THE TRAGIC MUSE

by

HENRY JAMES

MacMillan and Co., Limited St. Martin's Street, London

1921

PREFACE

I profess a certain vagueness of remembrance in respect to the origin

and growth of \_The Tragic Muse\_, which appeared in the \_Atlantic

Monthly\_ again, beginning January 1889 and running on, inordinately,

several months beyond its proper twelve. If it be ever of interest and

profit to put one's finger on the productive germ of a work of art, and

if in fact a lucid account of any such work involves that prime

identification, I can but look on the present fiction as a poor

fatherless and motherless, a sort of unregistered and unacknowledged

birth. I fail to recover my precious first moment of consciousness of

the idea to which it was to give form; to recognise in it--as I like to

do in general--the effect of some particular sharp impression or

concussion. I call such remembered glimmers always precious, because

without them comes no clear vision of what one may have intended, and

without that vision no straight measure of what one may have succeeded

in doing. What I make out from furthest back is that I must have had

from still further back, must in fact practically have always had, the

happy thought of some dramatic picture of the "artist-life" and of the

difficult terms on which it is at the best secured and enjoyed, the

general question of its having to be not altogether easily paid for. To

"do something about art"--art, that is, as a human complication and a

social stumbling-block--must have been for me early a good deal of a

nursed intention, the conflict between art and "the world" striking me

thus betimes as one of the half-dozen great primary motives. I remember

even having taken for granted with this fond inveteracy that no one of

these pregnant themes was likely to prove under the test more full of

matter. This being the case, meanwhile, what would all experience have

done but enrich one's conviction?--since if, on the one hand, I had

gained a more and more intimate view of the nature of art and the

conditions therewith imposed, so the world was a conception that clearly

required, and that would for ever continue to take, any amount of

filling-in. The happy and fruitful truth, at all events, was that there

was opposition--why there \_should\_ be was another matter--and that the

opposition would beget an infinity of situations. What had doubtless

occurred in fact, moreover, was that just this question of the essence

and the reasons of the opposition had shown itself to demand the light

of experience; so that to the growth of experience, truly, the treatment

of the subject had yielded. It had waited for that advantage.

Yet I continue to see experience giving me its jog mainly in the form of

an invitation from the gentle editor of the \_Atlantic\_, the late Thomas

Bailey Aldrich, to contribute to his pages a serial that should run

through the year. That friendly appeal becomes thus the most definite

statement I can make of the "genesis" of the book; though from the

moment of its reaching me everything else in the matter seems to live

again. What lives not least, to be quite candid, is the fact that I was

to see this production make a virtual end, for the time, as by its

sinister effect--though for reasons still obscure to me--of the pleasant

old custom of the "running" of the novel. Not for many years was I to

feel the practice, for my benefit, confidingly revive. The influence of

\_The Tragic Muse\_ was thus exactly other than what I had all earnestly

(if of course privately enough) invoked for it, and I remember well the

particular chill, at last, of the sense of my having launched it in a

great grey void from which no echo or message whatever would come back.

None, in the event, ever came, and as I now read the book over I find

the circumstance make, in its name, for a special tenderness of charity;

even for that finer consideration hanging in the parental breast about

the maimed or slighted, the disfigured or defeated, the unlucky or

unlikely child--with this hapless small mortal thought of further as

somehow "compromising." I am thus able to take the thing as having quite

wittingly and undisturbedly existed for itself alone, and to liken it to

some aromatic bag of gathered herbs of which the string has never been

loosed; or, better still, to some jar of potpourri, shaped and

overfigured and polished, but of which the lid, never lifted, has

provided for the intense accumulation of the fragrance within. The

consistent, the sustained, preserved \_tone\_ of \_The Tragic Muse\_, its

constant and doubtless rather fine-drawn truth to its particular sought

pitch and accent, are, critically speaking, its principal merit--the

inner harmony that I perhaps presumptuously permit myself to compare to

an unevaporated scent.

After which indeed I may well be summoned to say what I mean, in such a

business, by an appreciable "tone" and how I can justify my claim to

it--a demonstration that will await us later. Suffice it just here that

I find the latent historic clue in my hand again with the easy recall of

my prompt grasp of such a chance to make a story about art. \_There\_ was

my subject this time--all mature with having long waited, and with the

blest dignity that my original perception of its value was quite lost in

the mists of youth. I must long have carried in my head the notion of a

young man who should amid difficulty--the difficulties being the

story--have abandoned "public life" for the zealous pursuit of some

supposedly minor craft; just as, evidently, there had hovered before me

some possible picture (but all comic and ironic) of one of the most

salient London "social" passions, the unappeasable curiosity for the

things of the theatre; for every one of them, that is, except the drama

itself, and for the "personality" of the performer (almost any performer

quite sufficiently serving) in particular. This latter, verily, had

struck me as an aspect appealing mainly to satiric treatment; the only

adequate or effective treatment, I had again and again felt, for most of

the distinctively social aspects of London: the general artlessly

histrionised air of things caused so many examples to spring from behind

any hedge. What came up, however, at once, for my own stretched canvas,

was that it would have to be ample, give me really space to turn round,

and that a single illustrative case might easily be meagre fare. The

young man who should "chuck" admired politics, and of course some other

admired object with them, would be all very well; but he wouldn't be

enough--therefore what should one say to some other young man who would

chuck something and somebody else, admired in their way too?

There need never, at the worst, be any difficulty about the things

advantageously chuckable for art; the question is all but of choosing

them in the heap. Yet were I to represent a struggle--an interesting

one, indispensably--with the passions of the theatre (as a profession,

or at least as an absorption) I should have to place the theatre in

another light than the satiric. This, however, would by good luck be

perfectly possible too--without a sacrifice of truth; and I should

doubtless even be able to make my theatric case as important as I might

desire it. It seemed clear that I needed big cases--small ones would

practically give my central idea away; and I make out now my still

labouring under the illusion that the case of the sacrifice for art

\_can\_ ever be, with truth, with taste, with discretion involved,

apparently and showily "big." I daresay it glimmered upon me even then

that the very sharpest difficulty of the victim of the conflict I should

seek to represent, and the very highest interest of his predicament,

dwell deep in the fact that his repudiation of the great obvious, great

moral or functional or useful character, shall just have to consent to

resemble a surrender for absolutely nothing. Those characters are all

large and expansive, seated and established and endowed; whereas the

most charming truth about the preference for art is that to parade

abroad so thoroughly inward and so naturally embarrassed a matter is to

falsify and vulgarise it; that as a preference attended with the honours

of publicity it is indeed nowhere; that in fact, under the rule of its

sincerity, its only honours are those of contradiction, concentration

and a seemingly deplorable indifference to everything but itself.

Nothing can well figure as less "big," in an honest thesis, than a

marked instance of somebody's willingness to pass mainly for an ass. Of

these things I must, I say, have been in strictness aware; what I

perhaps failed of was to note that if a certain romantic glamour (even

that of mere eccentricity or of a fine perversity) may be flung over the

act of exchange of a "career" for the esthetic life in general, the

prose and the modesty of the matter yet come in with any exhibition of

the particular branch of esthetics selected. Then it is that the

attitude of hero or heroine may look too much--for the romantic

effect--like a low crouching over proved trifles. Art indeed has in our

day taken on so many honours and emoluments that the recognition of its

importance is more than a custom, has become on occasion almost a fury:

the line is drawn--especially in the English world--only at the

importance of heeding what it may mean.

The more I turn my pieces over, at any rate, the more I now see I must

have found in them, and I remember how, once well in presence of my

three typical examples, my fear of too ample a canvas quite dropped. The

only question was that if I had marked my political case, from so far

back, for "a story by itself," and then marked my theatrical case for

another, the joining together of these interests, originally seen as

separate, might, all disgracefully, betray the seam, show for mechanical

and superficial. A story was a story, a picture a picture, and I had a

mortal horror of two stories, two pictures, in one. The reason of this

was the clearest--my subject was immediately, under that disadvantage,

so cheated of its indispensable centre as to become of no more use for

expressing a main intention than a wheel without a hub is of use for

moving a cart. It was a fact, apparently, that one \_had\_ on occasion

seen two pictures in one; were there not for instance certain sublime

Tintorettos at Venice, a measureless Crucifixion in especial, which

showed without loss of authority half-a-dozen actions separately taking

place? Yes, that might be, but there had surely been nevertheless a

mighty pictorial fusion, so that the virtue of composition had somehow

thereby come all mysteriously to its own. Of course the affair would be

simple enough if composition could be kept out of the question; yet by

what art or process, what bars and bolts, what unmuzzled dogs and

pointed guns, perform that feat? I had to know myself utterly inapt for

any such valour and recognise that, to make it possible, sundry things

should have begun for me much further back than I had felt them even in

their dawn. A picture without composition slights its most precious

chance for beauty, and is, moreover, not composed at all unless the

painter knows \_how\_ that principle of health and safety, working as an

absolutely premeditated art, has prevailed. There may in its absence be

life, incontestably, as \_The Newcomes\_ has life, as \_Les Trois

Mousquetaires\_, as Tolstoi's \_Peace and War\_, have it; but what do such

large, loose, baggy monsters, with their queer elements of the

accidental and the arbitrary, artistically \_mean\_? We have heard it

maintained, we well remember, that such things are "superior to art";

but we understand least of all what \_that\_ may mean, and we look in vain

for the artist, the divine explanatory genius, who will come to our aid

and tell us. There is life and life, and as waste is only life

sacrificed and thereby prevented from "counting," I delight in a

deep-breathing economy and an organic form. My business was accordingly

to "go in" for complete pictorial fusion, some such common interest

between my two first notions as would, in spite of their birth under

quite different stars, do them no violence at all.

I recall with this confirmed infatuation of retrospect that through the

mild perceptions I here glance at there struck for \_The Tragic Muse\_ the

first hour of a season of no small subjective felicity; lighted mainly,

I seem to see, by a wide west window that, high aloft, looked over near

and far London sunsets, a half-grey, half-flushed expanse of London

life. The production of the thing, which yet took a good many months,

lives for me again all contemporaneously in that full projection, upon

my very table, of the good fog-filtered Kensington mornings; which had a

way indeed of seeing the sunset in and which at the very last are merged

to memory in a different and a sharper pressure, that of an hotel

bedroom in Paris during the autumn of 1889, with the Exposition du

Centenaire about to end--and my long story, through the usual

difficulties, as well. The usual difficulties--and I fairly cherish the

record as some adventurer in another line may hug the sense of his

inveterate habit of just saving in time the neck he ever

undiscourageably risks--were those bequeathed as a particular vice of

the artistic spirit, against which vigilance had been destined from the

first to exert itself in vain, and the effect of which was that again

and again, perversely, incurably, the centre of my structure would

insist on placing itself \_not\_, so to speak, in the middle. It mattered

little that the reader with the idea or the suspicion of a structural

centre is the rarest of friends and of critics--a bird, it would seem,

as merely fabled as the phoenix: the terminational terror was none the

less certain to break in and my work threaten to masquerade for me as an

active figure condemned to the disgrace of legs too short, ever so much

too short, for its body. I urge myself to the candid confession that in

very few of my productions, to my eye, \_has\_ the organic centre

succeeded in getting into proper position.

Time after time, then, has the precious waistband or girdle, studded and

buckled and placed for brave outward show, practically worked itself,

and in spite of desperate remonstrance, or in other words essential

counterplotting, to a point perilously near the knees--perilously I mean

for the freedom of these parts. In several of my compositions this

displacement has so succeeded, at the crisis, in defying and resisting

me, has appeared so fraught with probable dishonour, that I still turn

upon them, in spite of the greater or less success of final

dissimulation, a rueful and wondering eye. These productions have in

fact, if I may be so bold about it, specious and spurious centres

altogether, to make up for the failure of the true. As to which in my

list they are, however, that is another business, not on any terms to be

made known. Such at least would seem my resolution so far as I have

thus proceeded. Of any attention ever arrested by the pages forming the

object of this reference that rigour of discrimination has wholly and

consistently failed, I gather, to constitute a part. In which fact there

is perhaps after all a rough justice--since the infirmity I speak of,

for example, has been always but the direct and immediate fruit of a

positive excess of foresight, the overdone desire to provide for future

need and lay up heavenly treasure against the demands of my climax. If

the art of the drama, as a great French master of it has said, is above

all the art of preparations, that is true only to a less extent of the

art of the novel, and true exactly in the degree in which the art of the

particular novel comes near that of the drama. The first half of a

fiction insists ever on figuring to me as the stage or theatre for the

second half, and I have in general given so much space to making the

theatre propitious that my halves have too often proved strangely

unequal. Thereby has arisen with grim regularity the question of

artfully, of consummately masking the fault and conferring on the false

quantity the brave appearance of the true.

