# CHAPTER 24

My sense of how he received this suffered for a minute from something that I can describe only as a fierce split of my attention—a stroke that at first, as I sprang straight up, reduced me to the mere blind movement of getting hold of him, drawing him close, and, while I just fell for support against the nearest piece of furniture, instinctively keeping him with his back to the window. The appearance was full upon us that I had already had to deal with here: Peter Quint had come into view like a sentinel before a prison. The next thing I saw was that, from outside, he had reached the window, and then I knew that, close to the glass and glaring in through it, he offered once more to the room his white face of damnation. It represents but grossly what took place within me at the sight to say that on the second my decision was made; yet I believe that no woman so overwhelmed ever in so short a time recovered her grasp of the ACT. It came to me in the very horror of the immediate presence that the act would be, seeing and facing what I saw and faced, to keep the boy himself unaware. The inspiration—I can call it by no other name—was that I felt how voluntarily, how transcendently, I MIGHT. It was like fighting with a demon for a human soul, and when I had fairly so appraised it I saw how the human soul—held out, in the tremor of my hands, at arm's length—had a perfect dew of sweat on a lovely childish forehead. The face that was close to mine was as white as the face against the glass, and out of it presently came a sound, not low nor weak, but as if from much further away, that I drank like a waft of fragrance.

"Yes—I took it."

At this, with a moan of joy, I enfolded, I drew him close; and while I held him to my breast, where I could feel in the sudden fever of his little body the tremendous pulse of his little heart, I kept my eyes on the thing at the window and saw it move and shift its posture. I have likened it to a sentinel, but its slow wheel, for a moment, was rather the prowl of a baffled beast. My present quickened courage, however, was such that, not too much to let it through, I had to shade, as it were, my flame. Meanwhile the glare of the face was again at the window, the scoundrel fixed as if to watch and wait. It was the very confidence that I might now defy him, as well as the positive certitude, by this time, of the child's unconsciousness, that made me go on.

"What did you take it for?"

"To see what you said about me."

"You opened the letter?"

"I opened it."

My eyes were now, as I held him off a little again, on Miles's own face, in which the collapse of mockery showed me how complete was the ravage of uneasiness. What was prodigious was that at last, by my success, his sense was sealed and his communication stopped: he knew that he was in presence, but knew not of what, and knew still less that I also was and that I did know. And what did this strain of trouble matter when my eyes went back to the window only to see that the air was clear again and—by my personal triumph—the influence quenched? There was nothing there. I felt that the cause was mine and that I should surely get ALL.

"And you found nothing!"—I let my elation out.

He gave the most mournful, thoughtful little headshake. "Nothing."

"Nothing, nothing!" I almost shouted in my joy.

"Nothing, nothing," he sadly repeated.

I kissed his forehead; it was drenched.

"So what have you done with it?"

"I've burned it."

"Burned it?" It was now or never. "Is that what you did at school?"

"Oh, what this brought up!"

"At school?"

"Did you take letters?—or other things?"

"Other things?" He appeared now to be thinking of something far off and that reached him only through the pressure of his anxiety. Yet it did reach him.

"Did I STEAL?"

I felt myself redden to the roots of my hair as well as wonder if it were more strange to put to a gentleman such a question or to see him take it with allowances that gave the very distance of his fall in the world.

"Was it for that you mightn't go back?"

The only thing he felt was rather a dreary little surprise.

"Did you know I mightn't go back?"

"I know everything."

He gave me at this the longest and strangest look.

"Everything?"

"Everything. Therefore DID you—?" But I couldn't say it again.

Miles could, very simply.

"No. I didn't steal."

My face must have shown him I believed him utterly; yet my hands—but it was for pure tenderness—shook him as if to ask him why, if it was all for nothing, he had condemned me to months of torment.

"What then did you do?"

He looked in vague pain all round the top of the room and drew his breath, two or three times over, as if with difficulty. He might have been standing at the bottom of the sea and raising his eyes to some faint green twilight.

"Well—I said things."

"Only that?"

"They thought it was enough!"

"To turn you out for?"

"Well, I suppose I oughtn't."

"But to whom did you say them?"

"I don't know!"

"Was it to everyone?"

"No; it was only to—" He gave a sick little headshake. "I don't remember their names."

"Were they then so many?"

"No—only a few. Those I liked."

"And did they repeat what you said?"

"Oh, yes—they must have repeated them. To those THEY liked."

"And these things came round—?"

"To the masters? Oh, yes! But I didn't know they'd tell."

"The masters? They didn't—they've never told. That's why I ask you."

"Yes, it was too bad."

"Too bad?"

"What I suppose I sometimes said. To write home."

"Stuff and nonsense!"

"What WERE these things?"

"For there again, against the glass, as if to blight his confession and stay his answer, was the hideous author of our woe—the white face of damnation."

"No more, no more, no more!" I shrieked.

"Is she HERE?"

"Miss Jessel, Miss Jessel!" he with a sudden fury gave me back.

"It's not Miss Jessel! But it's at the window—straight before us. It's THERE—the coward horror, there for the last time!"

"It's HE?"

"Whom do you mean by 'he'?"

"Peter Quint—you devil!"

"What does he matter now, my own?—what will he EVER matter? I have you, but he has lost you forever!"

"There, THERE!" I said to Miles.

But he had already jerked straight round, stared, glared again, and seen but the quiet day.

With the stroke of the loss I was so proud of he uttered the cry of a creature hurled over an abyss, and the grasp with which I recovered him might have been that of catching him in his fall.

I caught him, yes, I held him—it may be imagined with what a passion; but at the end of a minute I began to feel what it truly was that I held. We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped.