. Maud Blandy had, with high elation, for her own portion, a sharp sense of this; if it had at the time done nothing more intimate for her the Sunday of bitterness just spent with Howard Bight had started, all abruptly, a turn of the tide of her luck. This turn had not in the least been in the young man's having spoken to her of marriage −− since she hadn't even, up to the late hour of their parting, so much as answered him straight: she dated the sense of difference much rather from the throb of a happy thought that had come to her while she cycled home to Kilburnia in the darkness. The throb had made her for the few minutes, tired as she was, put on speed, and it had been the cause of still further proceedings for her the first thing the next morning. The active step that was the essence of these proceedings had almost got itself taken before she went to bed; which indeed was what had happened to the extent of her writing, on the spot, a meditated letter. She sat down to it by the light of the guttering candle that awaited her on the dining−room table and in the stale air of family food that only had been −− a residuum so at the mercy of mere ventilation that she didn't so much as peep into a cupboard; after which she had been on the point of nipping over, as she would have said, to drop it into that opposite pillar−box whose vivid maw, opening out through thick London nights, had received so many of her fruitless little ventures. But she had checked herself and waited, waited to be sure, with the morning, that her fancy wouldn't fade; posting her note in the end, however, with a confident jerk, as soon as she was up. She had, later on, had business, or at least had sought it, among the haunts that she had taught herself to regard as professional; but neither on the Monday nor on either of the days that directly followed had she encountered there the friend whom it would take a difference in more matters than could as yet be dealt with to enable her to regard, with proper assurance or with proper modesty, as a lover. Whatever he was, none the less, it couldn't otherwise have come to her that it was possible to feel lonely in the Strand. That showed, after all, how thick they must constantly have been −− which was perhaps a thing to begin to think of in a new, in a steadier light. But it showed doubtless still more that her companion was probably up to something rather awful; it made her wonder, holding her breath a little, about Beadel−Muffet, made her certain that he and his affairs would partly account for Bight's whirl of absence.

Ever conscious of empty pockets, she had yet always a penny, or at least a ha'penny, for a paper, and those she now scanned, she quickly assured herself, were edited quite as usual. Sir A. B. C. Beadel−Muffet K.C.B., M.P. had returned on Monday from Undertone, where Lord and Lady Wispers had, from the previous Friday, entertained a very select party; Sir A. B. C. Beadel−Muffet K.C.B., M.P. was to attend on Tuesday the weekly meeting of the society of the Friends of Rest; Sir A. B. C. Beadel−Muffet K.C.B., M.P. had kindly consented to preside on Wednesday, at Samaritan House, at the opening of the Sale of Work of the Middlesex Incurables. These familiar announcements, however, far from appeasing her curiosity, had an effect upon her nerves; she read into them mystic meanings that she had never read before. Her freedom of mind in this direction was indeed at the same time limited, for her own horizon was already, by the Monday night, bristling with new possibilities, and the Tuesday itself −− well, what had the Tuesday itself become, with this eruption, from within, of interest amounting really to a revelation, what had the Tuesday itself become but the greatest day yet of her life? Such a description of it would have appeared to apply predominantly to the morning had she not, under the influence, precisely, of the morning's thrill, gone, towards evening, with her design, into the Charing Cross Station. There, at the bookstall, she bought them all, every rag that was hawked; and there, as she unfolded one at a venture, in the crowd and under the lamps, she felt her consciousness further, felt if for the moment quite impressively, enriched. 'Personal Peeps −− Number Ninety−Three: a Chat with the New Dramatist' needed neither the 'H.B.' as a terminal signature nor a text spangled, to the exclusion of almost everything else, with Mortimer Marshals that looked as tall as if lettered on posters, to help to account for her young man's use of his time. And yet, as she soon made out, it had been used with an economy that caused her both to wonder and to wince; the 'peep' commemorated being none other than their tea with the artless creature the previous Saturday, and the meagre incidents and pale impressions of that occasion furnishing forth the picture.

Bight had solicited no new interview; he hadn't been such a fool −− for she saw, soon enough, with all her intelligence, that this was what he would have been, and that a repetition of contact would have dished him. What

he had done, she found herself perceiving −− and perceiving with an emotion that caused her face to glow −− was journalism of the intensest essence; a column concocted of nothing, an omelette made, as it were, without even the breakage of the egg or two that might have been expected to be the price. The poor gentleman's whereabouts at five o'clock was the only egg broken, and this light and delicate crash was the sound in the world that would be sweetest to him. What stuff it had to be, since the writer really knew nothing about him, yet how its being just such stuff made it perfectly serve its purpose! She might have marvelled afresh, with more leisure, at such purposes, but she was lost in the wonder of seeing how, without matter, without thought, without an excuse, without a fact and yet at the same time sufficiently without a fiction, he had managed to be as resonant as if he had beaten a drum on the platform of a booth. And he had not been too personal, not made anything awkward for her, had given nothing and nobody away, had tossed the Chippendale Club into the air with such a turn that it had fluttered down again, like a blown feather, miles from its site. The thirty−seven agencies would already be posting to their subscriber thirty−seven copies, and their subscriber, on his side, would be posting, to his acquaintance, many times thirty−seven, and thus at least getting something for his money; but this didn't tell her why her friend had taken the trouble −− if it had been a trouble; why at all events he had taken the time, pressed as he apparently was for that commodity. These things she was indeed presently to learn, but they were meanwhile part of a suspense composed of more elements than any she had yet tasted. And the suspense was prolonged, though other affairs too, that were not part of it, almost equally crowded upon her; the week having almost waned when relief arrived in the form of a cryptic post−card. The post−card bore the H.B., like the precious 'Peep', which had already had a wondrous sequel, and it appointed, for the tea−hour, a place of meeting familiar to Maud, with the simple addition of the significant word 'Larks!'

When the time he had indicated came she waited for him, at their small table, swabbed like the deck of a steam−packet, nose to nose with a mustard−pot and a price−list, in the consciousness of perhaps after all having as much to tell him as to hear from him. It appeared indeed at first that this might well be the case, for the questions that came up between them when he had taken his place were overwhelmingly those he himself insisted on putting. "What has he done, what has he, and what will he?" −− that inquiry, not loud but deep, had met him as he sat down; without however producing the least recognition. Then she as soon felt that his silence and his manner were enough for her, or that, if they hadn't been, his wonderful look, the straightest she had ever had from him, would instantly have made them so. He looked at her hard, hard, as if he had meant "I say, mind your eyes!" and it amounted really to glimpse, rather fearful, of the subject. It was no joke, the subject, clearly, and her friend had fairly gained age, and he had certainly lost weight, in his recent dealings with it. It struck her even, with everything else, that this was positively the way he would have liked him to show if their union had taken the form they hadn't reached the point of discussing; wearily coming back to her from the thick of things, wanting to put on his slippers and have his tea, all prepared by her and in their place, and beautifully to be trusted to regale her in his turn. He was excited, disavowedly, and it took more disavowal still after she had opened her budget −− which she did, in truth, by saying to him as her first alternative: "What did you do him for, poor Mortimer Marshal? It isn't that he's not in the seventh heaven−−!"

"He is in the seventh heaven!" Bight quickly broke in. "He doesn't want my blood?"

"Did you do him," she asked, "that he should want it? It's splendid how you could −− simply on that show."

"That show? Why," said Howard Bight, "that show was an immensity. That show was volumes, stacks, abysses."

He said it in such at tone that she was a little at a loss. "Oh, you don't want abysses."

"Not much, to knock off such twaddle. There isn't a breath in it of what I saw. What I saw is my own affair. I've got the abysses for myself. They're in my head −− it's always something. But the monster," he demanded, "has written you?"

"How couldn't he −− that night? I got it the next morning, telling me how much he wanted to thank me and asking me where he might see me. So I went," said Maud, "to see him."

"At his own place again?"

"At his own place again. What do I yearn for but to be received at people's own places?"

"Yes, for the stuff. But when you've had −− as you had had from him −− the stuff?"

"Well, sometimes, you see, I get more. He gives me all I can take." It was in her head to ask if by chance Bight were jealous, but she gave it another turn. "We had a big palaver, partly about you. He appreciates."

"Me?"

"Me −− first of all, I think. All the more that I've had −− fancy! −− a proof of my stuff, the despised and rejected, as originally concocted, and that he has now seen it. I tried it on again with Brains, the night of your thing −− sent if off with your thing enclosed as a rouser. They took it, by return, like a shot −− you'll see on Wednesday. And if the dear man lives till then, for impatience, I'm to lunch with him that day."

"I see," said Bight. "Well, that was what I did it for. It shows how right I was."

They faced each other, across their thick crockery, with eyes that said more than their words, and that, above all, said, and asked, other things. So she went on in a moment: "I don't know what he doesn't expect. And he thinks I can keep it up."

"Lunch with him every Wednesday?"

"Oh, he'd give me my lunch, and more. It was last Sunday that you were right −− about my sitting close," she pursued, "I'd have been a pretty fool to jump. Suddenly, I see, the music begins. I'm awfully obliged to you."

"You feel," he presently asked, "quite differently −− so differently that I've missed my chance? I don't care for that serpent, but there's something else that you don't tell me." The young man, detached and a little spent, with his shoulder against the wall and a hand vaguely playing over the knives, forks and spoons, dropped his succession of sentences without an apparent direction. "Something else has come up, and you're as pleased as Punch. Or, rather, you're not quite entirely so, because you can't goad me to fury. You can't worry me as much as you'd like. Marry me first, old man, and then see if I mind. Why shouldn't you keep it up? −− I mean lunching with him?" His questions came as in play that was a little pointless, without his waiting more than a moment for answers; though it was not indeed that she might not have answered even in the moment, had not the pointless play been more what she wanted. "Was it at the place," he went on, "that he took us to?"

"Dear no −− at his flat, where I've been before. You'll see, in Brains, on Wednesday. I don't think I've muffed it −− it's really rather there. But he showed me everything this time −− the bathroom, the refrigerator, and the machines for stretching his trousers. He has nine, and in constant use."

"Nine?" said Bight gravely.

"Nine."

"Nine trousers?"

"Nine machines. I don't know how many trousers."

"Ah, my dear," he said, "that's a grave omission; the want of the information will be felt and resented. But does it all, at any rate," he asked, "sufficiently fetch you?" After which, as she didn't speak, he lapsed into helpless sincerity. "Is it really, you think, his dream to secure you?"

She replied, on this, as if his tone made it too amusing. "Quite. There's no mistaking it. He sees me as, most days in the year, pulling the wires and beating the drum somewhere; that is he sees me of course not exactly as writing about 'our home' −− once I've got one −− myself, but as procuring others to do it through my being (as you've made him believe) in with the Organs of Public Opinion. He doesn't see, if I'm half decent, why there shouldn't be something about him every day in the week. He's all right, and he's all ready. And who, after all, can do him so well as the partner of his flat? It's like making, in one of those big domestic siphons, the luxury of the poor, your own soda−water. It comes cheaper, and it's always on the sideboard. 'Vichy chez soi.' The interviewer at home."

Her companion took it in. "Your place is on my sideboard −− you're really a first−class fizz! He steps then, at any rate, into Beadel−Muffet's place."

"That," Maud assented, "is what he would like to do." And she knew more than ever there was something to wait for.

"It's a lovely opening," Bight returned. But he still said, for the moment, nothing else; as if, charged to the brim though he had originally been, she had rather led his thought away.

"What have you done with poor Beadel?" she consequently asked. "What is it, in the name of goodness, you're doing to him? It's worse than ever."

"Of course it's worse than ever."

"He capers," said Maud, "on every housetop −− he jumps out of every bush." With which her anxiety really broke out. "Is it you that are doing it?"

"If you mean am I seeing him, I certainly am. I'm seeing nobody else. I assure you he's spread thick."

"But you're acting for him?"

Bight waited. "Five hundred people are acting for him; but the difficulty is that what he calls the 'terrific forces of publicity' −− by which he means ten thousand other persons −− are acting against him. We've all in fact been turned on −− to turn everything off, and that's exactly the job that makes the biggest noise. It appears everywhere, in every kind of connection and every kind of type, that Sir A. B. C. Beadel−Muffet K.C.B., M.P. desires to cease to appear anywhere; and then it appears that his desiring to cease to appear is observed to conduce directly to his more tremendously appearing, or certainly, and in the most striking manner, to his not in the least disappearing. The workshop of silence roars like the Zoo at dinner−time. He can't disappear; he hasn't weight enough to sink; the splash the diver makes, you know, tells where he is. If you ask me what I'm doing," Bight wound up, "I'm holding him under water. But we're in the middle of the pond, the banks are thronged with spectators, and I'm expecting from day to day to see stands erected and gate−money taken. There," he wearily smiled, "you have it. Besides," he then added with an odd change of tone, "I rather think you'll see to−morrow."

He had made her at last horribly nervous. "What shall I see?"

"It will all be out."

"Then why shouldn't you tell me?"

"Well," the young man said, "he has disappeared. There you are. I mean personally. He's not to be found. But nothing could make more, you see, for ubiquity. The country will ring with it. He vanished on Tuesday night −− was then last seen at his club. Since then he has given no sign. How can a man disappear who does that sort of thing? It is, as you say, to caper on the housetops. But it will only be known to−night."

"Since when, then," Maud asked, "have you known it?"

"Since three o'clock to−day. But I've kept it. I am −− a while longer −− keeping it."

She wondered; she was full of fears. "What do you expect to get for it?"

"Nothing −− if you spoil my market. I seem to make out that you want to."

She gave this no heed; she had her thought. "Why then did you three days ago wire me a mystic word?"

"Mystic−−?"

"What do you call 'Larks'?"

"Oh, I remember. Well, it was because I saw larks coming; because I saw, I mean, what has happened. I was sure it would have to happen."

"And what the mischief is it?"

Bight smiled. "Why, what I tell you. That he has gone."

"Gone where?"

"Simply bolted to parts unknown. 'Where' is what nobody who belongs to him is able in the least to say, or seems likely to be able."

"Any more than why?"

"Any more than why."

"Only you are able to say that?"

"Well," said Bight, "I can say what has so lately stared me in the face, what he has been thrusting at me in all its grotesqueness: his desire for a greater privacy worked through the Papers themselves. He came to me with it," the young man presently added. "I didn't go to him."

"And he trusted you," Maud replied.

"Well, you see what I have given him −− the very flower of my genius. What more do you want? I'm spent, seedy, sore. I'm sick," Bight declared, "of his beastly funk."

Maud's eyes, in spite of it, were still a little hard. "Is he thoroughly sincere?"

"Good God, no! How can he be? Only trying it −− as a cat, for a jump, tries too smooth a wall. He drops straight back."

"Then isn't his funk real?"

"As real as he himself is."

Maud wondered. "Isn't his flight−−?"

"That's what we shall see!"

"Isn't," she continued, "his reason?"

"Ah," he laughed out, "there you are again!"

But she had another thought and was not discouraged. "Mayn't he be honestly, mad?"

"Mad −− oh yes. But not, I think, honestly. He's not honestly anything in the world but the Beadel−Muffet of our delight."

"Your delight," Maud observed after a moment, "revolts me." And then she said: "When did you last see him?"

"On Tuesday at six, love. I was one of the last."

"Decidedly, too, then, I judge, one of the worst." She gave him her idea. "You hounded him on."

"I reported," said Bight, "success. Told him how it was going."

"Oh, I can see you! So that if he's dead−−"

"Well?" asked Bight blandly.

"His blood is on your hands."

He eyed his hands a moment. "They are dirty for him! But now, darling," he went on, "be so good as to show me yours."

"Tell me first," she objected, "what you believe. Is it suicide?"

"I think that's the thing for us to make it. Till somebody," he smiled, "makes it something else." And he showed how he warmed to the view. "There are weeks of it, dearest, yet."

He leaned more toward her, with his elbows on the table, and in this position, moved by her extreme gravity, he lightly flicked her chin with his finger. She threw herself, still grave, back from his touch, but they remained thus a while closely confronted. "Well," she at last remarked, "I shan't pity you."

"You make it, then, everyone except me?"

"I mean," she continued, "if you do have to loathe yourself."

"Oh, I shan't miss it." And then as if to show how little, "I did mean it, you know, at Richmond," he declared.

"I won't have you if you've killed him," she presently returned.

"You'll decide in that case for the nine?" And as the allusion, with its funny emphasis, left her blank: "You want to wear all the trousers?"

"You deserve," she said, when light came, "that I should take him." And she kept it up. "It's a lovely flat."

Well, he could do as much. "Nine, I suppose, appeals to you as the number of the muses?"

This short passage, remarkably, for all its irony, brought them together again, to the extent at least of leaving Maud's elbows on the table and of keeping her friend, now a little back in his chair, firm while he listened to her. So the girl came out. "I've seen Mrs Chorner three times. I wrote that night, after our talk at Richmond, asking her to oblige. And I put on cheek as I had never, never put it. I said the public would be so glad to hear from her 'on the occasion of her engagement'."

"Do you call that cheek?" Bight looked amused. "She at any rate rose straight."

"No, she rose crooked; but she rose. What you had told me there in the Park −− well, immediately happened. She did consent to see me, and so far you had been right in keeping me up to it. But what do you think it was for?"

"To show you her flat, her tub, her petticoats?"

"She doesn't live in a flat; she lives in a house of her own, and a jolly good one, in Green Street, Park Lane; though I did, as happened, see her tub, which is a dream −− all marble and silver, like a kind of a swagger sarcophagus, a thing for the Wallace Collection; and though her petticoats, as she first shows, seem all that, if you wear petticoats yourself, you can look at. There's no doubt of her money −− given her place and her things, and given her appearance too, poor dear, which would take some doing."

"She squints?" Bight sympathetically asked.

"She's so ugly that she has to be rich −− she couldn't afford it on less than five thousand a year. As it is, I could well see, she can afford anything −− even such a nose. But she's funny and decent; sharp, but a really good sort. And they're not engaged."

"She told you so? Then there you are!"

"It all depends," Maud went on; "and you don't know where I am at all. I know what it depends on."

"Then there you are again! It's a mine of gold."

"Possibly, but not in your sense. She wouldn't give me the first word of an interview −− it wasn't for that she received me. It was for something much better."

Well, Bight easily guessed. "For my job?"

"To see what can be done. She loathes his publicity."

The young man's face lighted. "She told you so?"

"She received me on purpose to tell me."

"Then why do you question my 'larks'? What do you want more?"

"I want nothing −− with what I have: nothing, I mean, but to help her. We made friends −− I like her. And she likes me," said Maud Blandy.

"Like Mortimer Marshal, precisely."

"No, precisely not like Mortimer Marshal. I caught, on the spot, her idea −− that was what took her. Her idea is that I can help her −− help her to keep them quiet about Beadel: for which purpose I seem to have struck her as falling from the skies, just at the right moment, into her lap."

Howard Bight followed, yet lingered by the way. "To keep whom quiet−−?"

"Why, the beastly Papers −− what we've been talking about. She wants him straight out of them −− straight."

"She too?" Bight wondered. "Then she's in terror?"

"No, not in terror −− or it wasn't that when I last saw her. But in mortal disgust. She feels it has gone too far −− which is what she wanted me, as an honest, decent, likely young woman, up to my neck in it, as she supposed, to understand from her. My relation with her is now that I do understand and that if an improvement takes place I shan't have been the worse for it. Therefore you see," Maud went on, "you simply cut my throat when you prevent improvement."

"Well, my dear," her friend returned, "I won't let you bleed to death." And he showed, with this, as confessedly struck. "She doesn't then, you think, know−−?"

"Know what?"

"Why, what, about him, there may be to be known. Doesn't know of his flight."

"She didn't −− certainly."

"Nor of anything to make it likely?"

"What you call his queer reason? No −− she named it to me no more than you have; though she does mention, distinctly, that he himself hates, or pretends to hate, the exhibition daily made of him."

"She speaks of it," Bight asked, "as pretending−−?"

Maud straightened it out. "She feels him −− that she practically told me −− as rather ridiculous. She honestly has her feeling; and, upon my word, it's what I like her for. Her stomach has turned and she has made it her condition. 'Muzzle your Press,' she says; 'then we'll talk.' She gives him three months −− she'll give him even six. And this, meanwhile −− when he comes to you −− is how you forward the muzzling."

"The Press, my child," Bight said, "is the watchdog of civilisation, and the watchdog happens to be −− it can't be helped −− in a chronic state of rabies. Muzzling is easy talk; one can but keep the animal on the run. Mrs Chorner, however," he added, "seems a figure of fable."

"It's what I told you she would have to be when, some time back, you threw out, as a pure hypothesis, to supply the man with a motive, your exact vision of her. Your motive has come true," Maud went on −− "with the difference only, if I understand you, that this doesn't appear the whole of it. That doesn't matter" −− she frankly paid him a tribute. "Your forecast was inspiration."

"A stroke of genius" −− he had been the first to feel it. But there were matters less clear. "When did you see her last?"

"Four days ago. It was the third time."

"And even then she didn't imagine the truth about him?"

"I don't know, you see," said Maud, "what you call the truth."

"Well, that he −− quite by that time −− didn't know where the deuce to turn. That's truth enough."

Maud made sure. "I don't see how she can have known it and not have been upset. She wasn't," said the girl, "upset. She isn't upset. But she's original."

"Well, poor thing," Bight remarked, "she'll have to be."

"Original?"

"Upset. Yes, and original too, if she doesn't give up the job." It had held him an instant −− but there were many things. "She sees the wild ass he is, and yet she's willing−−?"

"'Willing' is just what I asked you three months ago," Maud returned, how she could be."

He had lost it −− he tried to remember. "What then did I say?"

"Well, practically, that women are idiots. Also, I believe, that he's a dazzling beauty."

"Ah yes, he is, poor wretch, though beauty to−day in distress."

"Then there you are," said Maud. They had got up, as at the end of their story, but they stood a moment while he waited for change. "If it comes out," the girl dropped, "that will save him. If he's dishonoured −− as I see her −− she'll have him, because then he won't be ridiculous. And I can understand it."

Bight looked at her in such appreciation that he forgot, as he pocketed it, to glance at his change. "Oh, you creatures−−!"

"Idiots, aren't we?"

Bight let the question pass, but still with his eyes on her, "You ought to want him to be dishonoured."

"I can't want him, then −− if he's to get the good of it −− to be dead."

Still for a little he looked at her. "And if you're to get the good?" But she had turned away, and he went with her to the door, before which, when they had passed out, they had in the side−street, a backwater to the flood of the Strand, a further sharp colloquy. They were alone, the small street for a moment empty, and they felt at first that they had adjourned to a greater privacy, of which, for that matter, he took prompt advantage. "You're to lunch again with the man of the flat?"

"Wednesday, as I say; 1.45."

"Then oblige me by stopping away."

"You don't like it?" Maud asked.

"Oblige me, oblige me," he repeated.

"And disoblige him?"

"Chuck him. We've started him. It's enough."

Well, the girl but wanted to be fair. "It's you who started him; so I admit you're quits."

"That then started you −− made Brains repent; so you see what you both owe me. I let the creature off, but I hold you to your debt. There's only one way for you to meet it." And then as she but looked into the roaring Strand: "With worship." It made her, after a minute, meet his eyes, but something just then occurred that stayed any word on the lips of either. A sound reached their ears, as yet unheeded, the sound of newsboys in the great thoroughfare shouting 'extra−specials' and mingling with the shout a catch that startled them. The expression in their eyes quickened as they heard, borne on the air, "Mysterious Disappearance−−!" and then lost it in the hubbub. It was easy to complete the cry, and Bight himself gasped. "Beadel−Muffet? Confound them!"

"Already?" Maud had turned positively pale.

"They've got it first −− be hanged to them!"

Bight gave a laugh −− a tribute to their push −− but her hand was on his arm for a sign to listen again. It was there, in the raucous throats; it was there, for a penny, under the lamps and in the thick of the stream that stared and passed and left it. They caught the whole thing −− "Prominent Public Man!" And there was something brutal and sinister in the way it was given to the flaring night, to the other competing sounds, to the general hardness of hearing and sight which was yet, on London pavements, compatible with an interest sufficient for cynicism. He had been, poor Beadel, public and prominent, but he had never affected Maud Blandy at least as so marked with this character as while thus loudly committed to extinction. It was horrid −− it was tragic; yet her lament for him was dry. "If he's gone I'm dished."

"Oh, he's gone −− now," said Bight.

"I mean if he's dead."

"Well, perhaps he isn't. I see," Bight added, "what you do mean. If he's dead you can't kill him."

"Oh, she wants him alive," said Maud.

"Otherwise she can't chuck him?"

To which the girl, however, anxious and wondering, made no direct reply. "Good−bye to Mrs Chorner. And I owe it to you."

"Ah, my love!" he vaguely appealed.

"Yes, it's you who have destroyed him, and it makes up for what you've done for me."

"I've done it, you mean, against you? I didn't know," he said, "you'd take it so hard."

Again, as he spoke, the cries sounded out: "Mysterious Disappearance of Prominent Public Man!" It seemed to swell as they listened; Maud started with impatience. "I hate it too much," she said, and quitted him to join the crowd.

He was quickly at her side, however, and before she reached the Strand he had brought her again to a pause. "Do you mean you hate it so much you won't have me?"

It had pulled her up short, and her answer was proportionately straight. "I won't have you if he's dead."

"Then will you if he's not?"

At this she looked at him hard. "Do you know, first?"

"No −− blessed if I do."

"On your honour?"

"On my honour."

"Well," she said after a hesitation, "if she doesn't drop me−−"

"It's an understood thing?" he pressed.

But again she hung fire. "Well, produce him first."

They stood there striking their bargain, and it was made, by the long look they exchanged, a question of good faith. "I'll produce him," said Howard Bight.

5

If it had not been a disaster, Beadel−Muffet's plunge into the obscure, it would have been a huge success; so large a space did the prominent public man occupy, for the next few days, in the Papers, so near did he come, nearer certainly than ever before, to supplanting other topics. The question of his whereabouts, of his antecedents, of his habits, of his possible motives, of his probable, or improbable, embarrassments, fairly raged, from day to day and from hour to hour, making the Strand, for our two young friends, quite fiercely, quite cruelly vociferous. They met again promptly, in the thick of the uproar, and no other eyes could have scanned the current rumours and remarks so eagerly as Maud's unless it had been those of Maud's companion. The rumours and remarks were mostly very wonderful, and all of a nature to sharpen the excitement produced in the comrades by their being already, as they felt, 'in the know'. Even for the girl this sense existed, so that she could smile at wild surmises; she struck herself as knowing much more than she did, especially as, with the alarm once given, she abstained, delicately enough, from worrying, from catechising Bight. She only looked at him as to say "See, while the suspense lasts, how generously I spare you," and her attitude was not affected by the interested promise he had made her. She believed he knew more than he said, though he had sworn as to what he didn't; she saw him in short as holding some threads but having lost others, and his state of mind, so far as she could read it, represented in equal measure assurances unsupported and anxieties unconfessed. He would have liked to pass for having, on cynical grounds, and for the mere ironic beauty of it, believed that the hero of the hour was only, as he had always been, 'up to' something from which he would emerge more than ever glorious, or at least conspicuous; but, knowing the gentleman was more than anything, more than all else, asinine, he was not deprived of ground in which fear could abundantly grow. If Beadel, in other words, was ass enough, as was conceivable, to be working the occasion, he was by the same token ass enough to have lost control of it, to have committed some folly from which even fools don't rebound. That was the spark of suspicion lurking in the young man's ease, and that, Maud knew, explained something else.

The family and friends had but too promptly been approached, been besieged; yet Bight, in all the promptness, had markedly withdrawn from the game −− had had, one could easily judge, already too much to do with it. Who but he, otherwise, would have been so naturally let loose upon the forsaken home, the bewildered circle, the agitated club, the friend who had last conversed with the eminent absentee, the waiter, in exclusive halls, who had served him with five−o'clock tea, the porter, in august Pall Mall, who had called his last cab, the cabman, supremely privileged, who had driven him −− where? 'The Last Cab' would, as our young woman reflected, have been a heading so after her friend's own heart, and so consonant with his genius, that it took all her discretion not to ask him how he had resisted it. She didn't ask, she but herself noted the title for future use −− she would have at least got that, 'The Last Cab', out of the business; and, as the days went by and the extra−specials swarmed, the situation between them swelled with all the unspoken. Matters that were grave depended on it for each −− and nothing so much, for instance, as her seeing Mrs Corner again. To see that lady as things had been had meant that the poor woman might have been helped to believe in her. Believing in her she would have paid her, and Maud, disposed as she was, really had felt capable of earning the pay. Whatever, as the case stood, was caused to hang in the air, nothing dangled more free than the profit derivable from muzzling the Press. With the watchdog to whom Bight had compared it barking for dear life, the moment was scarcely adapted for calling afresh upon a person who had offered a reward for silence. The only silence, as we say, was in the girl's not mentioning to her friend how these embarrassments affected her. Mrs Corner was a person she liked −− a connection more to her taste than any she had professionally made, and the thought of her now on the rack, tormented with suspense, might well have brought to her lips a "See there what you've done!"

There was, for that matter, in Bight's face −− he couldn't keep it out −− precisely the look of seeing it; which was one of her reasons too for not insisting on her wrong. If he couldn't conceal it this was a part of the rest of the unspoken; he didn't allude to the lady lest it might be too sharply said to him that it was on her account he should most blush. Last of all he was hushed by the sense of what he had himself said when the news first fell on their ears. His promise to 'produce' the fugitive was still in the air, but with every day that passed the prospect turned less to redemption. Therefore if her own promise, on a different head, depended on it, he was naturally not in a

hurry to bring the question to a test. So it was accordingly that they but read the Papers and looked at each other. Maud felt in truth that these organs had never been so worth it, nor either she or her friend −− whatever the size of old obligations −− so much beholden to them. They helped them to wait, and the better, really, the longer the mystery lasted. It grew of course daily richer, adding to its mass as it went and multiplying its features, looming especially larger through the cloud of correspondence, communication, suggestion, supposition, speculation, with which it was presently suffused. Theories and explanations sprouted at night and bloomed in the morning, to be overtopped at noon by a still thicker crop and to achieve by evening the density of a tropical forest. These, again, were the green glades in which our young friends wandered.

Under the impression of the first night's shock Maud had written to Mortimer Marshal to excuse herself from her engagement to luncheon −− a step of which she had promptly advised Bight as a sign of her playing fair. He took it, she could see, for what it was worth, but she could see also how little he now cared. He was thinking of the man with whose strange agitation he had so cleverly and recklessly played, and, in the face of the catastrophe of which they were still so likely to have news, the vanities of smaller fools, the conveniences of first−class flats, the memory of Chippendale teas, ceased to be actual or ceased at any rate to be importunate. Her old interview, furbished into freshness, had appeared, on its Wednesday, in Brains, but she had not received in person the renewed homage of its author −− she had only, once more, had the vision of his inordinate purchase and diffusion of the precious number. It was a vision, however, at which neither Bight nor she smiled; it was funny on so poor a scale compared with their other show. But it befell that when this latter had, for ten days, kept being funny to the tune that so lengthened their faces, the poor gentleman glorified in Brains succeeded in making it clear that he was not easily to be dropped. He wanted now, evidently, as the girl said to herself, to live at concert pitch, and she gathered, from three or four notes, to which, at short intervals, he treated her, that he was watching in anxiety for reverberations not as yet perceptible. His expectation of results from what our young couple had done for him would, as always, have been a thing for pity with a young couple less imbued with the comic sense; though indeed it would also have been a comic thing for a young couple less attentive to a different drama. Disappointed of the girl's company at home the author of Corisanda had proposed fresh appointments, which she had desired at the moment, and indeed more each time, not to take up; to the extent even that, catching sight of him, unperceived, on one of these occasions, in her inveterate Strand, she checked on the spot a first impulse to make herself apparent. He was before her, in the crowd, and going the same way. He had stopped a little to look at a shop, and it was then that she swerved in time not to pass close to him. She turned and reversed, conscious and convinced that he was, as she mentally put it, on the prowl for her.

She herself, poor creature −− as she also mentally put it −− she herself was shamelessly on the prowl, but it wasn't, for her self−respect, to get herself puffed, it wasn't to pick up a personal advantage. It was to pick up news of Beadel−Muffet, to be near the extra−specials, and it was, also −− as to this she was never blind −− to cultivate that nearness by chances of Howard Bight. The blessing of blindness, in truth, at this time, she scantily enjoyed −− being perfectly aware of the place occupied, in her present attitude to that young man, by the simple impossibility of not seeing him. She had done with him, certainly, if he had killed Beadel, and nothing was now growing so fast as the presumption in favour of some catastrophe, yet shockingly to be revealed, enacted somewhere in desperate darkness −− though probably 'on lines', as the Papers said, anticipated by none of the theorists in their own columns, any more than by clever people at the clubs, where the betting was so heavy. She had done with him, indubitably, but she had not −− it was equally unmistakable −− done with letting him see how thoroughly she would have done; or, to feel about it otherwise, she was laying up treasure in time −− as against the privations of the future. She was affected moreover −− perhaps but half−consciously −− by another consideration; her attitude to Mortimer Marshal had turned a little to fright; she wondered, uneasily, at impressions she might have given him; and she had it, finally, on her mind that, whether or no the vain man believed in them, there must be a limit to the belief she had communicated to her friend. He was her friend, after all −− whatever should happen; and there were things that, even in that hampered character, she couldn't allow him to suppose. It was a queer business now, in fact, for her to ask herself if she, Maud Blandy, had produced in any sane human sense an effect of flirtation.

She saw herself in this possibility as in some grotesque reflector, a full−length looking−glass of the inferior quality that deforms and discolours. It made her, as a flirt, a figure for frank derision, and she entertained, honest girl, none of the self−pity that would have spared her a shade of this sharpened consciousness, have taken an inch

from facial proportion where it would have been missed with advantage, or added one in such other quarters as would have welcomed the gift. She might have counted the hairs of her head, for any wish she could have achieved to remain vague about them, just as she might have rehearsed, disheartened, postures of grace, for any dream she could compass of having ever accidentally struck one. Void, in short, of a personal illusion, exempt with an exemption which left her not less helplessly aware of where her hats and skirts and shoes failed, than of where her nose and mouth and complexion, and, above all, where her poor figure, without a scrap of drawing, did, she blushed to bethink herself that she might have affected her young man as really bragging of a conquest. Her other young man's pursuit of her, what was it but rank greed −− not in the least for her person, but for the connection of which he had formed so preposterous a view? She was ready now to say to herself that she had swaggered to Bight for the joke −− odd indeed though the wish to undeceive him at the moment when he would have been more welcome than ever to think what he liked. The only thing she wished him not to think, as she believed, was that she thought Mortimer Marshal thought her −− or anyone on earth thought her −− intrinsically charming. She didn't want to put to him "Do you suppose I suppose that if it came to the point−−?" her reasons for such avoidance being easily conceivable. He was not to suppose that, in any such quarter, she struck herself as either casting a spell or submitting to one; only, while their crisis lasted, rectifications were scarce in order. She couldn't remind him even, without a mistake, that she had but wished to worry him; because in the first place that suggested again a pretension in her (so at variance with the image in the mirror) to put forth arts −− suggested possibly even that she used similar ones when she lunched, in bristling flats, with the pushing; and because in the second it would have seemed a sort of challenge to him to renew his appeal.

Then, further and most of all, she had a doubt which by itself would have made her wary, as it distinctly, in her present suspended state, made her uncomfortable; she was haunted by the after−sense of having perhaps been fatuous. A spice of conviction, in respect to what was open to her, an element of elation, in her talk to Bight about Marshal, had there not, after all, been? Hadn't she a little liked to think the wretched man could cling to her? and hadn't she also a little, for herself, filled out the future, in fancy, with the picture of the droll relation? She had seen it as droll, evidently; but had she seen it as impossible, unthinkable? It had become unthinkable now, and she was not wholly unconscious of how the change had worked. Such workings were queer −− but there they were; the foolish man had become odious to her precisely because she was hardening her face for Bight. The latter was no foolish man, but this it was that made it the more a pity he should have placed the impassable between them. That was what, as the days went on, she felt herself take in. It was there, the impassable −− she couldn't lucidly have said why, couldn't have explained the thing on the real scale of the wrong her comrade had done. It was a wrong, it was a wrong −− she couldn't somehow get out of that; which was a proof, no doubt, that she confusedly tried. The author of Corisanda was sacrificed in the effort −− for ourselves it may come to that. Great to poor Maud Blandy as well, for that matter, great, yet also attaching, were the obscurity and ambiguity in which some impulses lived and moved −− the rich gloom of their combinations, contradictions, inconsistencies, surprises. It rested her verily a little from her straightness −− the line of a character, she felt, markedly like the line of the Edgware Road and of Maida Vale −− that she could be queerly inconsistent, and inconsistent in the hustling Strand, where, if anywhere, you had, under pain of hoofs and wheels, to decide whether or no you would cross. She had moments, before shop−windows, into which she looked without seeing, when all the unuttered came over her. She had once told her friend that she pitied everyone, and at these moments, in sharp unrest, she pitied Bight for their tension, in which nothing was relaxed.

It was all too mixed and too strange −− each of them in a different corner with a different impossibility. There was her own, in far Kilburnia; and there was her friend's, everywhere −− for where didn't he go? and there was Mrs Chorner's, on the very edge of Park 'Line', in spite of all petticoats and marble baths; and there was Beadel−Muffet's, the wretched man, God only knew where −− which was what made the whole show supremely incoherent: he ready to give his head, if, as seemed so unlikely, he still had a head, to steal into cover and keep under, out of the glare; he having scoured Europe, it might so well be guessed, for some hole in which the Papers wouldn't find him out, and then having −− what else was there by this time to presume? −− died, in the hole, as the only way not to see, to hear, to know, let alone be known, heard, seen. Finally, while he lay there relieved by the only relief, here was poor Mortimer Marshal, undeterred, undismayed, unperceiving, so hungry to be paragraphed in something like the same fashion and published on something like the same scale, that, for the very blindness of it, he couldn't read the lesson that was in the air, and scrambled, to his utmost, towards the boat itself

that ferried the warning ghost. Just that, beyond everything, was the incoherence that made for rather dismal farce, and on which Bight had put his finger in naming the author of Corisanda as a candidate, in turn, for the comic, the tragic vacancy. It was a wonderful moment for such an ideal, and the sight was not really to pass from her till she had seen the whole of the wonder. A fortnight had elapsed since the night of Beadel's disappearance, and the conditions attending the afternoon performances of the Finnish drama had in some degree reproduced themselves −− to the extent, that is, of the place, the time and several of the actors involved; the audience, for reasons traceable, being differently composed. A lady of 'high social position', desirous still further to elevate that character by the obvious aid of the theatre, had engaged a playhouse for a series of occasions on which she was to affront in person whatever volume of attention she might succeed in collecting. Her success had not immediately been great, and by the third or the fourth day the public consciousness was so markedly astray that the means taken to recover it penetrated, in the shape of a complimentary ticket, even to our young woman. Maud had communicated with Bight, who could be sure of a ticket, proposing to him that they should go together and offering to await him in the porch of the theatre. He joined her there, but with so queer a face −− for her subtlety −− that she paused before him, previous to their going in, with a straight "You know something!"

"About that rank idiot?" He shook his head, looking kind enough; but it didn't make him, she felt, more natural. "My dear, it's all beyond me."

"I mean," she said with a shade of uncertainty, "about poor dear Beadel."

"So do I. So does everyone. No one now, at any moment, means anything about anyone else. But I've lost intellectual control −− of the extraordinary case. I flattered myself I still had a certain amount. But the situation at last escapes me. I break down. Non comprenny? I give it up."

She continued to look at him hard. "Then what's the matter with you?"

"Why, just that, probably −− that I feel like a clever man 'done', and that your tone with me adds to the feeling. Or, putting it otherwise, it's perhaps only just one of the ways in which I'm so interesting; that, with the life we lead and the age we live in, there's always something the matter with me −− there can't help being: some rage, some disgust, some fresh amazement against which one hasn't, for all one's experience, been proof. That sense −− of having been sold again −− produces emotions that may well, on occasion, be reflected in the countenance. There you are."

Well, he might say that, "There you are," as often as he liked without, at the pass they had come to, making her in the least see where she was. She was only just where she stood, a little apart in the lobby, listening to his words, which she found eminently characteristic of him, struck with an odd impression of his talking against time, and, most of all, tormented to recognise that she could fairly do nothing better, at such a moment, than feel he was awfully nice. The moment −− that of his most blandly (she would have said in the case of another most impudently) failing, all round, to satisfy her −− was appropriate only to some emotion consonant with her dignity. It was all crowded and covered, hustled and interrupted now; but what really happened in this brief passage, and with her finding no words to reply to him, was that dignity quite appeared to collapse and drop from her, to sink to the floor, under the feet of people visibly bristling with 'paper', where the young man's extravagant offer of an arm, to put an end and help her in, had the effect of an invitation to leave it lying to be trampled on.