But I am far from pretending that these desperations of ingenuity have

not--as through seeming \_most\_ of the very essence of the problem--their

exasperated charm; so far from it that my particular supreme predicament

in the Paris hotel, after an undue primary leakage of time, no doubt,

over at the great river-spanning museum of the Champ de Mars and the

Trocadero, fairly takes on to me now the tender grace of a day that is

dead. Re-reading the last chapters of \_The Tragic Muse\_ I catch again

the very odour of Paris, which comes up in the rich rumble of the Rue de

la Paix--with which my room itself, for that matter, seems

impregnated--and which hangs for reminiscence about the embarrassed

effort to "finish," not ignobly, within my already exceeded limits; an

effort prolonged each day to those late afternoon hours during which the

tone of the terrible city seemed to deepen about one to an effect

strangely composed at once of the auspicious and the fatal. The "plot"

of Paris thickened at such hours beyond any other plot in the world, I

think; but there one sat meanwhile with another, on one's hands,

absolutely requiring precedence. Not the least imperative of one's

conditions was thus that one should have really, should have finely and

(given one's scale) concisely treated one's subject, in spite of there

being so much of the confounded irreducible quantity still to treat. If

I spoke just now, however, of the "exasperated" charm of supreme

difficulty, that is because the challenge of economic representation so

easily becomes, in any of the arts, intensely interesting to meet. To

put all that is possible of one's idea into a form and compass that will

contain and express it only by delicate adjustments and an exquisite

chemistry, so that there will at the end be neither a drop of one's

liquor left nor a hair's breadth of the rim of one's glass to

spare--every artist will remember how often that sort of necessity has

carried with it its particular inspiration. Therein lies the secret of

the appeal, to his mind, of the successfully \_foreshortened\_ thing,

where representation is arrived at, as I have already elsewhere had

occasion to urge, not by the addition of items (a light that has for its

attendant shadow a possible dryness) but by the art of figuring

synthetically, a compactness into which the imagination may cut thick,

as into the rich density of wedding-cake. The moral of all which indeed,

I fear, is, perhaps too trivially, but that the "thick," the false, the

dissembling second half of the work before me, associated throughout

with the effort to weight my dramatic values as heavily as might be,

since they had to be so few, presents that effort as at the very last a

quite convulsive, yet in its way highly agreeable, spasm. Of such mild

prodigies is the "history" of any specific creative effort composed!

But I have got too much out of the "old" Kensington light of twenty

years ago--a lingering oblique ray of which, to-day surely quite

extinct, played for a benediction over my canvas. From the moment I made

out, at my high-perched west window, my lucky title, that is from the

moment Miriam Rooth herself had given it me, so this young woman had

given me with it her own position in the book, and so that in turn had

given me my precious unity, to which no more than Miriam was either Nick

Dormer or Peter Sherringham to be sacrificed. Much of the interest of

the matter was immediately, therefore, in working out the detail of that

unity and--always entrancing range of questions--the order, the reason,

the relation, of presented aspects. With three \_general\_ aspects, that

of Miriam's case, that of Nick's and that of Sherringham's, there was

work in plenty cut out; since happy as it might be to say, "My several

actions beautifully become one," the point of the affair would be in

\_showing\_ them beautifully become so--without which showing foul failure

hovered and pounced. Well, the pleasure of handling an action (or,

otherwise expressed, of a "story") is at the worst, for a storyteller,

immense, and the interest of such a question as for example keeping Nick

Dormer's story his and yet making it also and all effectively in a large

part Peter Sherringham's, of keeping Sherringham's his and yet making it

in its high degree his kinsman's too, and Miriam Rooth's into the

bargain; just as Miriam Rooth's is by the same token quite operatively

his and Nick's, and just as that of each of the young men, by an equal

logic, is very contributively hers--the interest of such a question, I

say, is ever so considerably the interest of the system on which the

whole thing is done. I see to-day that it was but half a system to say,

"Oh Miriam, a case herself, is the \_link\_ between the two other cases";

that device was to ask for as much help as it gave and to require a good

deal more application than it announced on the surface. The sense of a

system saves the painter from the baseness of the \_arbitrary\_ stroke,

the touch without its reason, but as payment for that service the

process insists on being kept impeccably the right one.

These are intimate truths indeed, of which the charm mainly comes out

but on experiment and in practice; yet I like to have it well before me

here that, after all, \_The Tragic Muse\_ makes it not easy to say which

of the situations concerned in it predominates and rules. What has

become in that imperfect order, accordingly, of the famous centre of

one's subject? It is surely not in Nick's consciousness--since why, if

it be, are we treated to such an intolerable dose of Sherringham's? It

can't be in Sherringham's--we have for that altogether an excess of

Nick's. How, on the other hand, can it be in Miriam's, given that we

have no direct exhibition of hers whatever, that we get at it all

inferentially and inductively, seeing it only through a more or less

bewildered interpretation of it by others. The emphasis is all on an

absolutely objective Miriam, and, this affirmed, how--with such an

amount of exposed subjectivity all round her--can so dense a medium be a

centre? Such questions as those go straight--thanks to which they are, I

profess, delightful; going straight they are of the sort that makes

answers possible. Miriam \_is\_ central then to analysis, in spite of

being objective; central in virtue of the fact that the whole thing has

visibly, from the first, to get itself done in dramatic, or at least in

scenic conditions--though scenic conditions which are as near an

approach to the dramatic as the novel may permit itself and which have

this in common with the latter, that they move in the light of

\_alternation\_. This imposes a consistency other than that of the novel

at its loosest, and, for one's subject, a different view and a different

placing of the centre. The charm of the scenic consistency, the

consistency of the multiplication of \_aspects\_, that of making them

amusingly various, had haunted the author of \_The Tragic Muse\_ from far

back, and he was in due course to yield to it all luxuriously, too

luxuriously perhaps, in \_The Awkward Age\_, as will doubtless with the

extension of these remarks be complacently shown.

To put himself at any rate as much as possible under the protection of

it had been ever his practice (he had notably done so in \_The Princess

Casamassima\_, so frankly panoramic and processional); and in what case

could this protection have had more price than in the one before us? No

character in a play (any play not a mere monologue) has, for the right

expression of the thing, a \_usurping\_ consciousness; the consciousness

of others is exhibited exactly in the same way as that of the "hero";

the prodigious consciousness of Hamlet, the most capacious and most

crowded, the moral presence the most asserted, in the whole range of

fiction, only takes its turn with that of the other agents of the story,

no matter how occasional these may be. It is left, in other words, to

answer for itself equally with theirs: wherefore (by a parity of

reasoning if not of example) Miriam's might without inconsequence be

placed on the same footing; and all in spite of the fact that the "moral

presence" of each of the men most importantly concerned with her--or

with the second of whom she at least is importantly concerned--\_is\_

independently answered for. The idea of the book being, as I have said,

a picture of some of the personal consequences of the art-appetite

raised to intensity, swollen to voracity, the heavy emphasis falls where

the symbol of some of the complications so begotten might be made (as I

judged, heaven forgive me!) most "amusing": amusing I mean in the best

very modern sense. I never "go behind" Miriam; only poor Sherringham

goes, a great deal, and Nick Dormer goes a little, and the author, while

they so waste wonderment, goes behind \_them\_: but none the less she is

as thoroughly symbolic, as functional, for illustration of the idea, as

either of them, while her image had seemed susceptible of a livelier and

"prettier" concretion. I had desired for her, I remember, all manageable

vividness--so ineluctable had it long appeared to "do the actress," to

touch the theatre, to meet that connexion somehow or other, in any free

plunge of the speculative fork into the contemporary social salad.

The late R. L. Stevenson was to write to me, I recall--and precisely on

the occasion of \_The Tragic Muse\_--that he was at a loss to conceive how

one could find an interest in anything so vulgar or pretend to gather

fruit in so scrubby an orchard; but the view of a creature of the stage,

the view of the "histrionic temperament," as suggestive much less,

verily, in respect to the poor stage \_per se\_ than in respect to "art"

at large, affected me in spite of that as justly tenable. An objection

of a more pointed order was forced upon me by an acute friend later on

and in another connexion: the challenge of one's right, in any pretended

show of social realities, to attach to the image of a "public

character," a supposed particular celebrity, a range of interest, of

intrinsic distinction, greater than any such display of importance on

the part of eminent members of the class as we see them about us. There

\_was\_ a nice point if one would--yet only nice enough, after all, to be

easily amusing. We shall deal with it later on, however, in a more

urgent connexion. What would have worried me much more had it dawned

earlier is the light lately thrown by that admirable writer M. Anatole

France on the question of any animated view of the histrionic

temperament--a light that may well dazzle to distress any ingenuous

worker in the same field. In those parts of his brief but inimitable

\_Histoire Comique\_ on which he is most to be congratulated--for there

are some that prompt to reserves--he has "done the actress," as well as

the actor, done above all the mountebank, the mummer and the \_cabotin\_,

and mixed them up with the queer theatric air, in a manner that

practically warns all other hands off the material for ever. At the same

time I think I saw Miriam, and without a sacrifice of truth, that is of

the particular glow of verisimilitude I wished her most to benefit by,

in a complexity of relations finer than any that appear possible for the

gentry of M. Anatole France.

Her relation to Nick Dormer, for instance, was intended as a superior

interest--that of being (while perfectly sincere, sincere for \_her\_, and

therefore perfectly consonant with her impulse perpetually to perform

and with her success in performing) the result of a touched imagination,

a touched pride for "art," as well as of the charm cast on other

sensibilities still. Dormer's relation to herself is a different matter,

of which more presently; but the sympathy she, poor young woman, very

generously and intelligently offers him where most people have so

stinted it, is disclosed largely at the cost of her egotism and her

personal pretensions, even though in fact determined by her sense of

their together, Nick and she, postponing the "world" to their conception

of other and finer decencies. Nick can't on the whole see--for I have

represented him as in his day quite sufficiently troubled and

anxious--why he should condemn to ugly feebleness his most prized

faculty (most prized, at least, by himself) even in order to keep his

seat in Parliament, to inherit Mr. Carteret's blessing and money, to

gratify his mother and carry out the mission of his father, to marry

Julia Dallow in fine, a beautiful imperative woman with a great many

thousands a year. It all comes back in the last analysis to the

individual vision of decency, the critical as well as the passionate

judgement of it under sharp stress; and Nick's vision and judgement, all

on the esthetic ground, have beautifully coincided, to Miriam's

imagination, with a now fully marked, an inspired and impenitent, choice

of her own: so that, other considerations powerfully aiding indeed, she

is ready to see their interest all splendidly as one. She is in the

uplifted state to which sacrifices and submissions loom large, but loom

so just because they must write sympathy, write passion, large. Her

measure of what she would be capable of for him--capable, that is, of

\_not\_ asking of him--will depend on what he shall ask of \_her\_, but she

has no fear of not being able to satisfy him, even to the point of

"chucking" for him, if need be, that artistic identity of her own which

she has begun to build up. It will all be to the glory, therefore, of

their common infatuation with "art": she will doubtless be no less

willing to serve his than she was eager to serve her own, purged now of

the too great shrillness.

This puts her quite on a different level from that of the vivid monsters

of M. France, whose artistic identity is the last thing \_they\_ wish to

chuck--their only dismissal is of all material and social over-draping.

Nick Dormer in point of fact asks of Miriam nothing but that she shall

remain "awfully interesting to paint"; but that is \_his\_ relation,

which, as I say, is quite a matter by itself. He at any rate, luckily

for both of them it may be, doesn't put her to the test: he is so busy

with his own case, busy with testing himself and feeling his reality.