Within, once seated, they kept their places through two intervals, but at the end of the third act −− there were to be no less than five −− they fell in with a movement that carried half the audience to the outer air. Howard Bight desired to smoke, and Maud offered to accompany him, for the purpose, to the portico, where, somehow, for both of them, the sense was immediately strong that this, the squalid Strand, damp yet incandescent, ugly yet eloquent, familiar yet fresh, was life, palpable, ponderable, possible, much more than the stuff, neither scenic nor cosmic, they had quitted. The difference came to them, from the street, in a moist mild blast, which they simply took in, at first, in a long draught, as more amusing than their play, and which, for the moment, kept them conscious of the voices of the air as of something mixed and vague. The next thing, of course, however, was that they heard the hoarse newsmen, though with the special sense of the sound not standing out −− which, so far as it did come, made them exchange a look. There was no hawker just then within call.

"What are they crying?"

"Blessed if I care!" Bight said while he got his light −− which he had but just done when they saw themselves closely approached. The Papers had come into sight in the form of a small boy bawling the 'Winner' of something, and at the same moment they recognised their reprieve they recognised also the presence of Mortimer Marshal.

He had no shame about it. "I fully believed I should find you."

"But you haven't been," Bight asked, "inside?"

"Not at to−day's performance −− I only just thought I'd pass. But at each of the others," Mortimer Marshal confessed.

"Oh, you're a devotee," said Bight, whose reception of the poor man contended, for Maud's attention, with this extravagance of the poor man's own importunity. Their friend had sat through the piece three times on the chance of her being there for one or other of the acts, and if he had given that up in discouragement he still hovered and waited. Who now, moreover, was to say he wasn't rewarded? To find her companion as well as at last to find herself gave the reward a character that it took, somehow, for her eye, the whole of this misguided person's curiously large and flat, but distinctly bland, sweet, solicitous countenance to express. It came over the girl with horror that here was a material object −− the incandescence, on the edge of the street, didn't spare it −− which she had had perverse moments of seeing fixed before her for life. She asked herself, in this agitation, what she would have likened it to; more than anything perhaps to a large clean china plate, with a neat 'pattern', suspended, to the exposure of hapless heads, from the centre of the domestic ceiling. Truly she was, as by the education of the strain undergone, learning something every hour −− it seemed so to be the case that a strain enlarged the mind, formed the taste, enriched, even, the imagination. Yet in spite of this last fact, it must be added, she continued rather mystified by the actual pitch of her comrade's manner, Bight really behaving as if he enjoyed their visitor's 'note'. He treated him so decently, as they said, that he might suddenly have taken to liking his company; which was an odd appearance till Maud understood it −− whereupon it became for her a slightly sinister one. For the effect of the honest gentleman, she by that time saw, was to make her friend nervous and vicious, and the form taken by his irritation was just this dangerous candour, which encouraged the candour of the victim. She had for the latter a residuum of pity, whereas Bight, she felt, had none, and she didn't want him, the poor man, absolutely to pay with his life.

It was clear, however, within a few minutes, that this was what he was bent on doing, and she found herself helpless before his smug insistence. She had taken his measure; he was made incorrigibly to try, irredeemably to fail −− to be, in short, eternally defeated and eternally unaware. He wouldn't rage −− he couldn't, for the citadel might, in that case, have been carried by his assault; he would only spend his life in walking round and round it, asking everyone he met how in the name of goodness one did get in. And everyone would make a fool of him −− though no one so much as her companion now −− and everything would fall from him but the perfection of his temper, of his tailor, of his manners, of his mediocrity. He evidently rejoiced at the happy chance which had presented him again to Bight, and he lost as little time as possible in proposing, the play ended, an adjournment again to tea. The spirit of malice in her comrade, now inordinately excited, met this suggestion with an amendment that fairly made her anxious; Bight threw out, in a word, the idea that he himself surely, this time, should entertain Mr Marshal.

"Only I'm afraid I can take you but to a small pothouse that we poor journalists haunt."

"They're just the places I delight in −− it would be of an extraordinary interest. I sometimes venture into them −− feeling awfully strange and wondering, I do assure you, who people are. But to go there with you−−!" And he looked from Bight to Maud and from Maud back again with such abysses of appreciation that she knew him as lost indeed.

6

It was demonic of Bight, who immediately answered that he would tell him with pleasure who everyone was, and she felt this the more when her friend, making light of the rest of the entertainment they had quitted, advised their sacrificing it and proceeding to the other scene. He was really too eager for his victim −− she wondered what he wanted to do with him. He could only play him at the most a practical joke −− invent appetising identities, once they were at table, for the dull consumers around. No one, at the place they most frequented, had an identity in the least appetising, no one was anyone or anything. It was apparently of the essence of existence on such terms −− the terms, at any rate, to which she was reduced −− that people comprised in it couldn't even minister to each other's curiosity, let alone to envy or awe. She would have wished therefore, for their pursuer, to intervene a little, to warn him against beguilement; but they had moved together along the Strand and then out of it, up a near cross street, without her opening her mouth. Bight, as she felt, was acting to prevent this; his easy talk redoubled, and he led his lamb to the shambles. The talk had jumped to poor Beadel −− her friend had startled her by causing it, almost with violence, at a given moment, to take that direction, and he thus quite sufficiently stayed her speech. The people she lived with mightn't make you curious, but there was of course always a sharp exception for him. She kept still, in fine, with the wonder of what he wanted; though indeed she might, in the presence of their guest's response, have felt he was already getting it. He was getting, that is −− and she was, into the bargain −− the fullest illustration of the ravage of a passion; so sublimely Marshal rose to the proposition, infernally thrown off, that, in whatever queer box or tight place Beadel might have found himself, it was something, after all, to have so powerfully interested the public. The insidious artless way in which Bight made his point! −− "I don't know that I've ever known the public (and I watch it, as in my trade we have to, day and night) so consummately interested." They had that phenomenon −− the present consummate interest −− well before them while they sat at their homely meal, served with accessories so different from those of the sweet Chippendale (another chord on which the young man played with just the right effect!), and it would have been hard to say if the guest were, for the first moments, more under the spell of the marvellous 'hold' on the town achieved by the great absentee, or of that of the delicious coarse tablecloth, the extraordinary form of the saltcellars, and the fact that he had within range of sight, at the other end of the room, in the person of the little quiet man with blue spectacles and an obvious wig, the greatest authority in London about the inner life of the criminal classes. Beadel, none the less, came up again and stayed up −− would clearly so have been kept up, had there been need, by their host, that the girl couldn't at last fail to see how much it was for herself that his intention worked. What was it, all the same −− since it couldn't be anything so simple as to expose their hapless visitor? What had she to learn about him? −− especially at the hour of seeing what there was still to learn about Bight. She ended by deciding −− for his appearance bore her out −− that his explosion was but the form taken by an inward fever. The fever, on this theory, was the result of the final pang of responsibility. The mystery of Beadel had grown too dark to be borne −− which they would presently feel; and he was meanwhile in the phase of bluffing it off, precisely because it was to overwhelm him.

"And do you mean you too would pay with your life?" He put the question, agreeably, across the table to his guest; agreeably of course in spite of his eye's dry glitter.

His guest's expression, at this, fairly became beautiful. "Well, it's an awfully nice point. Certainly one would like to feel the great murmur surrounding one's name, to be there, more or less, so as not to lose the sense of it, and as I really think, you know, the pleasure; the great city, the great empire, the world itself for the moment, hanging literally on one's personality and giving a start, in its suspense, whenever one is mentioned. Big sensation, you know, that," Mr Marshal pleadingly smiled, "and of course if one were dead one wouldn't enjoy it. One would have to come to life for that."

"Naturally," Bight rejoined −− "only that's what the dead don't do. You can't eat your cake and have it. The question is," he good−naturedly explained, "whether you'd be willing, for the certitude of the great murmur you speak of, to part with your life under circumstances of extraordinary mystery."

His guest earnestly fixed it. "Whether I would be willing?"

"Mr Marshal wonders," Maud said to Bight, "if you are, as a person interested in his reputation, definitely

proposing to him some such possibility."

He looked at her, on this, with mild, round eyes, and she felt, wonderfully, that he didn't quite see her as joking. He smiled −− he always smiled, but his anxiety showed, and he turned it again to their companion. "You mean −− a −− the knowing how it might be going to be felt?"

"Well yes −− call it that. The consciousness of what one's unexplained extinction −− given, to start with, one's high position −− would mean, wouldn't be able to help meaning, for millions and millions of people. The point is −− and I admit it's, as you call it, a 'nice' one −− if you can think of the impression so made as worth the purchase. Naturally, naturally, there's but the impression you make. You don't receive any. You can't. You've only your confidence −− so far as that's an impression. Oh, it is indeed a nice point; and I only put it to you," Bight wound up, "because, you know, you do like to be recognised."

Mr Marshal was bewildered, but he was not so bewildered as not to be able, a trifle coyly, but still quite bravely, to confess to that. Maud, with her eyes on her friend, found herself thinking of him as of some plump, innocent animal, more or less of the pink−eyed rabbit or sleek guinea−pig order, involved in the slow spell of a serpent of shining scales. Bight's scales, truly, had never so shone as this evening, and he used to admiration −− which was just a part of the lustre −− the right shade of gravity. He was neither so light as to fail of the air of an attractive offer, nor yet so earnest as to betray a gibe. He might conceivably have been, as an undertaker of improvements in defective notorieties, placing before his guest a practical scheme. It was really quite as if he were ready to guarantee the 'murmur' if Mr Marshal was ready to pay the price. And the price wouldn't of course be only Mr Marshal's existence. All this, at least, if Mr Marshal felt moved to take it so. The prodigious thing, next, was that Mr Marshal was so moved −− though, clearly, as was to be expected, with important qualifications. "Do you really mean," he asked, "that one would excite this delightful interest?"

"You allude to the charged state of the air on the subject of Beadel?" Bight considered, looking volumes. "It would depend a good deal upon who one is."

He turned, Mr Marshal, again to Maud Blandy, and his eyes seemed to suggest to her that she should put his question for him. They forgave her, she judged, for having so oddly forsaken him, but they appealed to her now not to leave him to struggle alone. Her own difficulty was, however, meanwhile, that she feared to serve him as he suggested without too much, by way of return, turning his case to the comic; whereby she only looked at him hard and let him revert to their friend. "Oh," he said, with a rich wistfulness from which the comic was not absent, "of course everyone can't pretend to be Beadel."

"Perfectly. But we're speaking, after all, of those who do count."

There was quite a hush, for the minute, while the poor man faltered. "Should you say that I −− in any appreciable way −− count?"

Howard Bight distilled honey. "Isn't it a little a question of how much we should find you did, or, for that matter, might, as it were, be made to, in the event of a real catastrophe?"

Mr Marshal turned pale, yet he met it too with sweetness. "I like the way" −− and he had a glance for Maud −− "you talk of catastrophes!"

His host did the comment justice. "Oh, it's only because, you see, we're so peculiarly in the presence of one. Beadel shows so tremendously what a catastrophe does for the right person. His absence, you may say, doubles, quintuples, his presence."

"I see, I see!" Mr Marshal was all there. "It's awfully interesting to be so present. And yet it's rather dreadful to be so absent." It had set him fairly musing; for couldn't the opposites be reconciled −− "If he is," he threw out, "absent−−!"

"Why, he's absent, of course," said Bight, "if he's dead."

"And really dead is what you believe him to be?"

He breathed it with a strange break, as from a mind too full. It was on the one hand a grim vision for his own case, but was on the other a kind of clearance of the field. With Beadel out of the way his own case could live, and he was obviously thinking what it might be to be as dead as that and yet as much alive. What his demand first did, at any rate, was to make Howard Bight look straight at Maud. Her own look met him, but she asked nothing now. She felt him somehow fathomless, and his practice with their infatuated guest created a new suspense. He might indeed have been looking at her to learn how to reply, but even were this the case she had still nothing to answer. So in a moment he had spoken without her. "I've quite given him up."

It sank into Marshal, after which it produced something. "He ought then to come back. I mean," he explained, "to see for himself −− to have the impression."

"Of the noise he has made? Yes" −− Bight weighed it −− "that would be the ideal."

"And it would, if one must call it 'noise'," Marshal limpidly pursued, "make −− a −− more."

"Oh, but if you can't!"

"Can't, you mean, through having already made so much, add to the quantity?"

"Can't" −− Bight was a wee bit sharp −− "come back, confound it, at all. Can't return from the dead!"

Poor Marshal had to take it. "No −− not if you are dead."

"Well, that's what we're talking about."

Maud, at this, for pity, held out a perch. "Mr Marshal, I think, is talking a little on the basis of the possibility of your not being!" He threw her an instant glance of gratitude, and it gave her a push. "So long as you're not quite too utterly, you can come back."

"Oh," said Bight, "in time for the fuss?"

"Before" −− Marshal met it −− "the interest has subsided. It naturally then wouldn't −− would it? −− subside!"

"No," Bight granted; "not if it hadn't, through wearing out −− I mean your being lost too long −− already died out."

"Oh, of course," his guest agreed, "you mustn't be lost too long." A vista had plainly opened to him, and the subject led him on. He had, before its extent, another pause. "About how long, do you think−−?"

Well, Bight had to think. "I should say Beadel had rather overdone it."

The poor gentleman stared. "But if he can't help himself−−?"

Bight gave a laugh. "Yes; but in case he could."

Maud again intervened, and, as her question was for their host, Marshal was all attention. "Do you consider Beadel has overdone it?"

Well, once more, it took consideration. The issue of Bight's, however, was not of the clearest. "I don't think we can tell unless he were to. I don't think that, without seeing it, and judging by the special case, one can quite know how it would be taken. He might, on the one side, have spoiled, so to speak, his market; and he might, on the other, have scored as never before."

"It might be," Maud threw in, "just the making of him."

"Surely" −− Marshal glowed −− "there's just that chance."

"What a pity then," Bight laughed, "that there isn't someone to take it! For the light it would throw, I mean, on the laws −− so mysterious, so curious, so interesting −− that govern the great currents of public attention. They're not wholly whimsical −− wayward and wild; they have their strange logic, their obscure reason −− if one could only get at it! The man who does, you see −− and who can keep his discovery to himself! −− will make his everlasting fortune, as well, no doubt, as that of a few others. It's our branch, our preoccupation, in fact, Miss Blandy's and mine −− this pursuit of the incalculable, this study, to that end, of the great forces of publicity. Only, of course, it must be remembered," Bight went on, "that in the case we're speaking of −− the man disappearing as Beadel has now disappeared, and supplanting for the time every other topic −− must have someone on the spot for him, to keep the pot boiling, someone acting, with real intelligence, in his interest. I mean if he's to get the good of it when he does turn up. It would never do, you see, that that should be flat!"

"Oh no, not flat, never!" Marshal quailed at the thought. Held as in a vise by his host's high lucidity, he exhaled his interest at every pore. "It wouldn't be flat for Beadel, would it? −− I mean if he were to come."

"Not much! It wouldn't be flat for Beadel −− I think I can undertake." And Bight undertook so well that he threw himself back in his chair with his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat and his head very much up. "The only thing is that for poor Beadel it's a luxury, so to speak, wasted −− and so dreadfully, upon my word, that one quite regrets there's no one to step in."

"To step in ?" His visitor hung upon his lips.

"To do the thing better, so to speak −− to do it right; to −− having raised the whirlwind −− really ride the storm. To seize the psychological hour."

Marshal met it, yet he wondered. "You speak of the reappearance? I see. But the man of the reappearance would have, wouldn't he? −− or perhaps I don't follow? −− to be the same as the man of the disappearance. It wouldn't do as well −− would it? −− for somebody else to turn up?"

Bight considered him with attention −− as if there were fine possibilities. "No; unless such a person should turn up, say −− well, with news of him."

"But what news?"

"With lights −− the more lurid the better −− on the darkness. With the facts, don't you see, of the disappearance."

Marshal, on his side, threw himself back. "But he'd have to know them!"

"Oh," said Bight, with prompt portentousness, "that could be managed."

It was too much, by this time, for his victim, who simply turned on Maud a dilated eye and a flushed cheek. "Mr Marshal," it made her say −− "Mr Marshal would like to turn up."

Her hand was on the table, and the effect of her words, combined with this, was to cause him, before responsive speech could come, to cover it respectfully but expressively with his own. "Do you mean," he panted to Bight, "that you have, amid the general collapse of speculation, facts to give?"

"I've always facts to give."

It begot in the poor man a large hot smile. "But −− how shall I say? −− authentic, or as I believe you clever people say, 'inspired' ones?"

"If I should undertake such a case as we're supposing, I would of course by that circumstance undertake that my facts should be −− well, worthy of it. I would take," Bight on his own part modestly smiled, "pains with them."

It finished the business. "Would you take pains for me?"

Bight looked at him now hard. "Would you like to appear?"

"Oh, 'appear'!" Marshal weakly murmured.

"Is it, Mr Marshal, a real proposal? I mean are you prepared−−?"

Wonderment sat in his eyes −− an anguish of doubt and desire. "But wouldn't you prepare me−−?"

"Would you prepare me −− that's the point," Bight laughed −− "to prepare you?"

There was a minute's mutual gaze, but Marshal took it in. "I don't know what you're making me say; I don't know what you're making me feel. When one is with people so up in these things−−" and he turned to his companions, alternately, a look as of conscious doom lighted with suspicion, a look that was like a cry for mercy −− "one feels a little as if one ought to be saved from one's self. For I dare say one's foolish enough with one's poor little wish−−"

"The little wish, my dear sir" −− Bight took him up −− "to stand out in the world! Your wish is the wish of all high spirits."

"It's dear of you to say it." Mr Marshal was all response. "I shouldn't want, even if it were weak or vain, to have lived wholly unknown. And if what you ask is whether I understand you to speak, as it were, professionally−−"

"You do understand me?" Bight pushed back his chair.

"Oh, but so well! −− when I've already seen what you can do. I need scarcely say, that having seen it, I shan't bargain."

"Ah, then, I shall," Bight smiled. "I mean with the Papers. It must be half profits."

"'Profits'?" His guest was vague.

"Our friend," Maud explained to Bight, "simply wants the position."

Bight threw her a look. "Ah, he must take what I give him."

"But what you give me," their friend handsomely contended, "is the position."

"Yes; but the terms that I shall get! I don't produce you, of course," Bight went on, "till I've prepared you. But when I do produce you it will be as a value."

"You'll get so much for me?" the poor gentleman quavered.

"I shall be able to get, I think, anything I ask. So we divide." And Bight jumped up.

Marshal did the same, and, while, with his hands on the back of his chair, he steadied himself from the vertiginous view, they faced each other across the table. "Oh, it's too wonderful!"

"You're not afraid?"

He looked at a card on the wall, framed, suspended and marked with the word 'Soups'. He looked at Maud, who had not moved. "I don't know; I may be; I must feel. What I should fear," he added, "would be his coming

back."

"Beadel's? Yes, that would dish you. But since he can't−−!"

"I place myself," said Mortimer Marshal, "in your hands."

Maud Blandy still hadn't moved; she stared before her at the cloth. A small sharp sound, unheard, she saw, by the others, had reached her from the street, and with her mind instinctively catching at it, she waited, dissimulating a little, for its repetition or its effect. It was the howl of the Strand, it was news of the absent, and it would have a bearing. She had a hesitation, for she winced even now with the sense of Marshal's intensest look at her. He couldn't be saved from himself, but he might be, still, from Bight; though it hung of course, her chance to warn him, on what the news would be. She thought with concentration, while her friends unhooked their overcoats, and by the time these garments were donned she was on her feet. Then she spoke. "I don't want you to be 'dished'."

He allowed for her alarm. "But how can I be?"

"Something has come."

"Something−−?" The men had both spoken.

They had stopped where they stood; she again caught the sound. "Listen! They're crying."

They waited then, and it came −− came, of a sudden, with a burst and as if passing the place. A hawker, outside, with his 'extra', called by someone and hurrying, bawled it as he moved. "Death of Beadel−Muffet −− Extraordinary News!"

They all gasped, and Maud, with her eyes on Bight, saw him, to her satisfaction at first, turn pale. But his guest drank it in. "If it's true then" −− Marshal triumphed at her −− "I'm not dished."

But she only looked hard at Bight, who struck her as having, at the sound, fallen to pieces, and as having above all, on the instant, turned cold for his worried game. "Is it true?" she austerely asked.

His white face answered. "It's true."

7

The first thing, on the part of our friends −− after each interlocutor, producing a penny, had plunged into the unfolded 'Latest' −− was this very evidence of their dispensing with their companion's further attendance on their agitated state, and all the more that Bight was to have still, in spite of agitation, his function with him to accomplish: a result much assisted by the insufflation of wind into Mr Marshal's sails constituted by the fact before them. With Beadel publicly dead this gentleman's opportunity, on the terms just arranged, opened out; it was quite as if they had seen him, then and there, step, with a kind of spiritual splash, into the empty seat of the boat so launched, scarcely even taking time to master the essentials before he gave himself to the breeze. The essentials indeed he was, by their understanding, to receive in full from Bight at their earliest leisure; but nothing could so vividly have marked his confidence in the young man as the promptness with which he appeared now ready to leave him to his inspiration. The news moreover, as yet, was the rich, grim fact −− a sharp flare from an Agency, lighting into blood−colour the locked room, finally, with the police present, forced open, of the first hotel at Frankfort−on−the−Oder; but there was enough of it, clearly, to bear scrutiny, the scrutiny represented in our young couple by the act of perusal prolonged, intensified, repeated, so repeated that it was exactly perhaps with this suggestion of doubt that poor Mr Marshal had even also a little lost patience. He vanished, at any rate, while his supporters, still planted in the side−street into which they had lately issued, stood extinguished, as to any facial communion, behind the array of printed columns. It was only after he had gone that, whether aware or not, the other lowered, on either side, the absorbing page and knew that their eyes had met. A remarkable thing, for Maud Blandy, then happened, a thing quite as remarkable at least as poor Beadel's suicide, which we recall her having so considerably discounted.

Present as they thus were at the tragedy, present in far Frankfort just where they stood, by the door of their stale pothouse and in the thick of London air, the logic of her situation, she was sharply conscious, would have been an immediate rupture with Bight. He was scared at what he had done −− he looked his scare so straight out at her that she might almost have seen in it the dismay of his question of how far his responsibility, given the facts, might, if pried into, be held −− and not only at the judgement−seat of mere morals −− to reach. The dismay was to that degree illuminating that she had had from him no such avowal of responsibility as this amounted to, and the limit to any laxity on her own side had therefore not been set for her with any such sharpness. It put her at last in the right, his scare −− quite richly in the right; and as that was naturally but where she had waited to find herself, everything that now silently passed between them had the merit, if it had none other, of simplifying. Their hour had struck, the hour after which she was definitely not to have forgiven him. Yet what occurred, as I say, was that, if, at the end of five minutes, she had moved much further, it proved to be, in spite of logic, not in the sense away from him, but in the sense nearer. He showed to her, at these strange moments, as blood−stained and literally hunted; the yell of the hawkers, repeated and echoing round them, was like a cry for his life; and there was in particular a minute during which, gazing down into the roused Strand, all equipped both with mob and with constables, she asked herself whether she had best get off with him through the crowd, where they would be least noticed, or get him away through quiet Covent Garden, empty at that hour, but with policemen to watch a furtive couple, and with the news, more bawled at their heels in the stillness, acquiring the sound of the very voice of justice. It was this last sudden terror that presently determined her, and determined with it an impulse of protection that had somehow to do with pity without having to do with tenderness. It settled, at all events, the question of leaving him; she couldn't leave him there and so; she must see at least what would have come of his own sense of the shock.

The way he took it, the shock, gave her afresh the measure of how perversely he had played with Marshal −− of how he had tried so, on the very edge of his predicament, to cheat his fears and beguile his want of ease. He had insisted to his victim on the truth he had now to reckon with, but had insisted only because he didn't believe it. Beadel, by that attitude, was but lying low; so that he would have no promise really to redeem. At present he had one, indeed, and Maud could ask herself if the redemption of it, with the leading of their wretched friend a further fantastic dance, would be what he depended on to drug the pain of remorse. By the time she had covered as much ground as this, however, she had also, standing before him, taken his special out of his hand and, folding

it up carefully with her own and smoothing it down, packed the two together into such a small tight ball as she might toss to a distance without the air, which she dreaded, of having, by any looser proceeding, disowned or evaded the news. Howard Bight, helpless and passive, putting on the matter no governed face, let her do with him as she liked, let her, for the first time in their acquaintance, draw his hand into her arm as if he were an invalid or as if she were a snare. She took with him, thus guided and sustained, their second plunge; led him, with decision, straight to where their shock was shared and amplified, pushed her way, guarding him, across the dense thoroughfare and through the great westward current which fairly seemed to meet and challenge them, and then, by reaching Waterloo Bridge with him and descending the granite steps, set him down at last on the Embankment. It was a fact, none the less, that she had in her eyes, all the while, and too strangely for speech, the vision of the scene in the little German city: the smashed door, the exposed horror, the wondering, insensible group, the English gentleman, in the disordered room, driven to bay among the scattered personal objects that only too floridly announced and emblazoned him, and several of which the Papers were already naming −− the poor English gentleman, hunted and hiding, done to death by the thing he yet, for so long, always would have, and stretched on the floor with his beautiful little revolver still in his hand and the effusion of his blood, from a wound taken, with rare resolution, full in the face, extraordinary and dreadful.

She went on with her friend, eastward and beside the river, and it was as if they both, for that matter, had, in their silence, the dire material vision. Maud Blandy, however, presently stopped short −− one of the connections of the picture so brought her to a stand. It had come over her, with a force she couldn't check, that the catastrophe itself would have been, with all the unfathomed that yet clung to it, just the thing for her companion's professional hand; so that, queerly but absolutely, while she looked at him again in reprobation and pity, it was as much as she could do not to feel it for him as something missed, not to wish he might have been there to snatch his chance, and not, above all, to betray to him this reflection. It had really risen to her lips −− "Why aren't you, old man, on the spot?" and indeed the question, had it broken forth, might well have sounded as a provocation to him to start without delay. Such was the effect, in poor Maud, for the moment, of the habit, so confirmed in her, of seeing time marked only by the dial of the Papers. She had admired in Bight the true journalist that she herself was so clearly not −− though it was also not what she had most admired in him; and she might have felt, at this instant, the charm of putting true journalism to the proof. She might have been on the point of saying: "Real business, you know, would be for you to start now, just as you are, before anyone else, sure as you can so easily be of having the pull"; and she might, after a moment, while they paused, have been looking back, through the river−mist, for a sign of the hour, at the blurred face of Big Ben. That she grazed this danger yet avoided it was partly the result in truth of her seeing for herself quickly enough that the last thing Bight could just then have thought of, even under provocation of the most positive order, was the chance thus failing him, or the train, the boat, the advantage, that the true journalist wouldn't have missed. He quite, under her eyes, while they stood together, ceased to be the true journalist; she saw him, as she felt, put off the character as definitely as she might have seen him remove his coat, his hat, or the contents of his pockets, in order to lay them on the parapet before jumping into the river. Wonderful was the difference that this transformation, marked by no word and supported by no sign, made in the man she had hitherto known. Nothing, again, could have so expressed for her his continued inward dismay. It was as if, for that matter, she couldn't have asked him a question without adding to it; and she didn't wish to add to it, since she was by this time more fully aware that she wished to be generous. When she at last uttered other words it was precisely so that she mightn't press him.