He has seen himself as giving up precious things for an object, and that

object has somehow not been the young woman in question, nor anything

very nearly like her. She, on the other hand, has asked everything of

Peter Sherringham, who has asked everything of \_her\_; and it is in so

doing that she has really most testified for art and invited him to

testify. With his professed interest in the theatre--one of those deep

subjections that, in men of "taste," the ComÃ©die FranÃ§aise used in old

days to conspire for and some such odd and affecting examples of which

were to be noted--he yet offers her his hand and an introduction to the

very best society if she will leave the stage. The power--and her having

the sense of the power--to "shine" in the world is his highest measure

of her, the test applied by him to her beautiful human value; just as

the manner in which she turns on him is the application of her own

standard and touchstone. She is perfectly sure of her own; for--if there

were nothing else, and there is much--she has tasted blood, so to speak,

in the form of her so prompt and auspicious success with the public,

leaving all probations behind (the whole of which, as the book gives it,

is too rapid and sudden, though inevitably so: processes, periods,

intervals, stages, degrees, connexions, may be easily enough and barely

enough named, may be unconvincingly stated, in fiction, to the deep

discredit of the writer, but it remains the very deuce to \_represent\_

them, especially represent them under strong compression and in brief

and subordinate terms; and this even though the novelist who doesn't

represent, and represent "all the time," is lost, exactly as much lost

as the painter who, at his work and given his intention, doesn't paint

"all the time").

Turn upon her friend at any rate Miriam does; and one of my main points

is missed if it fails to appear that she does so with absolute

sincerity and with the cold passion of the high critic who knows, on

sight of them together, the more or less dazzling false from the

comparatively grey-coloured true. Sherringham's whole profession has

been that he rejoices in her as she is, and that the theatre, the

organised theatre, will be, as Matthew Arnold was in those very days

pronouncing it, irresistible; and it is the promptness with which he

sheds his pretended faith as soon as it feels in the air the breath of

reality, as soon as it asks of him a proof or a sacrifice, it is this

that excites her doubtless sufficiently arrogant scorn. Where is the

virtue of his high interest if it has verily never \_been\_ an interest to

speak of and if all it has suddenly to suggest is that, in face of a

serious call, it shall be unblushingly relinquished? If he and she

together, and her great field and future, and the whole cause they had

armed and declared for, have not been serious things they have been base

make-believes and trivialities--which is what in fact the homage of

society to art always turns out so soon as art presumes not to be vulgar

and futile. It is immensely the fashion and immensely edifying to listen

to, this homage, while it confines its attention to vanities and frauds;

but it knows only terror, feels only horror, the moment that, instead of

making all the concessions, art proceeds to ask for a few. Miriam is

nothing if not strenuous, and evidently nothing if not "cheeky," where

Sherringham is concerned at least: these, in the all-egotistical

exhibition to which she is condemned, are the very elements of her

figure and the very colours of her portrait. But she is mild and

inconsequent for Nick Dormer (who demands of her so little); as if

gravely and pityingly embracing the truth that \_his\_ sacrifice, on the

right side, is probably to have very little of her sort of recompense. I

must have had it well before me that she was all aware of the small

strain a great sacrifice to Nick would cost her--by reason of the strong

effect on her of his own superior logic, in which the very intensity of

concentration was so to find its account.

If the man, however, who holds her personally dear yet holds her

extremely personal message to the world cheap, so the man capable of a

consistency and, as she regards the matter, of an honesty so much higher

than Sherringham's, virtually cares, "really" cares, no straw for his

fellow-struggler. If Nick Dormer attracts and all-indifferently holds

her it is because, like herself and unlike Peter, he puts "art" first;

but the most he thus does for her in the event is to let her see how she

may enjoy, in intimacy, the rigour it has taught him and which he

cultivates at her expense. This is the situation in which we leave her,

though there would be more still to be said about the difference for her

of the two relations--that to each of the men--could I fondly suppose as

much of the interest of the book "left over" for the reader as for

myself. Sherringham, for instance, offers Miriam marriage, ever so

"handsomely"; but if nothing might lead me on further than the question

of what it would have been open to us--us novelists, especially in the

old days--to show, "serially," a young man in Nick Dormer's quite

different position as offering or a young woman in Miriam's as taking,

so for that very reason such an excursion is forbidden me. The trade of

the stage-player, and above all of the actress, must have so many

detestable sides for the person exercising it that we scarce imagine a

full surrender to it without a full surrender, not less, to every

immediate compensation, to every freedom and the largest ease within

reach: which presentment of the possible case for Miriam would yet have

been condemned--and on grounds both various and interesting to trace--to

remain very imperfect.

I feel, moreover, that I might still, with space, abound in remarks

about Nick's character and Nick's crisis suggested to my present more

reflective vision. It strikes me, alas, that he is not quite so

interesting as he was fondly intended to be, and this in spite of the

multiplication, within the picture, of his pains and penalties; so that

while I turn this slight anomaly over I come upon a reason that affects

me as singularly charming and touching and at which indeed I have

already glanced. Any presentation of the artist \_in triumph\_ must be

flat in proportion as it really sticks to its subject--it can only

smuggle in relief and variety. For, to put the matter in an image, all

we then--in his triumph--see of the charm-compeller is the back he turns

to us as he bends over his work. "His" triumph, decently, is but the

triumph of what he produces, and that is another affair. His romance is

the romance he himself projects; he eats the cake of the very rarest

privilege, the most luscious baked in the oven of the gods--therefore he

mayn't "have" it, in the form of the privilege of the hero, at the same

time. The privilege of the hero--that is, of the martyr or of the

interesting and appealing and comparatively floundering \_person\_--places

him in quite a different category, belongs to him only as to the artist

deluded, diverted, frustrated or vanquished; when the "amateur" in him

gains, for our admiration or compassion or whatever, all that the expert

has to do without. Therefore I strove in vain, I feel, to embroil and

adorn this young man on whom a hundred ingenious touches are thus

lavished: he has insisted in the event on looking as simple and flat as

some mere brass check or engraved number, the symbol and guarantee of a

stored treasure. The better part of him is locked too much away from us,

and the part we see has to pass for--well, what it passes for, so

lamentedly, among his friends and relatives. No, accordingly, Nick

Dormer isn't "the best thing in the book," as I judge I imagined he

would be, and it contains nothing better, I make out, than that

preserved and achieved unity and quality of tone, a value in itself,

which I referred to at the beginning of these remarks. What I mean by

this is that the interest created, and the expression of that interest,

are things kept, as to kind, genuine and true to themselves. The appeal,

the fidelity to the prime motive, is, with no little art, strained clear

(even as silver is polished) in a degree answering--at least by

intention--to the air of beauty. There is an awkwardness again in having

thus belatedly to point such features out; but in that wrought

appearance of animation and harmony, that effect of free movement and

yet of recurrent and insistent reference, \_The Tragic Muse\_ has struck

me again as conscious of a bright advantage.

HENRY JAMES.

BOOK FIRST

I

The people of France have made it no secret that those of England, as a

general thing, are to their perception an inexpressive and speechless

race, perpendicular and unsociable, unaddicted to enriching any bareness

of contact with verbal or other embroidery. This view might have derived

encouragement, a few years ago, in Paris, from the manner in which four

persons sat together in silence, one fine day about noon, in the garden,

as it is called, of the Palais de l'Industrie--the central court of the

great glazed bazaar where, among plants and parterres, gravelled walks

and thin fountains, are ranged the figures and groups, the monuments and

busts, which form in the annual exhibition of the Salon the department

of statuary. The spirit of observation is naturally high at the Salon,

quickened by a thousand artful or artless appeals, but it need have put

forth no great intensity to take in the characters I mention. As a

solicitation of the eye on definite grounds these visitors too

constituted a successful plastic fact; and even the most superficial

observer would have marked them as products of an insular neighbourhood,

representatives of that tweed-and-waterproof class with which, on the

recurrent occasions when the English turn out for a holiday--Christmas

and Easter, Whitsuntide and the autumn--Paris besprinkles itself at a

night's notice. They had about them the indefinable professional look

of the British traveller abroad; the air of preparation for exposure,

material and moral, which is so oddly combined with the serene

revelation of security and of persistence, and which excites, according

to individual susceptibility, the ire or the admiration of foreign

communities. They were the more unmistakable as they presented mainly

the happier aspects of the energetic race to which they had the honour

to belong. The fresh diffused light of the Salon made them clear and

important; they were finished creations, in their way, and, ranged there

motionless on their green bench, were almost as much on exhibition as if

they had been hung on the line.

Three ladies and a young man, they were obviously a family--a mother,

two daughters and a son; a circumstance which had the effect at once of

making each member of the group doubly typical and of helping to account

for their fine taciturnity. They were not, with each other, on terms of

ceremony, and also were probably fatigued with their course among the

pictures, the rooms on the upper floor. Their attitude, on the part of

visitors who had superior features even if they might appear to some

passers-by to have neglected a fine opportunity for completing these

features with an expression, was after all a kind of tribute to the

state of exhaustion, of bewilderment, to which the genius of France is

still capable of reducing the proud.

"En v'lÃ  des abrutis!" more than one of their fellow-gazers might have

been heard to exclaim; and certain it is that there was something

depressed and discouraged in this interesting group, who sat looking

vaguely before them, not noticing the life of the place, somewhat as if

each had a private anxiety. It might have been finely guessed, however,

that though on many questions they were closely united this present

anxiety was not the same for each. If they looked grave, moreover, this

was doubtless partly the result of their all being dressed in such

mourning as told of a recent bereavement. The eldest of the three ladies

had indeed a face of a fine austere mould which would have been moved to

gaiety only by some force more insidious than any she was likely to

recognise in Paris. Cold, still, and considerably worn, it was neither

stupid nor hard--it was firm, narrow and sharp. This competent matron,

acquainted evidently with grief but not weakened by it, had a high

forehead to which the quality of the skin gave a singular polish--it

glittered even when seen at a distance; a nose which achieved a high

free curve; and a tendency to throw back her head and carry it well

above her, as if to disengage it from the possible entanglements of the

rest of her person. If you had seen her walk you would have felt her to

tread the earth after a fashion suggesting that in a world where she had

long since discovered that one couldn't have one's own way one could

never tell what annoying aggression might take place, so that it was

well, from hour to hour, to save what one could. Lady Agnes saved her

head, her white triangular forehead, over which her close-crinkled

flaxen hair, reproduced in different shades in her children, made a

looped silken canopy like the marquee at a garden-party. Her daughters

were as tall as herself--that was visible even as they sat there--and

one of them, the younger evidently, altogether pretty; a straight,

slender, grey-eyed English girl of the sort who show "good" figures and

fresh complexions. The sister, who was not pretty, was also straight and

slender and grey-eyed. But the grey in this case was not so pure, nor

were the straightness and the slenderness so maidenly. The brother of

these young ladies had taken off his hat as if he felt the air of the

summer day heavy in the great pavilion. He was a lean, strong,

clear-faced youth, with a formed nose and thick light-brown hair which

lay continuously and profusely back from his forehead, so that to smooth

it from the brow to the neck but a single movement of the hand was

required. I cannot describe him better than by saying that he was the

sort of young Englishman who looks particularly well in strange lands

and whose general aspect--his inches, his limbs, his friendly eyes, the

modulation of his voice, the cleanness of his flesh-tints and the

fashion of his garments--excites on the part of those who encounter him

in far countries on the ground of a common speech a delightful sympathy

of race. This sympathy may sometimes be qualified by the seen limits of

his apprehension, but it almost revels as such horizons recede. We shall

see quickly enough how accurate a measure it might have taken of

Nicholas Dormer. There was food for suspicion perhaps in the wandering

blankness that sat at moments in his eyes, as if he had no attention at

all, not the least in the world, at his command; but it is no more than

just to add without delay that this discouraging symptom was known among

those who liked him by the indulgent name of dreaminess. By his mother

and sisters, for instance, his dreaminess was constantly noted. He is

the more welcome to the benefit of such an interpretation as there is

always held to be something engaging in the combination of the muscular

and the musing, the mildness of strength.

After some time, an interval during which these good people might have

appeared to have come, individually, to the Palais de l'Industrie much

less to see the works of art than to think over their domestic affairs,

the young man, rousing himself from his reverie, addressed one of the

girls.

"I say, Biddy, why should we sit moping here all day? Come and take a

turn about with me."

His younger sister, while he got up, leaned forward a little, looking

round her, but she gave for the moment no further sign of complying with

his invitation.