"I think of her −− poor thing: that's what it makes me do. I think of her there at this moment −− just out of the 'Line' −− with this stuff shrieked at her windows." With which, having so at once contained and relieved herself, she caused him to walk on.

"Are you talking of Mrs Chorner?" he after a moment asked. And then, when he had had her quick "Of course −− of who else?" he said what she didn't expect. "Naturally one thinks of her. But she has herself to blame. I mean she drove him−−" What he meant, however, Bight suddenly dropped, taken as he was with another idea, which had brought them the next minute to a halt. "Mightn't you, by the way, see her?"

"See her now−−?"

"'Now' or never −− for the good of it. Now's just your time."

"But how can it be hers, in the very midst−−?"

"Because it's in the very midst. She'll tell you things to−night that she'll never tell again. To−night she'll be

great."

Maud gaped almost wildly. "You want me, at such an hour, to call−−?"

"And send up your card with the word −− oh, of course the right one! −− on it."

"What do you suggest," Maud asked, "as the right one?"

"Well, 'The world wants you' −− that usually does. I've seldom known it, even in deeper distress than is, after all, here supposable, to fail. Try it, at any rate."

The girl, strangely touched, intensely wondered. "Demand of her, you mean, to let me explain for her?"

"There you are. You catch on. Write that −− if you like −− 'Let me explain.' She'll want to explain."

Maud wondered at him more −− he had somehow so turned the tables on her. "But she doesn't. It's exactly what she doesn't; she never has. And that he, poor wretch, was always wanting to−−"

"Was precisely what made her hold off? I grant it." He had waked up. "But that was before she had killed him. Trust me, she'll chatter now."

This, for his companion, simply forced it out. "It wasn't she who killed him. That, my dear, you know."

"You mean it was I who did? Well then, my child, interview me." And, with his hands in his pockets and his idea apparently genuine, he smiled at her, by the grey river and under the high lamps, with an effect strange and suggestive. "That would be a go!"

"You mean" −− she jumped at it −− "you'll tell me what you know?"

"Yes, and even what I've done! But −− if you'll take it so −− for the Papers. Oh, for the Papers only!"

She stared. "You mean you want me to get it in−−?"

"I don't 'want' you to do anything, but I'm ready to help you, ready to get it in for you, like a shot, myself, if it's a thing you yourself want."

"A thing I want −− to give you away?"

"Oh," he laughed, "I'm just now worth giving! You'd really do it, you know. And, to help you, here I am. It would be for you −− only judge! −− a leg up."

It would indeed, she really saw; somehow, on the spot, she believed it. But his surrender made her tremble. It wasn't a joke −− she could give him away; or rather she could sell him for money. Money, thus, was what he offered her, or the value of money, which was the same; it was what he wanted her to have. She was conscious already, however, that she could have it only as he offered it, and she said therefore, but half−heartedly, "I'll keep your secret."

He looked at her more gravely. "Ah, as a secret I can't give it." Then he hesitated. "I'll get you a hundred pounds for it."

"Why don't you," she asked, "get them for yourself?"

"Because I don't care for myself. I care only for you."

She waited again. "You mean for my taking you?" And then as he but looked at her: "How should I take you if I had dealt with you that way?"

"What do I lose by it," he said, "if, by our understanding of the other day, since things have so turned out, you're not to take me at all? So, at least, on my proposal, you get something else."

"And what," Maud returned, "do you get?"

"I don't 'get'; I lose. I have lost. So I don't matter." The eyes with which she covered him at this might have signified either that he didn't satisfy her or that his last word −− as his word −− rather imposed itself. Whether or no, at all events, she decided that he still did matter. She presently moved again, and they walked some minutes more. He had made her tremble, and she continued to tremble. So unlike anything that had ever come to her was, if seriously viewed, his proposal. The quality of it, while she walked, grew intenser with each step. It struck her as, when one came to look at it, unlike any offer any man could ever have made or any woman ever have received; and it began accordingly, on the instant, to affect her as almost inconceivably romantic, absolutely, in a manner, and quite out of the blue, dramatic; immeasurably more so, for example, than the sort of thing she had come out to hear in the afternoon −− the sort of thing that was already so far away. If he was joking it was poor, but if he was serious it was, properly, sublime. And he wasn't joking. He was, however, after an interval, talking again, though, trembling still, she had not been attentive; so that she was unconscious of what he had said until she heard him once more sound Mrs Chorner's name. "If you don't, you know, someone else will, and someone much worse. You told me she likes you." She had at first no answer for him, but it presently made her stop again.

It was beautiful, if she would, but it was odd −− this pressure for her to push at the very hour he himself had renounced pushing. A part of the whole sublimity of his attitude, so far as she was concerned, it clearly was; since, obviously, he was not now to profit by anything she might do. She seemed to see that, as the last service he could render, he wished to launch her and leave her. And that came out the more as he kept it up. "If she likes you, you know, she really wants you. Go to her as a friend."

"And bruit her abroad as one?" Maud Blandy asked.

"Oh, as a friend from the Papers −− from them and for them, and with just your half−hour to give her before you rush back to them. Take it even −− oh, you can safely" −− the young man developed −− "a little high with her. That's the way −− the real way." And he spoke the next moment as if almost losing his patience. "You ought by this time, you know, to understand."

There was something in her mind that it still charmed −− his mastery of the horrid art. He could see, always, the superior way, and it was as if, in spite of herself, she were getting the truth from him. Only she didn't want the truth −− at least not that one. "And if she simply, for my impudence, chucks me out of window? A short way is easy for them, you know, when one doesn't scream or kick, or hang on to the furniture or the banisters. And I usually, you see" −− she said it pensively −− "don't. I've always, from the first, had my retreat prepared for any occasion, and flattered myself that, whatever hand I might, or mightn't, become at getting in, no one would ever be able so beautifully to get out. Like a flash, simply. And if she does, as I say, chuck me, it's you who fall to the ground."

He listened to her without expression, only saying "If you feel for her, as you insist, it's your duty." And then later, as if he had made an impression, "Your duty, I mean, to try. I admit, if you will, that there's a risk, though I don't, with my experience, feel it. Nothing venture, at any rate, nothing have; and it's all, isn't it? at the worst, in the day's work. There's but one thing you can go on, but it's enough. The greatest probability."

She resisted, but she was taking it in. "The probability that she will throw herself on my neck?"

"It will be either one thing or the other," he went on as if he had not heard her. "She'll not receive you, or she will. But if she does your fortune's made, and you'll be able to look higher than the mere common form of donkey." She recognized the reference to Marshal, but that was a thing she needn't mind now, and he had already continued. "She'll keep nothing back. And you mustn't either."

"Oh, won't I?" Maud murmured.

"Then you'll break faith with her."

And, as if to emphasise it, he went on, though without leaving her an infinite time to decide, for he looked at his watch as they proceeded, and when they came, in their spacious walk, abreast of another issue, where the breadth of the avenue, the expanses of stone, the stretch of the river, the dimness of the distance, seemed to isolate them, he appeared, by renewing their halt and looking up afresh toward the town, to desire to speed her on her way. Many things meanwhile had worked within her, but it was not till she had kept him on past the Temple Station of the Underground that she fairly faced her opportunity. Even then too there were still other things, under the assault of which she dropped, for the moment, Mrs Chorner. "Did you really," she asked, "believe he'd turn up alive?"

With his hands in his pockets he continued to gloom at her. "Up there, just now, with Marshal −− what did you take me as believing?"

"I gave you up. And I do give you. You're beyond me. Only," she added, "I seem to have made you out since then as really staggered. Though I don't say it," she ended, "to bear hard upon you.

"Don't bear hard," said Howard Bight very simply.

It moved her, for all she could have said; so that she had for a moment to wonder if it were bearing hard to mention some features of the rest of her thought. If she was to have him, certainly, it couldn't be without knowing, as she said to herself, something −− something she might perhaps mitigate a little the solitude of his penance by possessing. "There were moments when I even imagined that, up to a certain point, you were still in communication with him. Then I seemed to see that you lost touch −− though you braved it out for me; that you had begun to be really uneasy and were giving him up. I seemed to see," she pursued after a hesitation, "that it was coming home to you that you had worked him up too high −− that you were feeling, if I may say it, that you had better have stopped short. I mean short of this."

"You may say it," Bight answered. "I had better."

She looked at him a moment. "There was more of him than you believed."

"There was more of him. And now," Bight added, looking across the river, "here's all of him."

"Which you feel you have on your heart?"

"I don't know where I have it." He turned his eyes to her. "I must wait."

"For more facts?"

"Well," he returned after a pause, "hardly perhaps for 'more' if −− with what we have −− this is all. But I've things to think out. I must wait to see how I feel. I did nothing but what he wanted. But we were behind a bolting horse −− whom neither of us could have stopped."

"And he," said Maud, "is the one dashed to pieces."

He had his grave eyes on her. "Would you like it to have been me?"

"Of course not. But you enjoyed it −− the bolt; everything up to the smash. Then, with that ahead, you were nervous."

"I'm nervous still," said Howard Bight.

Even in his unexpected softness there was something that escaped her, and it made in her, just a little, for irritation. "What I mean is that you enjoyed his terror. That was what led you on."

"No doubt −− it was so grand a case. But do you call charging me with it," the young man asked, "not bearing hard−−?"

"No" −− she pulled herself up −− "it is. I don't charge you. Only I feel how little −− about what has been, all the while, behind −− you tell me. Nothing explains."

"Explains what?"

"Why, his act."

He gave a sign of impatience. "Isn't the explanation what I offered a moment ago to give you?"

It came, in effect, back to her. "For use?"

"For use."

"Only?"

"Only." It was sharp.

They stood a little, on this, face to face; at the end of which she turned away. "I'll go to Mrs Chorner." And she was off while he called after her to take a cab. It was quite as if she were to come upon him, in his strange insistence, for the fare.

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If she kept to herself, from the morrow on, for three days, her adoption of that course was helped, as she thankfully felt, by the great other circumstance and the great public commotion under cover of which it so little mattered what became of private persons. It was not simply that she had her reasons, but she couldn't during this time have descended again to Fleet Street even had she wished, though she said to herself often enough that her behaviour was rank cowardice. She left her friend alone with what he had to face, since, as she found, she could in absence from him a little recover herself. In his presence, the night of the news, she knew she had gone to pieces, had yielded, all too vulgarly, to a weakness proscribed by her original view. Her original view had been that if poor Beadel, worked up, as she inveterately kept seeing him, should embrace the tragic remedy, Howard Bight wouldn't be able not to show as practically compromised. He wouldn't be able not to smell of the wretched man's blood, morally speaking, too strongly for condonations or complacencies. There were other things, truly, that, during their minutes on the Embankment, he had been able to do, but they constituted just the sinister subtlety to which it was well that she should not again, yet awhile, be exposed. They were of the order −− from the safe summit of Maida Hill she could make it out −− that had proved corrosive to the muddled mind of the Frankfort fugitive, deprived, in the midst of them, of any honest issue. Bight, of course, rare youth, had meant no harm; but what was precisely queerer, what, when you came to judge, less human, than to be formed for offence, for injury, by the mere inherent play of the spirit of observation, of criticism, by the inextinguishable flame, in fine, of the ironic passion? The ironic passion, in such a world as surrounded one, might assert itself as half the dignity, the decency, of life; yet, none the less, in cases where one had seen it prove gruesomely fatal (and not to one's self, which was nothing, but to others, even the stupid and the vulgar) one was plainly admonished to −− well, stand off a little and think.

This was what Maud Blandy, while the Papers roared and resounded more than ever with the new meat flung to them, tried to consider that she was doing; so that the attitude held her fast during the freshness of the event. The event grew, as she had felt it would, with every further fact from Frankfort and with every extra−special, and reached its maximum, inevitably, in the light of comment and correspondence. These features, before the catastrophe, had indubitably, at the last, flagged a little, but they revived so prodigiously, under the well−timed shock, that, for the period we speak of, the poor gentleman seemed, with a continuance, with indeed an enhancement, of his fine old knack, to have the successive editions all to himself. They had been always of course, the Papers, very largely about him, but it was not too much to say that at this crisis they were about nothing else worth speaking of; so that our young woman could but groan in spirit at the direful example set to the emulous. She spared an occasional moment to the vision of Mortimer Marshal, saw him drunk, as she might have said, with the mere fragrance of the wine of glory, and asked herself what art Bight would now use to furnish him forth as he had promised. The mystery of Beadel's course loomed, each hour, so much larger and darker that the plan would have to be consummate, or the private knowledge alike beyond cavil and beyond calculation, which should attempt either to sound or to mask the appearances. Strangely enough, none the less, she even now found herself thinking of her rash colleague as attached, for the benefit of his surviving victim, to this idea; she went in fact so far as to imagine him half−upheld, while the public wonder spent itself, by the prospect of the fun he might still have with Marshal. This implied, she was not unconscious, that his notion of fun was infernal, and would of course be especially so were his knowledge as real as she supposed it. He would inflate their foolish friend with knowledge that was false and so start him as a balloon for the further gape of the world. This was the image, in turn, that would yield the last sport −− the droll career of the wretched man as wandering forever through space under the apprehension, in time duly gained, that the least touch of earth would involve the smash of his car. Afraid, thus, to drop, but at the same time equally out of conceit of the chill air of the upper and increasing solitudes to which he had soared, he would become such a diminishing speck, though traceably a prey to wild human gyrations, as she might conceive Bight to keep in view for future recreation.