"Where shall we find you, then, if Peter comes?" asked the other Miss

Dormer, making no movement at all.

"I daresay Peter won't come. He'll leave us here to cool our heels."

"Oh Nick dear!" Biddy exclaimed in a small sweet voice of protest. It

was plainly her theory that Peter would come, and even a little her fond

fear that she might miss him should she quit that spot.

"We shall come back in a quarter of an hour. Really I must look at these

things," Nick declared, turning his face to a marble group which stood

near them on the right--a man with the skin of a beast round his loins,

tussling with a naked woman in some primitive effort of courtship or

capture.

Lady Agnes followed the direction of her son's eyes and then observed:

"Everything seems very dreadful. I should think Biddy had better sit

still. Hasn't she seen enough horrors up above?"

"I daresay that if Peter comes Julia'll be with him," the elder girl

remarked irrelevantly.

"Well then he can take Julia about. That will be more proper," said Lady

Agnes.

"Mother dear, she doesn't care a rap about art. It's a fearful bore

looking at fine things with Julia," Nick returned.

"Won't you go with him, Grace?"--and Biddy appealed to her sister.

"I think she has awfully good taste!" Grace exclaimed, not answering

this inquiry.

"\_Don't\_ say nasty things about her!" Lady Agnes broke out solemnly to

her son after resting her eyes on him a moment with an air of reluctant

reprobation.

"I say nothing but what she'd say herself," the young man urged. "About

some things she has very good taste, but about this kind of thing she

has no taste at all."

"That's better, I think," said Lady Agnes, turning her eyes again to the

"kind of thing" her son appeared to designate.

"She's awfully clever--awfully!" Grace went on with decision.

"Awfully, awfully!" her brother repeated, standing in front of her and

smiling down at her.

"You are nasty, Nick. You know you are," said the young lady, but more

in sorrow than in anger.

Biddy got up at this, as if the accusatory tone prompted her to place

herself generously at his side. "Mightn't you go and order lunch--in

that place, you know?" she asked of her mother. "Then we'd come back

when it was ready."

"My dear child, I can't order lunch," Lady Agnes replied with a cold

impatience which seemed to intimate that she had problems far more

important than those of victualling to contend with.

"Then perhaps Peter will if he comes. I'm sure he's up in everything of

that sort."

"Oh hang Peter!" Nick exclaimed. "Leave him out of account, and \_do\_

order lunch, mother; but not cold beef and pickles."

"I must say--about \_him\_--you're not nice," Biddy ventured to remark to

her brother, hesitating and even blushing a little.

"You make up for it, my dear," the young man answered, giving her

chin--a very charming, rotund, little chin--a friendly whisk with his

forefinger.

"I can't imagine what you've got against him," her ladyship said

gravely.

"Dear mother, it's disappointed fondness," Nick argued. "They won't

answer one's notes; they won't let one know where they are nor what to

expect. 'Hell has no fury like a woman scorned'; nor like a man

either."

"Peter has such a tremendous lot to do--it's a very busy time at the

embassy; there are sure to be reasons," Biddy explained with her pretty

eyes.

"Reasons enough, no doubt!" said Lady Agnes--who accompanied these words

with an ambiguous sigh, however, as if in Paris even the best reasons

would naturally be bad ones.

"Doesn't Julia write to you, doesn't she answer you the very day?" Grace

asked, looking at Nick as if she were the bold one.

He waited, returning her glance with a certain severity. "What do you

know about my correspondence? No doubt I ask too much," he went on; "I'm

so attached to them. Dear old Peter, dear old Julia!"

"She's younger than you, my dear!" cried the elder girl, still resolute.

"Yes, nineteen days."

"I'm glad you know her birthday."

"She knows yours; she always gives you something," Lady Agnes reminded

her son.

"Her taste is good \_then\_, isn't it, Nick?" Grace Dormer continued.

"She makes charming presents; but, dear mother, it isn't \_her\_ taste.

It's her husband's."

"How her husband's?"

"The beautiful objects of which she disposes so freely are the things he

collected for years laboriously, devotedly, poor man!"

"She disposes of them to you, but not to others," said Lady Agnes. "But

that's all right," she added, as if this might have been taken for a

complaint of the limitations of Julia's bounty. "She has to select among

so many, and that's a proof of taste," her ladyship pursued.

"You can't say she doesn't choose lovely ones," Grace remarked to her

brother in a tone of some triumph.

"My dear, they're all lovely. George Dallow's judgement was so sure, he

was incapable of making a mistake," Nicholas Dormer returned.

"I don't see how you can talk of him, he was dreadful," said Lady Agnes.

"My dear, if he was good enough for Julia to marry he's good enough for

us to talk of."

"She did him a very great honour."

"I daresay, but he was not unworthy of it. No such enlightened

collection of beautiful objects has been made in England in our time."

"You think too much of beautiful objects!" Lady Agnes sighed.

"I thought you were just now lamenting that I think too little."

"It's very nice--his having left Julia so well off," Biddy interposed

soothingly, as if she foresaw a tangle.

"He treated her \_en grand seigneur\_, absolutely," Nick went on.

"He used to look greasy, all the same"--Grace bore on it with a dull

weight. "His name ought to have been Tallow."

"You're not saying what Julia would like, if that's what you are trying

to say," her brother observed.

"Don't be vulgar, Grace," said Lady Agnes.

"I know Peter Sherringham's birthday!" Biddy broke out innocently, as a

pacific diversion. She had passed her hand into Nick's arm, to signify

her readiness to go with him, while she scanned the remoter reaches of

the garden as if it had occurred to her that to direct their steps in

some such sense might after all be the shorter way to get at Peter.

"He's too much older than you, my dear," Grace answered without

encouragement.

"That's why I've noticed it--he's thirty-four. Do you call that too

old? I don't care for slobbering infants!" Biddy cried.

"Don't be vulgar," Lady Agnes enjoined again.

"Come, Bid, we'll go and be vulgar together; for that's what we are, I'm

afraid," her brother said to her. "We'll go and look at all these low

works of art."

"Do you really think it's necessary to the child's development?" Lady

Agnes demanded as the pair turned away. And then while her son, struck

as by a challenge, paused, lingering a moment with his little sister on

his arm: "What we've been through this morning in this place, and what

you've paraded before our eyes--the murders, the tortures, all kinds of

disease and indecency!"

Nick looked at his mother as if this sudden protest surprised him, but

as if also there were lurking explanations of it which he quickly

guessed. Her resentment had the effect not so much of animating her cold

face as of making it colder, less expressive, though visibly prouder.

"Ah dear mother, don't do the British matron!" he replied

good-humouredly.

"British matron's soon said! I don't know what they're coming to."

"How odd that you should have been struck only with the disagreeable

things when, for myself, I've felt it to be most interesting, the most

suggestive morning I've passed for ever so many months!"

"Oh Nick, Nick!" Lady Agnes cried with a strange depth of feeling.

"I like them better in London--they're much less unpleasant," said Grace

Dormer.

"They're things you can look at," her ladyship went on. "We certainly

make the better show."

"The subject doesn't matter, it's the treatment, the treatment!" Biddy

protested in a voice like the tinkle of a silver bell.

"Poor little Bid!"--her brother broke into a laugh.

"How can I learn to model, mamma dear, if I don't look at things and if

I don't study them?" the girl continued.

This question passed unheeded, and Nicholas Dormer said to his mother,

more seriously, but with a certain kind explicitness, as if he could

make a particular allowance: "This place is an immense stimulus to me;

it refreshes me, excites me--it's such an exhibition of artistic life.

It's full of ideas, full of refinements; it gives one such an impression

of artistic experience. They try everything, they feel everything. While

you were looking at the murders, apparently, I observed an immense deal

of curious and interesting work. There are too many of them, poor

devils; so many who must make their way, who must attract attention.

Some of them can only \_taper fort\_, stand on their heads, turn

somersaults or commit deeds of violence, to make people notice them.

After that, no doubt, a good many will be quieter. But I don't know;

to-day I'm in an appreciative mood--I feel indulgent even to them: they

give me an impression of intelligence, of eager observation. All art is

one--remember that, Biddy dear," the young man continued, smiling down

from his height. "It's the same great many-headed effort, and any ground

that's gained by an individual, any spark that's struck in any province,

is of use and of suggestion to all the others. We're all in the same

boat."

"'We,' do you say, my dear? Are you really setting up for an artist?"

Lady Agnes asked.

Nick just hesitated. "I was speaking for Biddy."

"But you \_are\_ one, Nick--you are!" the girl cried.

Lady Agnes looked for an instant as if she were going to say once more

"Don't be vulgar!" But she suppressed these words, had she intended

them, and uttered sounds, few in number and not completely articulate,

to the effect that she hated talking about art. While her son spoke she

had watched him as if failing to follow; yet something in the tone of

her exclamation hinted that she had understood him but too well.

"We're all in the same boat," Biddy repeated with cheerful zeal.

"Not me, if you please!" Lady Agnes replied. "It's horrid messy work,

your modelling."

"Ah but look at the results!" said the girl eagerly--glancing about at

the monuments in the garden as if in regard even to them she were,

through that unity of art her brother had just proclaimed, in some

degree an effective cause.

"There's a great deal being done here--a real vitality," Nicholas Dormer

went on to his mother in the same reasonable informing way. "Some of

these fellows go very far."

"They do indeed!" said Lady Agnes.

"I'm fond of young schools--like this movement in sculpture," Nick

insisted with his slightly provoking serenity.

"They're old enough to know better!"

"Mayn't I look, mamma? It \_is\_ necessary to my development," Biddy

declared.

"You may do as you like," said Lady Agnes with dignity.

"She ought to see good work, you know," the young man went on.

"I leave it to your sense of responsibility." This statement was

somewhat majestic, and for a moment evidently it tempted Nick, almost

provoked him, or at any rate suggested to him an occasion for some

pronouncement he had had on his mind. Apparently, however, he judged the

time on the whole not quite right, and his sister Grace interposed with

the inquiry--

"Please, mamma, are we never going to lunch?"

"Ah mother, mother!" the young man murmured in a troubled way, looking

down at her with a deep fold in his forehead.

For Lady Agnes also, as she returned his look, it seemed an occasion;

but with this difference that she had no hesitation in taking advantage

of it. She was encouraged by his slight embarrassment, for ordinarily

Nick was not embarrassed. "You used to have so \_much\_ sense of

responsibility," she pursued; "but sometimes I don't know what has

become of it--it seems all, \_all\_ gone!"

"Ah mother, mother!" he exclaimed again--as if there were so many things

to say that it was impossible to choose. But now he stepped closer, bent

over her and in spite of the publicity of their situation gave her a

quick expressive kiss. The foreign observer whom I took for granted in

beginning to sketch this scene would have had to admit that the rigid

English family had after all a capacity for emotion. Grace Dormer indeed

looked round her to see if at this moment they were noticed. She judged

with satisfaction that they had escaped.

II

Nick Dormer walked away with Biddy, but he had not gone far before he

stopped in front of a clever bust, where his mother, in the distance,

saw him playing in the air with his hand, carrying out by this gesture,

which presumably was applausive, some critical remark he had made to his

sister. Lady Agnes raised her glass to her eyes by the long handle to

which rather a clanking chain was attached, perceiving that the bust

represented an ugly old man with a bald head; at which her ladyship

indefinitely sighed, though it was not apparent in what way such an

object could be detrimental to her daughter. Nick passed on and quickly

paused again; this time, his mother discerned, before the marble image

of a strange grimacing woman. Presently she lost sight of him; he

wandered behind things, looking at them all round.

"I ought to get plenty of ideas for my modelling, oughtn't I, Nick?" his

sister put to him after a moment.

"Ah my poor child, what shall I say?"

"Don't you think I've any capacity for ideas?" the girl continued

ruefully.

"Lots of them, no doubt. But the capacity for applying them, for putting

them into practice--how much of that have you?"

"How can I tell till I try?"

"What do you mean by trying, Biddy dear?"

"Why you know--you've seen me."

"Do you call that trying?" her brother amusedly demanded.

"Ah Nick!" she said with sensibility. But then with more spirit: "And

please what do you call it?"

"Well, this for instance is a good case." And her companion pointed to

another bust--a head of a young man in terra-cotta, at which they had

just arrived; a modern young man to whom, with his thick neck, his

little cap and his wide ring of dense curls, the artist had given the

air of some sturdy Florentine of the time of Lorenzo.

Biddy looked at the image a moment. "Ah that's not trying; that's

succeeding."

"Not altogether; it's only trying seriously."

"Well, why shouldn't I be serious?"

"Mother wouldn't like it. She has inherited the fine old superstition

that art's pardonable only so long as it's bad--so long as it's done at

odd hours, for a little distraction, like a game of tennis or of whist.

The only thing that can justify it, the effort to carry it as far as one

can (which you can't do without time and singleness of purpose), she

regards as just the dangerous, the criminal element. It's the oddest

hind-part-before view, the drollest immorality."

"She doesn't want one to be professional," Biddy returned as if she

could do justice to every system.

"Better leave it alone then. There are always duffers enough."

"I don't want to be a duffer," Biddy said. "But I thought you encouraged

me."

"So I did, my poor child. It was only to encourage myself."

"With your own work--your painting?"

"With my futile, my ill-starred endeavours. Union is strength--so that

we might present a wider front, a larger surface of resistance."

Biddy for a while said nothing and they continued their tour of

observation. She noticed how he passed over some things quickly, his

first glance sufficing to show him if they were worth another, and then

recognised in a moment the figures that made some appeal. His tone

puzzled but his certainty of eye impressed her, and she felt what a

difference there was yet between them--how much longer in every case she

would have taken to discriminate. She was aware of how little she could

judge of the value of a thing till she had looked at it ten minutes;

indeed modest little Biddy was compelled privately to add "And often not

even then." She was mystified, as I say--Nick was often mystifying, it

was his only fault--but one thing was definite: her brother had high

ability. It was the consciousness of this that made her bring out at

last: "I don't so much care whether or no I please mamma, if I please

you."

"Oh don't lean on me. I'm a wretched broken reed--I'm no use \_really\_!"

he promptly admonished her.

"Do you mean you're a duffer?" Biddy asked in alarm.

"Frightful, frightful!"

"So that you intend to give up your work--to let it alone, as you advise

\_me\_?"

"It has never been my work, all that business, Biddy. If it had it would

be different. I should stick to it."

"And you \_won't\_ stick to it?" the girl said, standing before him

open-eyed.

Her brother looked into her eyes a moment, and she had a compunction;

she feared she was indiscreet and was worrying him. "Your questions are

much simpler than the elements out of which my answer should come."

"A great talent--what's simpler than that?"

"One excellent thing, dear Biddy: no talent at all!"

"Well, yours is so real you can't help it."

"We shall see, we shall see," said Nick Dormer. "Let us go look at that

big group."

"We shall see if your talent's real?" Biddy went on as she accompanied

him.

"No; we shall see if, as you say, I can't help it. What nonsense Paris

makes one talk!" the young man added as they stopped in front of the

composition. This was true perhaps, but not in a sense he could find

himself tempted to deplore. The present was far from his first visit to

the French capital: he had often quitted England and usually made a

point of "putting in," as he called it, a few days there on the outward

journey to the Continent or on the return; but at present the feelings,

for the most part agreeable, attendant upon a change of air and of scene

had been more punctual and more acute than for a long time before, and

stronger the sense of novelty, refreshment, amusement, of the hundred

appeals from that quarter of thought to which on the whole his attention

was apt most frequently, though not most confessedly, to stray. He was

fonder of Paris than most of his countrymen, though not so fond perhaps

as some other captivated aliens: the place had always had the virtue of

quickening in him sensibly the life of reflexion and observation. It was

a good while since his impressions had been so favourable to the city by

the Seine; a good while at all events since they had ministered so to

excitement, to exhilaration, to ambition, even to a restlessness that

was not prevented from being agreeable by the excess of agitation in it.

Nick could have given the reason of this unwonted glow, but his

preference was very much to keep it to himself. Certainly to persons not

deeply knowing, or at any rate not deeply curious, in relation to the

young man's history the explanation might have seemed to beg the

question, consisting as it did of the simple formula that he had at last

come to a crisis. Why a crisis--what was it and why had he not come to

it before? The reader shall learn these things in time if he cares

enough for them.

Our young man had not in any recent year failed to see the Salon, which

the general voice this season pronounced not particularly good. None the

less it was the present exhibition that, for some cause connected with

his "crisis," made him think fast, produced that effect he had spoken of

to his mother as a sense of artistic life. The precinct of the marbles

and bronzes spoke to him especially to-day; the glazed garden, not

florally rich, with its new productions alternating with perfunctory

plants and its queer, damp smell, partly the odour of plastic clay, of

the studios of sculptors, put forth the voice of old associations, of

other visits, of companionships now ended--an insinuating eloquence

which was at the same time somehow identical with the general sharp

contagion of Paris. There was youth in the air, and a multitudinous

newness, for ever reviving, and the diffusion of a hundred talents,

ingenuities, experiments. The summer clouds made shadows on the roof of

the great building; the white images, hard in their crudity, spotted the

place with provocations; the rattle of plates at the restaurant sounded

sociable in the distance, and our young man congratulated himself more

than ever that he had not missed his chance. He felt how it would help

him to settle something. At the moment he made this reflexion his eye

fell upon a person who appeared--just in the first glimpse--to carry out

the idea of help. He uttered a lively ejaculation, which, however, in

its want of finish, Biddy failed to understand; so pertinent, so

relevant and congruous, was the other party to this encounter.

The girl's attention followed her brother's, resting with it on a young

man who faced them without seeing them, engaged as he was in imparting

to two companions his ideas about one of the works exposed to view. What

Biddy remarked was that this young man was fair and fat and of the

middle stature; he had a round face and a short beard and on his crown a

mere reminiscence of hair, as the fact that he carried his hat in his

hand permitted to be observed. Bridget Dormer, who was quick, placed him

immediately as a gentleman, but as a gentleman unlike any other

gentleman she had ever seen. She would have taken him for very foreign

but that the words proceeding from his mouth reached her ear and imposed

themselves as a rare variety of English. It was not that a foreigner

might not have spoken smoothly enough, nor yet that the speech of this

young man was not smooth. It had in truth a conspicuous and aggressive

perfection, and Biddy was sure no mere learner would have ventured to

play such tricks with the tongue. He seemed to draw rich effects and

wandering airs from it--to modulate and manipulate it as he would have

done a musical instrument. Her view of the gentleman's companions was

less operative, save for her soon making the reflexion that they were

people whom in any country, from China to Peru, you would immediately

have taken for natives. One of them was an old lady with a shawl; that

was the most salient way in which she presented herself. The shawl was

an ancient much-used fabric of embroidered cashmere, such as many ladies

wore forty years ago in their walks abroad and such as no lady wears

to-day. It had fallen half off the back of the wearer, but at the moment

Biddy permitted herself to consider her she gave it a violent jerk and

brought it up to her shoulders again, where she continued to arrange and

settle it, with a good deal of jauntiness and elegance, while she

listened to the talk of the gentleman. Biddy guessed that this little

transaction took place very frequently, and was not unaware of its

giving the old lady a droll, factitious, faded appearance, as if she

were singularly out of step with the age. The other person was very much

younger--she might have been a daughter--and had a pale face, a low

forehead, and thick dark hair. What she chiefly had, however, Biddy

rapidly discovered, was a pair of largely-gazing eyes. Our young friend

was helped to the discovery by the accident of their resting at this

moment for a time--it struck Biddy as very long--on her own. Both these

ladies were clad in light, thin, scant gowns, giving an impression of

flowered figures and odd transparencies, and in low shoes which showed a

great deal of stocking and were ornamented with large rosettes. Biddy's

slightly agitated perception travelled directly to their shoes: they

suggested to her vaguely that the wearers were dancers--connected

possibly with the old-fashioned exhibition of the shawl-dance. By the

time she had taken in so much as this the mellifluous young man had

perceived and addressed himself to her brother. He came on with an

offered hand. Nick greeted him and said it was a happy chance--he was

uncommonly glad to see him.

"I never come across you--I don't know why," Nick added while the two,

smiling, looked each other up and down like men reunited after a long

interval.

"Oh it seems to me there's reason enough: our paths in life are so

different." Nick's friend had a great deal of manner, as was evinced by

his fashion of saluting Biddy without knowing her.

"Different, yes, but not so different as that. Don't we both live in

London, after all, and in the nineteenth century?"

"Ah my dear Dormer, excuse me: I don't live in the nineteenth century.

\_Jamais de la vie\_!" the gentleman declared.

"Nor in London either?"

"Yes--when I'm not at Samarcand! But surely we've diverged since the old

days. I adore what you burn, you burn what I adore." While the stranger

spoke he looked cheerfully, hospitably, at Biddy; not because it was

she, she easily guessed, but because it was in his nature to desire a

second auditor--a kind of sympathetic gallery. Her life was somehow

filled with shy people, and she immediately knew she had never

encountered any one who seemed so to know his part and recognise his

cues.

"How do you know what I adore?" Nicholas Dormer asked.

"I know well enough what you used to."

"That's more than I do myself. There were so many things."

"Yes, there are many things--many, many: that's what makes life so

amusing."

"Do you find it amusing?"

"My dear fellow, \_c'est Ã  se tordre\_. Don't you think so? Ah it was high

time I should meet you--I see. I've an idea you need me."

"Upon my word I think I do!" Nick said in a tone which struck his sister

and made her wonder still more why, if the gentleman was so important as

that, he didn't introduce him.

"There are many gods and this is one of their temples," the mysterious

personage went on. "It's a house of strange idols--isn't it?--and of

some strange and unnatural sacrifices."

To Biddy as much as to her brother this remark might have been offered;

but the girl's eyes turned back to the ladies who for the moment had

lost their companion. She felt irresponsive and feared she should pass

with this easy cosmopolite for a stiff, scared, English girl, which was

not the type she aimed at; but wasn't even ocular commerce overbold so

long as she hadn't a sign from Nick? The elder of the strange women had

turned her back and was looking at some bronze figure, losing her shawl

again as she did so; but the other stood where their escort had quitted

her, giving all her attention to his sudden sociability with others. Her

arms hung at her sides, her head was bent, her face lowered, so that she

had an odd appearance of raising her eyes from under her brows; and in

this attitude she was striking, though her air was so unconciliatory as

almost to seem dangerous. Did it express resentment at having been

abandoned for another girl? Biddy, who began to be frightened--there was

a moment when the neglected creature resembled a tigress about to

spring--was tempted to cry out that she had no wish whatever to

appropriate the gentleman. Then she made the discovery that the young

lady too had a manner, almost as much as her clever guide, and the rapid

induction that it perhaps meant no more than his. She only looked at

Biddy from beneath her eyebrows, which were wonderfully arched, but

there was ever so much of a manner in the way she did it. Biddy had a

momentary sense of being a figure in a ballet, a dramatic ballet--a

subordinate motionless figure, to be dashed at to music or strangely

capered up to. It would be a very dramatic ballet indeed if this young

person were the heroine. She had magnificent hair, the girl reflected;

and at the same moment heard Nick say to his interlocutor: "You're not

in London--one can't meet you there?"

"I rove, drift, float," was the answer; "my feelings direct me--if such

a life as mine may be said to have a direction. Where there's anything

to feel I try to be there!" the young man continued with his confiding

laugh.

"I should like to get hold of you," Nick returned.

"Well, in that case there would be no doubt the intellectual adventure.

Those are the currents--any sort of personal relation--that govern my

career."

"I don't want to lose you this time," Nick continued in a tone that

excited Biddy's surprise. A moment before, when his friend had said that

he tried to be where there was anything to feel, she had wondered how he

could endure him.

"Don't lose me, don't lose me!" cried the stranger after a fashion which

affected the girl as the highest expression of irresponsibility she had

ever seen. "After all why should you? Let us remain together unless I

interfere"--and he looked, smiling and interrogative, at Biddy, who

still remained blank, only noting again that Nick forbore to make them

acquainted. This was an anomaly, since he prized the gentleman so.

Still, there could be no anomaly of Nick's that wouldn't impose itself

on his younger sister.

"Certainly, I keep you," he said, "unless on my side I deprive those

ladies--!"

"Charming women, but it's not an indissoluble union. We meet, we

communicate, we part! They're going--I'm seeing them to the door. I

shall come back." With this Nick's friend rejoined his companions, who

moved away with him, the strange fine eyes of the girl lingering on

Biddy's brother as well as on Biddy herself as they receded.