It wasn't however the future that was actually so much in question for them all as the immediately near present, offered to her as the latter was in the haunting light of the inevitably unlimited character of any real inquiry. The inquiry of the Papers, immense and ingenious, had yet for her the saving quality that she didn't take it

as real. It abounded, truly, in hypotheses, most of them lurid enough, but a certain ease of mind as to what these might lead to was perhaps one of the advantages she owed to her constant breathing of Fleet Street air. She couldn't quite have said why, but she felt it wouldn't be the Papers that, proceeding from link to link, would arrive vindictively at Bight's connection with his late client. The enjoyment of that consummation would rest in another quarter, and if the young man were as uneasy now as she thought he ought to be even while she hoped he wasn't, it would be from the fear in his eyes of such justice as was shared with the vulgar. The Papers held an inquiry, but the Authorities, as they vaguely figured to her, would hold an inquest; which was a matter −− even when international, complicated and arrangeable, between Frankfort and London, only on some system unknown to her −− more in tune with possibilities of exposure. It was not, as need scarce be said, from the exposure of Beadel that she averted herself; it was from the exposure of the person who had made of Beadel's danger, Beadel's dread −− whatever these really represented −− the use that the occurrence at Frankfort might be shown to certify. It was well before her, at all events, that if Howard Bight's reflections, so stimulated, kept pace at all with her own, he would at the worst, or even at the best, have been glad to meet her again. It was her knowing that and yet lying low that she privately qualified as cowardice; it was the instinct of watching and waiting till she should see how great the danger might become. And she had moreover another reason, which we shall presently learn. The extra−specials meanwhile were to be had in Kilburnia almost as soon as in the Strand; the little ponied and painted carts, tipped at an extraordinary angle, by which they were disseminated, had for that matter, she observed, never rattled up the Edgware Road at so furious a rate. Each evening, it was true, when the flare of Fleet Street would have begun really to smoke, she had, in resistance to old habit, a little to hold her self; but for three successive days she tided over that crisis. It was not till the fourth night that her reaction suddenly declared itself, determined as it partly was by the latest poster that dangled free at the door of a small shop just out of her own street. The establishment dealt in buttons, pins, tape, and silver bracelets, but the branch of its industry she patronised was that of telegrams, stamps, stationery, and the 'Edinburgh rock' offered to the appetite of the several small children of her next−door neighbour but one. 'The Beadel−Muffet Mystery, Startling Disclosures, Action of the Treasury' −− at these words she anxiously gazed; after which she decided. It was as if from her hilltop, from her very housetop, to which the window of her little room was contiguous, she had seen the red light in the east. It had, this time, its colour. She went on, she went far, till she met a cab, which she hailed, 'regardless', she felt, as she had hailed one after leaving Bight by the river. "To Fleet Street" she simply said, and it took her −− that she felt too −− back into life.

Yes, it was life again, bitter, doubtless, but with a taste, when, having stopped her cab, short of her indication, in Covent Garden, she walked across southward and to the top of the street in which she and her friend had last parted with Mortimer Marshal. She came down to their favoured pothouse, the scene of Bight's high compact with that worthy, and here, hesitating, she paused, uncertain as to where she had best look out. Her conviction, on her way, had but grown; Howard Bight would be looking out −− that to a certainty; something more, something portentous, had happened (by her evening paper, scanned in the light of her little shop window, she had taken instant possession of it), and this would have made him know that she couldn't keep up what he would naturally call her 'game'. There were places where they often met, and the diversity of these −− not too far apart, however −− would be his only difficulty. He was on the prowl, in fine, with his hat over his eyes; and she hadn't known, till this vision of him came, what seeds of romance were in her soul. Romance, the other night, by the river, had brushed them with a wing that was like the blind bump of a bat, but that had been something on his part, whereas this thought of bringing him succour as to a Russian anarchist, to some victim of society or subject of extradition, was all her own, and was of this special moment. She saw him with his hat over his eyes; she saw him with his overcoat collar turned up; she saw him as a hunted hero cleverly drawn in one of the serialising weeklies or, as they said, in some popular 'ply', and the effect of it was to open to her on the spot a sort of happy sense of all her possible immorality. That was the romantic sense, and everything vanished but the richness of her thrill. She knew little enough what she might have to do for him, but her hope, as sharp as a pang, was that, if anything, it would put her in danger too. The hope, as it happened then, was crowned on the very spot; she had never so felt in danger as when, just now, turning to the glazed door of their cookshop, she saw a man, within, close behind the glass, still, stiff and ominous, looking at her hard. The light of the place was behind him, so that his face, in the dusk of the side−street, was dark, but it was visible that she showed for him as an object of interest. The next thing, of course, she had seen more −− seen she could be such an object, in such a degree, only to her friend

himself, and that Bight had been thus sure of her; and the next thing after that had passed straight in and been met by him, as he stepped aside to admit her, in silence. He had his hat pulled down and, quite forgetfully, in spite of the warmth within, the collar of his mackintosh up.

It was his silence that completed the perfection of these things −− the perfection that came out most of all, oddly, after he had corrected them by removal and was seated with her, in their common corner, at tea, with the room almost to themselves and no one to consider but Marshal's little man in the obvious wig and the blue spectacles, the great authority on the inner life of the criminal classes. Strangest of all, nearly, was it, that, though now essentially belonging, as Maud felt, to this order, they were not conscious of the danger of his presence. What she had wanted most immediately to learn was how Bight had known; but he made, and scarce to her surprise, short work of that. "I've known every evening −− known, that is, that you've wanted to come; and I've been here every evening, waiting just there till I should see you. It was but a question of time. To−night, however, I was sure −− for there's, after all, something of me left. Besides, besides−−!" He had, in short, another certitude. "You've been ashamed −− I knew, when I saw nothing come, that you would be. But also that that would pass."

Maud found him, as she would have said, all there. "I've been ashamed, you mean, of being afraid?"

"You've been ashamed about Mrs Chorner; that is, about me. For that you did go to her I know."

"Have you been then yourself?"

"For what do you take me?" He seemed to wonder. "What had I to do with her −− except for you?" And then before she could say: "Didn't she receive you?"

"Yes, as you said, she 'wanted' me."

"She jumped at you?"

"Jumped at me. She gave me an hour."

He flushed with an interest that, the next moment, had flared in spite of everything into amusement. "So that I was right, in my perfect wisdom, up to the hilt?"

"Up to the hilt. She took it from me."

"That the public wants her?"

"That it won't take a refusal. So she opened up."

"Overflowed?"

"Prattled."

"Gushed?"

"Well, recognised and embraced her opportunity. Kept me there till midnight. Told me, as she called it, everything about everything."

They looked at each other long on it, and it determined in Bight at last a brave clatter of his crockery. "They're stupendous!"

"It's you that are," Maud replied, "to have found it out so. You know them down to the ground."

"Oh, what I've found out−−!" But it was more than he could talk of then. "If I hadn't really felt sure, I wouldn't so have urged you. Only now, if you please, I don't understand your having apparently but kept her in your pocket."

"Of course you don't," said Maud Blandy. To which she added, "And I don't quite myself. I only know that now that I have her there nothing will induce me to take her out."

"Then you potted her, permit me to say," he answered, "on absolutely false pretences."

"Absolutely; which is precisely why I've been ashamed. I made for home with the whole thing," she explained, "and there, that night, in the hours till morning, when, turning it over, I saw all it really was, I knew that I couldn't −− that I would rather choose that shame, that of not doing for her what I had offered, than the hideous honesty of bringing it out. Because, you see," Maud declared, "it was −− well, it was too much."

Bight followed her with a sharpness! "It was so good?"

"Quite beautiful! Awful!"

He wondered. "Really charming?"

"Charming, interesting, horrible. It was true −− and it was the whole thing. It was herself −− and it was him, all of him too. Not a bit made up, but just the poor woman melted and overflowing, yet at the same time raging −− like the hot−water tap when it boils. I never saw anything like it; everything, as you guaranteed, came out; it has made me know things. So, to have come down here with it, to have begun to hawk it, either through you, as you

kindly proposed, or in my own brazen person, to the highest bidder −− well, I felt that I didn't have to, after all, if I didn't want to, and that if it's the only way I can get money I would much rather starve."

"I see." Howard Bight saw all. "And that's why you're ashamed?"

She hesitated −− she was both so remiss and so firm. "I knew that by my not coming back to you, you would have guessed, have found me wanting; just, for that matter, as she has found me. And I couldn't explain. I can't −− I can't to her. So that," the girl went on, "I shall have done, so far as her attitude to me was to be concerned, something more indelicate, something more indecent, than if I had passed her on. I shall have wormed it all out of her, and then, by not having carried it to market, disappointed and cheated her. She was to have heard it cried like fresh herring."

Bight was immensely taken. "Oh, beyond all doubt. You're in a fix. You've played, you see, a most unusual game. The code allows everything but that."

"Precisely. So I must take the consequences. I'm dishonoured, but I shall have to bear it. And I shall bear it by getting out. Out, I mean, of the whole thing. I shall chuck them."

"Chuck the Papers?" he asked in his simplicity.

But his wonder, she saw, was overdone −− their eyes too frankly met. "Damn the Papers!" said Maud Blandy.

It produced in his sadness and weariness the sweetest smile that had yet broken through. "We shall, between us, if we keep it up, ruin them! And you make nothing," he went on, "of one's having at last so beautifully started you? Your complaint," he developed, "was that you couldn't get in. Then suddenly, with a splendid jump, you are in. Only, however, to look round you and say with disgust 'Oh, here?' Where the devil do you want to be?"

"Ah, that's another question. At least," she said, "I can scrub floors. I can take it out perhaps −− my swindle of Mrs Chorner," she pursued −− "in scrubbing hers."

He only, after this, looked at her a little. "She has written to you?"

"Oh, in high dudgeon. I was to have attended to the 'press−cutting' people as well, and she was to have seen herself, at the furthest, by the second morning (that was day−before−yesterday) all over the place. She wants to know what I mean."

"And what do you answer?"

"That it's hard, of course, to make her understand, but that I've felt her, since parting with her, simply to be too good."

"Signifying by it, naturally," Bight amended, "that you've felt yourself to be so."

"Well, that too if you like. But she was exquisite."

He considered. "Would she do for a ply?"

"Oh God, no!"

"Then for a tile?"

"Perhaps," said Maud Blandy at last.

He understood, visibly, the shade, as well as the pause; which, together, held him a moment. But it was of something else he spoke. "And you who had found they would never bite!"

"Oh, I was wrong," she simply answered. "Once they've tasted blood−−!"

"They want to devour," her friend laughed, "not only the bait and the hook, but the line and the rod and the poor fisherman himself? Except," he continued, "that poor Mrs Chorner hasn't yet even 'tasted'. However," he added, "she obviously will."

Maud's assent was full. "She'll find others. She'll appear."

He waited a moment −− his eye had turned to the door of the street. "Then she must be quick. These are things of the hour."

"You hear something?" she asked, his expression having struck her.

He listened again, but it was nothing. "No −− but it's somehow in the air."

"What is?"

"Well, that she must hurry. She must get in. She must get out." He had his arms on the table, and, locking his hands and inclining a little, he brought his face nearer to her. "My sense to−night's of an openness−−! I don't know what's the matter. Except, that is, that you're great."

She looked at him, not drawing back. "You know everything −− so immeasurably more than you admit or than you tell me. You mortally perplex and worry me."

It made him smile. "You're great, you're great," he only repeated. "You know it's quite awfully swagger, what you've done."

"What I haven't, you mean; what I never shall. Yes," she added, but now sinking back −− "of course you see that too. What don't you see, and what, with such ways, is to be the end of you?"

"You're great, you're great" −− he kept it up. "And I like you. That's to be the end of me."

So, for a minute, they left it, while she came to the thing that, for the last half−hour, had most been with her. "What is the 'action', announced to−night, of the Treasury?"

"Oh, they've sent somebody out, partly, it would seem, at the request of the German authorities, to take possession."

"Possession, you mean, of his effects?"

"Yes, and legally, administratively, of the whole matter."

"Seeing, you mean, that there's still more in it−−?"

"Than meets the eye," said Bight, "precisely. But it won't be till the case is transferred, as it presently will be, to this country, that they will see. Then it will be funny."

"Funny?" Maud Blandy asked.

"Oh, lovely."

"Lovely for you?"

"Why not? The bigger the whole thing grows, the lovelier."

"You've odd notions," she said, "of loveliness. Do you expect his situation won't be traced to you? Don't you suppose you'll be forced to speak?"

"To 'speak'−−?"

"Why, if it is traced. What do you make, otherwise, of the facts to−night?"

"Do you call them facts?" the young man asked.

"I mean the Astounding Disclosures."

"Well, do you only read your headlines? 'The most astounding disclosures are expected' −− that's the valuable text. Is it," he went on, "what fetched you?"

His answer was so little of one that she made her own scant. "What fetched me is that I can't rest."

"No more can I," he returned. "But in what danger do you think me?"

"In any in which you think yourself. Why not, if I don't mean in danger of hanging?"

He looked at her so that she presently took him for serious at last −− which was different from his having been either worried or perverse. "Of public discredit, you mean −− for having so unmercifully baited him? Yes," he conceded with a straightness that now surprised her, "I've thought of that. But how can the baiting be proved?"

"If they take possession of his effects won't his effects be partly his papers, and won't they, among them, find letters from you, and won't your letters show it?"

"Well, show what?"

"Why, the frenzy to which you worked him −− and thereby your connection."

"They won't show it to dunderheads."

"And are they all dunderheads?"

"Every mother's son of them −− where anything so beautiful is concerned."

"Beautiful?" Maud murmured.

"Beautiful, my letters are −− gems of the purest ray. I'm covered."

She let herself go −− she looked at him long. "You're a wonder. But all the same," she added, "you don't like it."

"Well, I'm not sure." Which clearly meant, however, that he almost was, from the way in which, the next moment, he had exchanged the question for another. "You haven't anything to tell me of Mrs Chorner's explanation?"

Oh, as to this, she had already considered and chosen. "What do you want of it when you know so much more? So much more, I mean, than even she has known."

"Then she hasn't known−−?"

"There you are! What," asked Maud, "are you talking about?"