"Who \_is\_ he--who \_are\_ they?" Biddy instantly asked.

"He's a gentleman," Nick made answer--insufficiently, she thought, and

even with a shade of hesitation. He spoke as if she might have supposed

he was not one, and if he was really one why didn't he introduce him?

But Biddy wouldn't for the world have put this question, and he now

moved to the nearest bench and dropped upon it as to await the other's

return. No sooner, however, had his sister seated herself than he said:

"See here, my dear, do you think you had better stay?"

"Do you want me to go back to mother?" the girl asked with a lengthening

visage.

"Well, what do you think?" He asked it indeed gaily enough.

"Is your conversation to be about--about private affairs?"

"No, I can't say that. But I doubt if mother would think it the sort of

thing that's 'necessary to your development.'"

This assertion appeared to inspire her with the eagerness with which she

again broke out: "But who are they--who are they?"

"I know nothing of the ladies. I never saw them before. The man's a

fellow I knew very well at Oxford. He was thought immense fun there.

We've diverged, as he says, and I had almost lost sight of him, but not

so much as he thinks, because I've read him--read him with interest. He

has written a very clever book."

"What kind of a book?"

"A sort of novel."

"What sort of novel?"

"Well, I don't know--with a lot of good writing." Biddy listened to this

so receptively that she thought it perverse her brother should add: "I

daresay Peter will have come if you return to mother."

"I don't care if he has. Peter's nothing to me. But I'll go if you wish

it."

Nick smiled upon her again and then said: "It doesn't signify. We'll all

go."

"All?" she echoed.

"He won't hurt us. On the contrary he'll do us good."

This was possible, the girl reflected in silence, but none the less the

idea struck her as courageous, of their taking the odd young man back to

breakfast with them and with the others, especially if Peter should be

there. If Peter was nothing to her it was singular she should have

attached such importance to this contingency. The odd young man

reappeared, and now that she saw him without his queer female appendages

he seemed personally less weird. He struck her moreover, as generally a

good deal accounted for by the literary character, especially if it were

responsible for a lot of good writing. As he took his place on the bench

Nick said to him, indicating her, "My sister Bridget," and then

mentioned his name, "Mr. Gabriel Nash."

"You enjoy Paris--you're happy here?" Mr. Nash inquired, leaning over

his friend to speak to the girl.

Though his words belonged to the situation it struck her that his tone

didn't, and this made her answer him more dryly than she usually spoke.

"Oh yes, it's very nice."

"And French art interests you? You find things here that please?"

"Oh yes, I like some of them."

Mr. Nash considered her kindly. "I hoped you'd say you like the Academy

better."

"She would if she didn't think you expected it," said Nicholas Dormer.

"Oh Nick!" Biddy protested.

"Miss Dormer's herself an English picture," their visitor pronounced in

the tone of a man whose urbanity was a general solvent.

"That's a compliment if you don't like them!" Biddy exclaimed.

"Ah some of them, some of them; there's a certain sort of thing!" Mr.

Nash continued. "We must feel everything, everything that we can. We're

here for that."

"You do like English art then?" Nick demanded with a slight accent of

surprise.

Mr. Nash indulged his wonder. "My dear Dormer, do you remember the old

complaint I used to make of you? You had formulas that were like walking

in one's hat. One may see something in a case and one may not."

"Upon my word," said Nick, "I don't know any one who was fonder of a

generalisation than you. You turned them off as the man at the

street-corner distributes hand-bills."

"They were my wild oats. I've sown them all."

"We shall see that!"

"Oh there's nothing of them now: a tame, scanty, homely growth. My only

good generalisations are my actions."

"We shall see \_them\_ then."

"Ah pardon me. You can't see them with the naked eye. Moreover, mine are

principally negative. People's actions, I know, are for the most part

the things they do--but mine are all the things I \_don't\_ do. There are

so many of those, so many, but they don't produce any effect. And then

all the rest are shades--extremely fine shades."

"Shades of behaviour?" Nick inquired with an interest which surprised

his sister, Mr. Nash's discourse striking her mainly as the twaddle of

the under-world.

"Shades of impression, of appreciation," said the young man with his

explanatory smile. "All my behaviour consists of my feelings."

"Well, don't you show your feelings? You used to!"

"Wasn't it mainly those of disgust?" Nash asked. "Those operate no

longer. I've closed that window."

"Do you mean you like everything?"

"Dear me, no! But I look only at what I do like."

"Do you mean that you've lost the noble faculty of disgust?"

"I haven't the least idea. I never try it. My dear fellow," said Gabriel

Nash, "we've only one life that we know anything about: fancy taking it

up with disagreeable impressions! When then shall we go in for the

agreeable?"

"What do you mean by the agreeable?" Nick demanded.

"Oh the happy moments of our consciousness--the multiplication of those

moments. We must save as many as possible from the dark gulf."

Nick had excited surprise on the part of his sister, but it was now

Biddy's turn to make him open his eyes a little. She raised her sweet

voice in appeal to the stranger.

"Don't you think there are any wrongs in the world--any abuses and

sufferings?"

"Oh so many, so many! That's why one must choose."

"Choose to stop them, to reform them--isn't that the choice?" Biddy

asked. "That's Nick's," she added, blushing and looking at this

personage.

"Ah our divergence--yes!" Mr. Nash sighed. "There are all kinds of

machinery for that--very complicated and ingenious. Your formulas, my

dear Dormer, your formulas!"

"Hang 'em, I haven't got any!" Nick now bravely declared.

"To me personally the simplest ways are those that appeal most," Mr.

Nash went on. "We pay too much attention to the ugly; we notice it, we

magnify it. The great thing is to leave it alone and encourage the

beautiful."

"You must be very sure you get hold of the beautiful," said Nick.

"Ah precisely, and that's just the importance of the faculty of

appreciation. We must train our special sense. It's capable of

extraordinary extension. Life's none too long for that."

"But what's the good of the extraordinary extension if there is no

affirmation of it, if it all goes to the negative, as you say? Where are

the fine consequences?" Dormer asked.

"In one's own spirit. One is one's self a fine consequence. That's the

most important one we have to do with. \_I\_ am a fine consequence," said

Gabriel Nash.

Biddy rose from the bench at this and stepped away a little as to look

at a piece of statuary. But she had not gone far before, pausing and

turning, she bent her eyes on the speaker with a heightened colour, an

air of desperation and the question, after a moment: "Are you then an

Ã¦sthete?"

"Ah there's one of the formulas! That's walking in one's hat! I've \_no\_

profession, my dear young lady. I've no \_Ã©tat civil\_. These things are a

part of the complicated ingenious machinery. As I say, I keep to the

simplest way. I find that gives one enough to do. Merely to be is such a

\_mÃ©tier\_; to live such an art; to feel such a career!"

Bridget Dormer turned her back and examined her statue, and her brother

said to his old friend: "And to write?"

"To write? Oh I shall never do it again!"

"You've done it almost well enough to be inconsistent. That book of

yours is anything but negative; it's complicated and ingenious."

"My dear fellow, I'm extremely ashamed of that book," said Gabriel Nash.

"Ah call yourself a bloated Buddhist and have done with it!" his

companion exclaimed.

"Have done with it? I haven't the least desire to have done with it. And

why should one call one's self anything? One only deprives other people

of their dearest occupation. Let me add that you don't \_begin\_ to have

an insight into the art of life till it ceases to be of the smallest

consequence to you what you may be called. That's rudimentary."

"But if you go in for shades you must also go in for names. You must

distinguish," Nick objected. "The observer's nothing without his

categories, his types and varieties."

"Ah trust him to distinguish!" said Gabriel Nash sweetly. "That's for

his own convenience; he has, privately, a terminology to meet it. That's

one's style. But from the moment it's for the convenience of others the

signs have to be grosser, the shades begin to go. That's a deplorable

hour! Literature, you see, is for the convenience of others. It requires

the most abject concessions. It plays such mischief with one's style

that really I've had to give it up."

"And politics?" Nick asked.

"Well, what about them?" was Mr. Nash's reply with a special cadence as

he watched his friend's sister, who was still examining her statue.

Biddy was divided between irritation and curiosity. She had interposed

space, but she had not gone beyond ear-shot. Nick's question made her

curiosity throb as a rejoinder to his friend's words.

"That, no doubt you'll say, is still far more for the convenience of

others--is still worse for one's style."

Biddy turned round in time to hear Mr. Nash answer: "It has simply

nothing in life to do with shades! I can't say worse for it than that."

Biddy stepped nearer at this and drew still further on her courage.

"Won't mamma be waiting? Oughtn't we to go to luncheon?"

Both the young men looked up at her and Mr. Nash broke out: "You ought

to protest! You ought to save him!"

"To save him?" Biddy echoed.

"He had a style, upon my word he had! But I've seen it go. I've read his

speeches."

"You were capable of that?" Nick laughed.

"For you, yes. But it was like listening to a nightingale in a brass

band."

"I think they were beautiful," Biddy declared.

Her brother got up at this tribute, and Mr. Nash, rising too, said with

his bright colloquial air: "But, Miss Dormer, he had eyes. He was made

to see--to see all over, to see everything. There are so few like that."

"I think he still sees," Biddy returned, wondering a little why Nick

didn't defend himself.

"He sees his 'side,' his dreadful 'side,' dear young lady. Poor man,

fancy your having a 'side'--you, you--and spending your days and your

nights looking at it! I'd as soon pass my life looking at an

advertisement on a hoarding."

"You don't see me some day a great statesman?" said Nick.

"My dear fellow, it's exactly what I've a terror of."

"Mercy! don't you admire them?" Biddy cried.

"It's a trade like another and a method of making one's way which

society certainly condones. But when one can be something better--!"

"Why what in the world is better?" Biddy asked.

The young man gasped and Nick, replying for him, said: "Gabriel Nash is

better! You must come and lunch with us. I must keep you--I must!" he

added.

"We shall save him yet," Mr. Nash kept on easily to Biddy while they

went and the girl wondered still more what her mother would make of

him.

III

After her companions left her Lady Agnes rested for five minutes in

silence with her elder daughter, at the end of which time she observed:

"I suppose one must have food at any rate," and, getting up, quitted the

place where they had been sitting. "And where are we to go? I hate

eating out of doors," she went on.

"Dear me, when one comes to Paris--!" Grace returned in a tone

apparently implying that in so rash an adventure one must be prepared

for compromises and concessions. The two ladies wandered to where they

saw a large sign of "Buffet" suspended in the air, entering a precinct

reserved for little white-clothed tables, straw-covered chairs and

long-aproned waiters. One of these functionaries approached them with

eagerness and with a \_"Mesdames sont seules?"\_ receiving in return from

her ladyship the slightly snappish announcement \_"Non; nous sommes

beaucoup!"\_ He introduced them to a table larger than most of the

others, and under his protection they took their places at it and began

rather languidly and vaguely to consider the question of the repast. The

waiter had placed a \_carte\_ in Lady Agnes's hands and she studied it,

through her eye-glass, with a failure of interest, while he enumerated

with professional fluency the resources of the establishment and Grace

watched the people at the other tables. She was hungry and had already

broken a morsel from a long glazed roll.

"Not cold beef and pickles, you know," she observed to her mother. Lady

Agnes gave no heed to this profane remark, but dropped her eye-glass and

laid down the greasy document. "What does it signify? I daresay it's all

nasty," Grace continued; and she added inconsequently: "If Peter comes

he's sure to be particular."

"Let him first be particular to come!" her ladyship exclaimed, turning a

cold eye upon the waiter.

\_"Poulet chasseur, filets mignons sauce bearnaise,"\_ the man suggested.

"You'll give us what I tell you," said Lady Agnes; and she mentioned

with distinctness and authority the dishes of which she desired that the

meal should be composed. He interjected three or four more suggestions,

but as they produced absolutely no impression on her he became silent

and submissive, doing justice apparently to her ideas. For Lady Agnes

had ideas, and, though it had suited her humour ten minutes before to

profess herself helpless in such a case, the manner in which she imposed

them on the waiter as original, practical, and economical, showed the

high executive woman, the mother of children, the daughter of earls, the

consort of an official, the dispenser of hospitality, looking back upon

a lifetime of luncheons. She carried many cares, and the feeding of

multitudes--she was honourably conscious of having fed them decently, as

she had always done everything--had ever been one of them. "Everything's

absurdly dear," she remarked to her daughter as the waiter went away. To

this remark Grace made no answer. She had been used for a long time back

to hearing that everything was very dear; it was what one always

expected. So she found the case herself, but she was silent and

inventive about it, and nothing further passed, in the way of

conversation with her mother, while they waited for the latter's orders

to be executed, till Lady Agnes reflected audibly: "He makes me unhappy,

the way he talks about Julia."

"Sometimes I think he does it to torment one. One can't mention her!"

Grace responded.

"It's better not to mention her, but to leave it alone."

"Yet he never mentions her of himself."

"In some cases that's supposed to show that people like people--though

of course something more's required to prove it," Lady Agnes continued

to meditate. "Sometimes I think he's thinking of her, then at others I

can't fancy \_what\_ he's thinking of."

"It would be awfully suitable," said Grace, biting her roll.

Her companion had a pause, as if looking for some higher ground to put

it upon. Then she appeared to find this loftier level in the

observation: "Of course he must like her--he has known her always."

"Nothing can be plainer than that she likes him," Grace opined.

"Poor Julia!" Lady Agnes almost wailed; and her tone suggested that she

knew more about that than she was ready to state.

"It isn't as if she wasn't clever and well read," her daughter went on.

"If there were nothing else there would be a reason in her being so

interested in politics, in everything that he is."

"Ah what Nick is--that's what I sometimes wonder!"

Grace eyed her parent in some despair: "Why, mother, isn't he going to

be like papa?" She waited for an answer that didn't come; after which

she pursued: "I thought you thought him so like him already."

"Well, I don't," said Lady Agnes quietly.

"Who is then? Certainly Percy isn't."

Lady Agnes was silent a space. "There's no one like your father."

"Dear papa!" Grace handsomely concurred. Then with a rapid transition:

"It would be so jolly for all of us--she'd be so nice to us."

"She's that already--in her way," said Lady Agnes conscientiously,

having followed the return, quick as it was. "Much good does it do her!"

And she reproduced the note of her bitterness of a moment before.

"It does her some good that one should look out for her. I do, and I

think she knows it," Grace declared. "One can at any rate keep other

women off."

"Don't meddle--you're very clumsy," was her mother's not particularly

sympathetic rejoinder. "There are other women who are beautiful, and

there are others who are clever and rich."

"Yes, but not all in one: that's what's so nice in Julia. Her fortune

would be thrown in; he wouldn't appear to have married her for it."

"If he does he won't," said Lady Agnes a trifle obscurely.

"Yes, that's what's so charming. And he could do anything then, couldn't

he?"

"Well, your father had no fortune to speak of."

"Yes, but didn't Uncle Percy help him?"

"His wife helped him," said Lady Agnes.

"Dear mamma!"--the girl was prompt. "There's one thing," she added:

"that Mr. Carteret will always help Nick."

"What do you mean by 'always'?"

"Why whether he marries Julia or not."

"Things aren't so easy," Lady Agnes judged. "It will all depend on

Nick's behaviour. He can stop it to-morrow."

Grace Dormer stared; she evidently thought Mr. Carteret's beneficence a

part of the scheme of nature. "How could he stop it?"

"By not being serious. It isn't so hard to prevent people giving you

money."

"Serious?" Grace repeated. "Does he want him to be a prig like Lord

Egbert?"

"Yes--that's exactly what he wants. And what he'll do for him he'll do

for him only if he marries Julia."

"Has he told you?" Grace inquired. And then, before her mother could

answer, "I'm delighted at that!" she cried.

"He hasn't told me, but that's the way things happen." Lady Agnes was

less optimistic than her daughter, and such optimism as she cultivated

was a thin tissue with the sense of things as they are showing through.

"If Nick becomes rich Charles Carteret will make him more so. If he

doesn't he won't give him a shilling."

"Oh mamma!" Grace demurred.

"It's all very well to say that in public life money isn't as necessary

as it used to be," her ladyship went on broodingly. "Those who say so

don't know anything about it. It's always intensely necessary."

Her daughter, visibly affected by the gloom of her manner, felt impelled

to evoke as a corrective a more cheerful idea. "I daresay; but there's

the fact--isn't there?--that poor papa had so little."

"Yes, and there's the fact that it killed him!"

These words came out with a strange, quick, little flare of passion.

They startled Grace Dormer, who jumped in her place and gasped, "Oh

mother!" The next instant, however, she added in a different voice, "Oh

Peter!" for, with an air of eagerness, a gentleman was walking up to

them.

"How d'ye do, Cousin Agnes? How d'ye do, little Grace?" Peter

Sherringham laughed and shook hands with them, and three minutes later

was settled in his chair at their table, on which the first elements of

the meal had been placed. Explanations, on one side and the other, were

demanded and produced; from which it appeared that the two parties had

been in some degree at cross-purposes. The day before Lady Agnes and her

companions travelled to Paris Sherringham had gone to London for

forty-eight hours on private business of the ambassador's, arriving, on

his return by the night-train, only early that morning. There had

accordingly been a delay in his receiving Nick Dormer's two notes. If

Nick had come to the embassy in person--he might have done him the

honour to call--he would have learned that the second secretary was

absent. Lady Agnes was not altogether successful in assigning a motive

to her son's neglect of this courteous form; she could but say: "I

expected him, I wanted him to go; and indeed, not hearing from you, he

would have gone immediately--an hour or two hence, on leaving this

place. But we're here so quietly--not to go out, not to seem to appeal

to the ambassador. Nick put it so--'Oh mother, we'll keep out of it; a

friendly note will do.' I don't know definitely what he wanted to keep

out of, unless anything like gaiety. The embassy isn't gay, I know. But

I'm sure his note was friendly, wasn't it? I daresay you'll see for

yourself. He's different directly he gets abroad; he doesn't seem to

care." Lady Agnes paused a moment, not carrying out this particular

elucidation; then she resumed: "He said you'd have seen Julia and that

you'd understand everything from her. And when I asked how she'd know he

said, 'Oh she knows everything!'"

"He never said a word to me about Julia," Peter Sherringham returned.

Lady Agnes and her daughter exchanged a glance at this: the latter had

already asked three times where Julia was, and her ladyship dropped that

they had been hoping she would be able to come with Peter. The young man

set forth that she was at the moment at an hotel in the Rue de la Paix,

but had only been there since that morning; he had seen her before

proceeding to the Champs ElysÃ©es. She had come up to Paris by an early

train--- she had been staying at Versailles, of all places in the world.

She had been a week in Paris on her return from Cannes--her stay there

had been of nearly a month: fancy!--and then had gone out to Versailles

to see Mrs. Billinghurst. Perhaps they'd remember her, poor Dallow's

sister. She was staying there to teach her daughters French--she had a

dozen or two!--and Julia had spent three days with her. She was to

return to England about the twenty-fifth. It would make seven weeks she

must have been away from town--a rare thing for her; she usually stuck

to it so in summer.

"Three days with Mrs. Billinghurst--how very good-natured of her!" Lady

Agnes commented.

"Oh they're very nice to her," Sherringham said.

"Well, I hope so!" Grace Dormer exhaled. "Why didn't you make her come

here?"

"I proposed it, but she wouldn't." Another eye-beam, at this, passed

between the two ladies and Peter went on: "She said you must come and

see her at the HÃ´tel de Hollande."

"Of course we'll do that," Lady Agnes declared. "Nick went to ask about

her at the Westminster."

"She gave that up; they wouldn't give her the rooms she wanted, her

usual set."

"She's delightfully particular!" Grace said complacently. Then she

added: "She \_does\_ like pictures, doesn't she?"

Peter Sherringham stared. "Oh I daresay. But that's not what she has in

her head this morning. She has some news from London--she's immensely

excited."

"What has she in her head?" Lady Agnes asked.

"What's her news from London?" Grace added.

"She wants Nick to stand."

"Nick to stand?" both ladies cried.

"She undertakes to bring him in for Harsh. Mr. Pinks is dead--the

fellow, you know, who got the seat at the general election. He dropped

down in London--disease of the heart or something of that sort. Julia

has her telegram, but I see it was in last night's papers."

"Imagine--Nick never mentioned it!" said Lady Agnes.

"Don't you know, mother?--abroad he only reads foreign papers."

"Oh I know. I've no patience with him," her ladyship continued. "Dear

Julia!"

"It's a nasty little place, and Pinks had a tight squeeze--107 or

something of that sort; but if it returned a Liberal a year ago very

likely it will do so again. Julia at any rate believes it can be made

to--if the man's Nick--and is ready to take the order to put him in."

"I'm sure if she can do it she will," Grace pronounced.

"Dear, dear Julia! And Nick can do something for himself," said the

mother of this candidate.

"I've no doubt he can do anything," Peter Sherringham returned

good-naturedly. Then, "Do you mean in expenses?" he inquired.

"Ah I'm afraid he can't do much in expenses, poor dear boy! And it's

dreadful how little we can look to Percy."

"Well, I daresay you may look to Julia. I think that's her idea."

"Delightful Julia!" Lady Agnes broke out. "If poor Sir Nicholas could

have known! Of course he must go straight home," she added.

"He won't like that," said Grace.

"Then he'll have to go without liking it."

"It will rather spoil \_your\_ little excursion, if you've only just

come," Peter suggested; "to say nothing of the great Biddy's, if she's

enjoying Paris."

"We may stay perhaps--with Julia to protect us," said Lady Agnes.

"Ah she won't stay; she'll go over for her man."

"Her man----?"

"The fellow who stands, whoever he is--especially if he's Nick." These

last words caused the eyes of Peter Sherringham's companions to meet

again, and he went on: "She'll go straight down to Harsh."

"Wonderful Julia!" Lady Agnes panted. "Of course Nick must go straight

there too."

"Well, I suppose he must see first if they'll have him."

"If they'll have him? Why how can he tell till he tries?"

"I mean the people at headquarters, the fellows who arrange it."

Lady Agnes coloured a little. "My dear Peter, do you suppose there will

be the least doubt of their 'having' the son of his father?"

"Of course it's a great name, Cousin Agnes--a very great name."

"One of the greatest, simply," Lady Agnes smiled.

"It's the best name in the world!" said Grace more emphatically.

"All the same it didn't prevent his losing his seat."

"By half-a-dozen votes: it was too odious!" her ladyship cried.

"I remember--I remember. And in such a case as that why didn't they

immediately put him in somewhere else?"

"How one sees you live abroad, dear Peter! There happens to have been

the most extraordinary lack of openings--I never saw anything like

it--for a year. They've had their hand on him, keeping him all ready. I

daresay they've telegraphed him."

"And he hasn't told you?"

Lady Agnes faltered. "He's so very odd when he's abroad!"

"At home too he lets things go," Grace interposed. "He does so

little--takes no trouble." Her mother suffered this statement to pass

unchallenged, and she pursued philosophically: "I suppose it's because

he knows he's so clever."

"So he is, dear old man. But what does he do, what has he been doing, in

a positive way?"

"He has been painting."

"Ah not seriously!" Lady Agnes protested.

"That's the worst way," said Peter Sherringham. "Good things?"

Neither of the ladies made a direct response to this, but Lady Agnes

said: "He has spoken repeatedly. They're always calling on him."

"He speaks magnificently," Grace attested.

"That's another of the things I lose, living in far countries. And he's

doing the Salon now with the great Biddy?"

"Just the things in this part. I can't think what keeps them so long,"

Lady Agnes groaned. "Did you ever see such a dreadful place?"

Sherringham stared. "Aren't the things good? I had an idea----!"

"Good?" cried Lady Agnes. "They're too odious, too wicked."

"Ah," laughed Peter, "that's what people fall into if they live abroad.

The French oughtn't to live abroad!"

"Here they come," Grace announced at this point; "but they've got a

strange man with them."

"That's a bore when we want to talk!" Lady Agnes sighed.