She had made him smile, even though his smile was perceptibly pale; and he continued. "Of what was behind.

Behind any game of mine. Behind everything."

"So am I then talking of that. No," said Maud, "she hasn't known, and she doesn't know I judge, to this hour. Her explanation therefore doesn't bear upon that. It bears upon something else."

"Well, my dear, on what?"

He was not, however, to find out by simply calling her his dear; for she had not sacrificed the reward of her interview in order to present the fine flower of it, unbribed, even to him. "You know how little you've ever told me, and you see how, at this instant, even while you press me to gratify you, you give me nothing. I give," she smiled −− yet not a little flushed −− "nothing for nothing."

He showed her he felt baffled, but also that she was perverse. "What you want of me is what, originally, you wouldn't hear of: anything so dreadful, that is, as his predicament must be. You saw that to make him want to keep quiet he must have something to be ashamed of, and that was just what, in pity, you positively objected to learning. You've grown," Bight smiled, "more interested since."

"If I have," said Maud, "it's because you have. Now, at any rate, I'm not afraid."

He waited a moment. "Are you very sure?"

"Yes, for my mystification is greater at last than my delicacy. I don't know till I do know" −− and she expressed this even with difficulty −− "what it has been, all the while, that it was a question of, and what, consequently, all the while, we've been talking about."

"Ah, but why should you know?" the young man inquired. "I can understand your needing to, or somebody's needing to, if we were in a ply, or even, though in a less degree, if we were in a tile. But since, my poor child, we're only in the delicious muddle of life itself−−!"

"You may have all the plums of the pudding, and I nothing but a mouthful of cold suet?" Maud pushed back her chair; she had taken up her old gloves; but while she put them on she kept in view both her friend and her grievance. "I don't believe," she at last brought out, "that there is, or that there ever was, anything."

"Oh, oh, oh!" Bight laughed.

"There's nothing," she continued, "'behind'. There's no horror."

"You hold, by that," said Bight, "that the poor man's deed is all me? That does make it, you see, bad for me."

She got up and, there before him, finished smoothing her creased gloves. "Then we are −− if there's such richness −− in a ply."

"Well, we are not, at all events −− so far as we ourselves are concerned −− the spectators." And he also got up. "The spectators must look out for themselves."

"Evidently, poor things!" Maud sighed. And as he still stood as if there might be something for him to come from her, she made her attitude clear −− which was quite the attitude now of tormenting him a little. "If you know something about him which she doesn't, and also which I don't, she knows something about him −− as I do too −− which you don't."

"Surely: when it's exactly what I'm trying to get out of you. Are you afraid I'll sell it?"

But even this taunt, which she took moreover at its worth, didn't move her. "You definitely then won't tell me?"

"You mean that if I will you'll tell me?"

She thought again. "Well −− yes. But on that condition alone."

"Then you're safe," said Howard Bight. "I can't, really, my dear, tell you. Besides, if it's to come out−−!"

"I'll wait in that case till it does. But I must warn you," she added, "that my facts won't come out."

He considered. "Why not, since the rush at her is probably even now being made? Why not, if she receives others?"

Well, Maud could think too. "She'll receive them, but the won't receive her. Others are like your people −− dunderheads. Others won't understand, won't count, won't exist." And she moved to the door. "There are no others." Opening the door, she had reached the street with it, even while he replied, overtaking her, that there were certainly none such as herself; but they had scarce passed out before her last remark was, to their somewhat disconcerted sense, sharply enough refuted. There was still the other they had forgotten, and that neglected quantity, plainly in search of them and happy in his instinct of the chase, now stayed their steps in the form of Mortimer Marshal.

9

He was coming in as they came out; and his "I hoped I might find you," an exhalation of cool candour that they took full in the face, had the effect, the next moment, of a great soft carpet, all flowers and figures, suddenly unrolled for them to walk upon and before which they felt a scruple. Their ejaculation, Maud was conscious, couldn't have passed for a welcome, and it wasn't till she saw the poor gentleman checked a little, in turn, by their blankness, that she fully perceived how interesting they had just become to themselves. His face, however, while, in their arrest, they neither proposed to re−enter the shop with him nor invited him to proceed with them anywhere else −− his face, gaping there, for Bight's promised instructions, like a fair receptacle, shallow but with all the capacity of its flatness, brought back so to our young woman the fond fancy her companion had last excited in him that he profited just a little −− and for sympathy in spite of his folly −− by her sense that with her too the latter had somehow amused himself. This placed her, for the brief instant, in a strange fellowship with their visitor's plea, under the impulse of which, without more thought, she had turned to Bight. "Your eager claimant," she, however, simply said, "for the opportunity now so beautifully created."

"I've ventured." Mr Marshal glowed back, "to come and remind you that the hours are fleeting."

Bight had surveyed him with eyes perhaps equivocal. "You're afraid someone else will step in?"

"Well, with the place so tempting and so empty−−!"

Maud made herself again his voice. "Mr Marshal sees it empty itself perhaps too fast."

He acknowledged, in his large, bright way, the help afforded him by her easy lightness. "I do want to get in, you know, before anything happens."

"And what," Bight inquired, "are you afraid may happen?"

"Well, to make sure," he smiled, "I want myself, don't you see, to happen first."

Our young woman, at this, fairly fell, for her friend, into his sweetness. "Do let him happen!"

"Do let me happen!" Mr Marshal followed it up.

They stood there together, where they had paused, in their strange council of three, and their extraordinary tone, in connection with their number, might have marked them, for some passer catching it, as persons not only discussing questions supposedly reserved for the Fates, but absolutely enacting some encounter of these portentous forces. "Let you −− let you?" Bight gravely echoed, while on the sound, for the moment, immensities might have hung. It was as far, however, as he was to have time to speak, for even while his voice was in the air another, at first remote and vague, joined it there on an ominous note and hushed all else to stillness. It came, through the roar of thoroughfares, from the direction of Fleet Street, and it made our interlocutors exchange an altered look. They recognised it, the next thing, as the howl, again, of the Strand, and then but an instant elapsed before it flared into the night. "Return of Beadel−Muffet! Tremenjous Sensation!"

Tremenjous indeed, so tremenjous that, each really turning as pale with it as they had turned, on the same spot, the other time and with the other news, they stood long enough stricken and still for the cry, multiplied in a flash, again to reach them. They couldn't have said afterwards who first took it up. "Return−−?"

"From the Dead −− I say!" poor Marshal piercingly quavered.

"Then he hasn't been−−?" Maud gasped it with him at Bight.

But that genius, clearly, was not less deeply affected. "He's alive?" he breathed in a long, soft wail in which admiration appeared at first to contend with amazement and then the sense of the comic to triumph over both. Howard Bight uncontrollably −− it might have struck them as almost hysterically −− laughed.

The others could indeed but stare. "Then who's dead?" piped Mortimer Marshal.

"I'm afraid, Mr Marshal, that you are," the young man returned, more gravely, after a minute. He spoke as if he saw how dead.

Poor Marshal was lost. "But someone was killed−−!"

"Someone undoubtedly was, but Beadel somehow has survived it."

"Has he, then, been playing the game−−?" It baffled comprehension.

Yet it wasn't even that what Maud most wondered. "Have you all the while really known?" she asked of Howard Bight.

He met it with a look that puzzled her for the instant, but that she then saw to mean, half with amusement, half with sadness, that his genius was, after all, simpler. "I wish I had. I really believed."

"All along?"

"No; but after Frankfort."

She remembered things. "You haven't had a notion this evening?"

"Only from the state of my nerves."

"Yes, your nerves must be in a state!" And somehow now she had no pity for him. It was almost as if she were, frankly, disappointed. "I," she then boldly said, "didn't believe."

"If you had mentioned that then," Marshal observed to her, "you would have saved me an awkwardness."

But Bight took him up. "She did believe −− so that she might punish me."

"Punish you−−?"

Maud raised her hand at her friend. "He doesn't understand."

He was indeed, Mr Marshal, fully pathetic now. "No, I don't understand. Not a wee bit."

"Well," said Bight kindly, "we none of us do. We must give it up."

"You think I really must−−?"

"You, sir," Bight smiled, "most of all. The places seem so taken."

His client, however, clung. "He won't die again−−?"

"If he does he'll again come to life. He'll never die. Only we shall die. He's immortal."

He looked up and down, this inquirer; he listened to the howl of the Strand, not yet, as happened, brought nearer to them by one of the hawkers. And yet it was as if, overwhelmed by his lost chance, he knew himself too weak even for their fond aid. He still therefore appealed. "Will this be a boom for him?"

"His return? Colossal. For −− fancy! −− it was exactly what we talked of, you remember, the other day, as the ideal. I mean," Bight smiled, "for a man to be lost, and yet at the same time−−"

"To be found?" poor Marshal too hungrily mused.

"To be boomed," Bight continued, "by his smash and yet never to have been too smashed to know how he was booming."

It was wonderful for Maud too. "To have given it all up, and yet to have it all."

"Oh, better than that," said her friend: "to have more than all, and more than you gave up. Beadel," he was careful to explain to their companion, "will have more."

Mr Marshal struggled with it. "More than if he were dead?"

"More," Bight laughed, "than if he weren't! It's what you would have liked, as I understand you, isn't it? and what you would have got. It's what I would have helped you to."

"But who then," wailed Marshal, "helps him?"

"Nobody. His star. His genius."

Mortimer Marshal glared about him as for some sign of such aids in his own sphere. It embraced, his own sphere too, the roaring Strand, yet −− mystification and madness! −− it was with Beadel the Strand was roaring. A hawker, from afar, at sight of the group, was already scaling the slope. "Ah, but how the devil−−?"

Bight pointed to this resource. "Go and see."

"But don't you want them?" poor Marshal asked as the others retreated.

"The Papers?" They stopped to answer. "No, never again. We've done with them. We give it up."

"I mayn't again see you?"

Dismay and a last clutch were in Marshal's face, but Maud, who had taken her friend's meaning in a flash, found the word to meet them. "We retire from business."

With which they turned again to move in the other sense, presenting their backs to Fleet Street. They moved together up the rest of the hill, going on in silence, not arrested by another little shrieking boy, not diverted by another extra−special, not pausing again till, at the end of a few minutes, they found themselves in the comparative solitude of Covent Garden, encumbered with the traces of its traffic, but now given over to peace. The howl of the Strand had ceased, their client had vanished forever, and from the centre of the empty space they could look up and see stars. One of these was of course Beadel−Muffet's, and the consciousness of that, for the moment, kept down any arrogance of triumph. He still hung above them, he ruled, immortal, the night; they were far beneath, and he now transcended their world; but a sense of relief, of escape, of the light, still unquenched, of

their old irony, made them stand there face to face. There was more between them now than there had ever been, but it had ceased to separate them, it sustained them in fact like a deep water on which they floated closer. Still, however, there was something Maud needed. "It had been all the while worked ?"

"Ah, not, before God −− since I lost sight of him −− by me."

"Then by himself?"

"I dare say. But there are plenty for him. He's beyond me."

"But you thought," she said, "it would be so. You thought," she declared, "something."

Bight hesitated. "I thought it would be great if he could. And as he could −− why, it is great. But all the same I too was sold. I am sold. That's why I give up."

"Then it's why I do. We must do something," she smiled at him, "that requires less cleverness."

"We must love each other," said Howard Bight.

"But can we live by that?"

He thought again; then he decided. "Yes."

"Ah," Maud amended, "we must be 'littery'. We've now got stuff."

"For the dear old ply, for the rattling good tile? Ah, they take better stuff than this −− though this too is good."

"Yes," she granted on reflection, "this is good, but it has bad holes. Who was the dead man in the locked hotel room?"

"Oh, I don't mean that. That," said Bight, "he'll splendidly explain."

"But how?"

"Why, in the Papers. To−morrow."

Maud wondered. "So soon?"

"If he returned to−night, and it's not yet ten o'clock, there's plenty of time. It will be in all of them −− while the universe waits. He'll hold us in the hollow of his hand. His chance is just there. And there," said the young man, "will be his greatness."

"Greater than ever then?"

"Quadrupled."

She followed; then it made her seize his arm. "Go to him!"

Bight frowned. "'Go'−−?"

"This instant. You explain!"

He understood, but only to shake his head. "Never again. I bow to him."

Well, she after a little understood; but she thought again. "You mean that the great hole is that he really had no reason, no funk−−?"

"I've wondered," said Howard Bight.

"Whether he had done anything to make publicity embarrassing?"

"I've wondered," the young man repeated.

"But I thought you knew!"

"So did I. But I thought also I knew he was dead. However," Bight added, "he'll explain that too."

"To−morrow?"

"No −− as a different branch. Say day after."

"Ah, then," said Maud, "if he explains−−!"

"There's no hole? I don't know!" −− and it forced from him at last a sigh. He was impatient of it, for he had done with it; it would soon bore him. So fast they lived. "It will take," he only dropped, "much explaining."

His detachment was logical, but she looked a moment at his sudden weariness. "There's always, remember, Mrs Chorner."

"Oh yes, Mrs Chorner; we luckily invented her."

"Well, if she drove him to his death −−?"

Bight, with a laugh, caught at it. "Is that it? Did she drive him?"

It pulled her up, and, though she smiled, they stood again, a little, as on their guard. "Now, at any rate," Maud simply said at last, "she'll marry him. So you see how right I was."

With a preoccupation that had grown in him, however, he had already lost the thread. "How right−−?"

"Not to sell my Talk."

"Oh yes," −− he remembered. "Quite right." But it all came to something else. "Whom will you marry?"

She only, at first, for answer, kept her eyes on him. Then she turned them about the place and saw no hindrance, and then, further, bending with a tenderness in which she felt so transformed, so won to something she had never been before, that she might even, to other eyes, well have looked so, she gravely kissed him. After which, as he took her arm, they walked on together. "That, at least," she said, "we'll put in the Papers." THE END