Peter got up in the spirit of welcome and stood a moment watching the

others approach. "There will be no difficulty in talking, to judge by

the gentleman," he dropped; and while he remains so conspicuous our eyes

may briefly rest on him. He was middling high and was visibly a

representative of the nervous rather than of the phlegmatic branch of

his race. He had an oval face, fine firm features, and a complexion that

tended to the brown. Brown were his eyes, and women thought them soft;

dark brown his hair, in which the same critics sometimes regretted the

absence of a little undulation. It was perhaps to conceal this plainness

that he wore it very short. His teeth were white, his moustache was

pointed, and so was the small beard that adorned the extremity of his

chin. His face expressed intelligence and was very much alive; it had

the further distinction that it often struck superficial observers with

a certain foreignness of cast. The deeper sort, however, usually felt it

latently English enough. There was an idea that, having taken up the

diplomatic career and gone to live in strange lands, he cultivated the

mask of an alien, an Italian or a Spaniard; of an alien in time

even--one of the wonderful ubiquitous diplomatic agents of the sixteenth

century. In fact, none the less, it would have been impossible to be

more modern than Peter Sherringham--more of one's class and one's

country. But this didn't prevent several stray persons--Bridget Dormer

for instance--from admiring the hue of his cheek for its olive richness

and his moustache and beard for their resemblance to those of Charles I.

At the same time--she rather jumbled her comparisons--she thought he

recalled a Titian.

IV

Peter's meeting with Nick was of the friendliest on both sides,

involving a great many "dear fellows" and "old boys," and his salutation

to the younger of the Miss Dormers consisted of the frankest "Delighted

to see you, my dear Bid!" There was no kissing, but there was cousinship

in the air, of a conscious, living kind, as Gabriel Nash doubtless

quickly noted, hovering for a moment outside the group. Biddy said

nothing to Peter Sherringham, but there was no flatness in a silence

which heaved, as it were, with the fairest physiognomic portents. Nick

introduced Gabriel Nash to his mother and to the other two as "a

delightful old friend" whom he had just come across, and Sherringham

acknowledged the act by saying to Mr. Nash, but as if rather less for

his sake than for that of the presenter: "I've seen you very often

before."

"Ah repetition--recurrence: we haven't yet, in the study of how to live,

abolished that clumsiness, have we?" Mr. Nash genially inquired. "It's a

poverty in the supernumeraries of our stage that we don't pass once for

all, but come round and cross again like a procession or an army at the

theatre. It's a sordid economy that ought to have been managed better.

The right thing would be just \_one\_ appearance, and the procession,

regardless of expense, for ever and for ever different." The company was

occupied in placing itself at table, so that the only disengaged

attention for the moment was Grace's, to whom, as her eyes rested on

him, the young man addressed these last words with a smile. "Alas, it's

a very shabby idea, isn't it? The world isn't got up regardless of

expense!"

Grace looked quickly away from him and said to her brother: "Nick, Mr.

Pinks is dead."

"Mr. Pinks?" asked Gabriel Nash, appearing to wonder where he should

sit.

"The member for Harsh; and Julia wants you to stand," the girl went on.

"Mr. Pinks, the member for Harsh? What names to be sure!" Gabriel mused

cheerfully, still unseated.

"Julia wants me? I'm much obliged to her!" Nick absently said. "Nash,

please sit by my mother, with Peter on her other side."

"My dear, it isn't Julia"--Lady Agnes spoke earnestly. "Every one wants

you. Haven't you heard from your people? Didn't you know the seat was

vacant?"

Nick was looking round the table to see what was on it. "Upon my word I

don't remember. What else have you ordered, mother?"

"There's some \_boeuf braisÃ©\_, my dear, and afterwards some galantine.

Here's a dish of eggs with asparagus-tips."

"I advise you to go in for it, Nick," said Peter Sherringham, to whom

the preparation in question was presented.

"Into the eggs with asparagus-tips? \_Donnez m'en s'il vous plaÃ®t\_. My

dear fellow, how can I stand? how can I sit? Where's the money to come

from?"

"The money? Why from Jul----!" Grace began, but immediately caught her

mother's eye.

"Poor Julia, how you do work her!" Nick exclaimed. "Nash, I recommend

you the asparagus-tips. Mother, he's my best friend--do look after him."

"I've an impression I've breakfasted--I'm not sure," Nash smiled.

"With those beautiful ladies? Try again--you'll find out."

"The money can be managed; the expenses are very small and the seat's

certain," Lady Agnes pursued, not apparently heeding her son's

injunction in respect to Nash.

"Rather--if Julia goes down!" her elder daughter exclaimed.

"Perhaps Julia won't go down!" Nick answered humorously.

Biddy was seated next to Mr. Nash, so that she could take occasion to

ask, "Who are the beautiful ladies?" as if she failed to recognise her

brother's allusion. In reality this was an innocent trick: she was more

curious than she could have given a suitable reason for about the odd

women from whom her neighbour had lately separated.

"Deluded, misguided, infatuated persons!" Mr. Nash replied,

understanding that she had asked for a description. "Strange eccentric,

almost romantic, types. Predestined victims, simple-minded sacrificial

lambs!"

This was copious, yet it was vague, so that Biddy could only respond:

"Oh all that?" But meanwhile Peter Sherringham said to Nick: "Julia's

here, you know. You must go and see her."

Nick looked at him an instant rather hard, as if to say: "You too?" But

Peter's eyes appeared to answer, "No, no, not I"; upon which his cousin

rejoined: "Of course I'll go and see her. I'll go immediately. Please to

thank her for thinking of me."

"Thinking of you? There are plenty to think of you!" Lady Agnes said.

"There are sure to be telegrams at home. We must go back--we must go

back!"

"We must go back to England?" Nick Dormer asked; and as his mother made

no answer he continued: "Do you mean I must go to Harsh?"

Her ladyship evaded this question, inquiring of Mr. Nash if he would

have a morsel of fish; but her gain was small, for this gentleman,

struck again by the unhappy name of the bereaved constituency, only

broke out: "Ah what a place to represent! How can you--how can you?"

"It's an excellent place," said Lady Agnes coldly. "I imagine you've

never been there. It's a very good place indeed. It belongs very largely

to my cousin, Mrs. Dallow."

Gabriel partook of the fish, listening with interest. "But I thought we

had no more pocket-boroughs."

"It's pockets we rather lack, so many of us. There are plenty of

Harshes," Nick Dormer observed.

"I don't know what you mean," Lady Agnes said to Nash with considerable

majesty.

Peter Sherringham also addressed him with an "Oh it's all right; they

come down on you like a shot!" and the young man continued ingenuously:

"Do you mean to say you've to pay money to get into that awful

place--that it's not \_you\_ who are paid?"

"Into that awful place?" Lady Agnes repeated blankly.

"Into the House of Commons. That you don't get a high salary?"

"My dear Nash, you're delightful: don't leave me--don't leave me!" Nick

cried; while his mother looked at him with an eye that demanded: "Who in

the world's this extraordinary person?"

"What then did you think pocket-boroughs were?" Peter Sherringham asked.

Mr. Nash's facial radiance rested on him. "Why, boroughs that filled

your pocket. To do that sort of thing without a bribe--\_c'est trop

fort!\_"

"He lives at Samarcand," Nick Dormer explained to his mother, who

flushed perceptibly. "What do you advise me? I'll do whatever you say,"

he went on to his old acquaintance.

"My dear, my dear----!" Lady Agnes pleaded.

"See Julia first, with all respect to Mr. Nash. She's of excellent

counsel," said Peter Sherringham.

Mr. Nash smiled across the table at his host. "The lady first--the lady

first! I've not a word to suggest as against any idea of hers."

"We mustn't sit here too long, there'll be so much to do," said Lady

Agnes anxiously, perceiving a certain slowness in the service of the

\_boeuf braisÃ©\_.

Biddy had been up to this moment mainly occupied in looking, covertly

and in snatches, at Peter Sherringham; as was perfectly lawful in a

young lady with a handsome cousin whom she had not seen for more than a

year. But her sweet voice now took license to throw in the words: "We

know what Mr. Nash thinks of politics: he told us just now he thinks

them dreadful."

"No, not dreadful--only inferior," the personage impugned protested.

"Everything's relative."

"Inferior to what?" Lady Agnes demanded.

Mr. Nash appeared to consider a moment. "To anything else that may be in

question."

"Nothing else is in question!" said her ladyship in a tone that would

have been triumphant if it had not been so dry.

"Ah then!" And her neighbour shook his head sadly. He turned after this

to Biddy. "The ladies whom I was with just now and in whom you were so

good as to express an interest?" Biddy gave a sign of assent and he went

on: "They're persons theatrical. The younger one's trying to go upon the

stage."

"And are you assisting her?" Biddy inquired, pleased she had guessed so

nearly right.

"Not in the least--I'm rather choking her off. I consider it the lowest

of the arts."

"Lower than politics?" asked Peter Sherringham, who was listening to

this.

"Dear no, I won't say that. I think the ThÃ©Ã¢tre FranÃ§ais a greater

institution than the House of Commons."

"I agree with you there!" laughed Sherringham; "all the more that I

don't consider the dramatic art a low one. It seems to me on the

contrary to include all the others."

"Yes--that's a view. I think it's the view of my friends."

"Of your friends?"

"Two ladies--old acquaintances--whom I met in Paris a week ago and whom

I've just been spending an hour with in this place."

"You should have seen them; they struck me very much," Biddy said to her

cousin.

"I should like to see them if they really have anything to say to the

theatre."

"It can easily be managed. Do you believe in the theatre?" asked Gabriel

Nash.

"Passionately," Sherringham confessed. "Don't you?"

Before Nash had had time to answer Biddy had interposed with a sigh.

"How I wish I could go--but in Paris I can't!"

"I'll take you, Biddy--I vow I'll take you."

"But the plays, Peter," the girl objected. "Mamma says they're worse

than the pictures."

"Oh, we'll arrange that: they shall do one at the FranÃ§ais on purpose

for a delightful little yearning English girl."

"Can you make them?"

"I can make them do anything I choose."

"Ah then it's the theatre that believes in \_you\_," said Mr. Nash.

"It would be ungrateful if it didn't after all I've done for it!"

Sherringham gaily opined.

Lady Agnes had withdrawn herself from between him and her other guest

and, to signify that she at least had finished eating, had gone to sit

by her son, whom she held, with some importunity, in conversation. But

hearing the theatre talked of she threw across an impersonal challenge

to the paradoxical young man. "Pray should you think it better for a

gentleman to be an actor?"

"Better than being a politician? Ah, comedian for comedian, isn't the

actor more honest?"

Lady Agnes turned to her son and brought forth with spirit: "Think of

your great father, Nicholas!"

"He was an honest man," said Nicholas. "That's perhaps why he couldn't

stand it."

Peter Sherringham judged the colloquy to have taken an uncomfortable

twist, though not wholly, as it seemed to him, by the act of Nick's

queer comrade. To draw it back to safer ground he said to this

personage: "May I ask if the ladies you just spoke of are English--Mrs.

and Miss Rooth: isn't that the rather odd name?"

"The very same. Only the daughter, according to her kind, desires to be

known by some \_nom de guerre\_ before she has even been able to enlist."

"And what does she call herself?" Bridget Dormer asked.

"Maud Vavasour, or Edith Temple, or Gladys Vane--some rubbish of that

sort."

"What then is her own name?"

"Miriam--Miriam Rooth. It would do very well and would give her the

benefit of the prepossessing fact that--to the best of my belief at

least--she's more than half a Jewess."

"It is as good as Rachel Felix," Sherringham said.

"The name's as good, but not the talent. The girl's splendidly stupid."

"And more than half a Jewess? Don't you believe it!" Sherringham

laughed.

"Don't believe she's a Jewess?" Biddy asked, still more interested in

Miriam Rooth.

"No, no--that she's stupid, really. If she is she'll be the first."

"Ah you may judge for yourself," Nash rejoined, "if you'll come

to-morrow afternoon to Madame CarrÃ©, Rue de Constantinople, \_Ã

l'entresol\_."

"Madame CarrÃ©? Why, I've already a note from her--I found it this

morning on my return to Paris--asking me to look in at five o'clock and

listen to a \_jeune Anglaise\_."

"That's my arrangement--I obtained the favour. The ladies want an

opinion, and dear old CarrÃ© has consented to see them and to give one.

Maud Vavasour will recite, and the venerable artist will pass

judgement."

Sherringham remembered he had his note in his pocket and took it out to

look it over. "She wishes to make her a little audience--she says she'll

do better with that--and she asks me because I'm English. I shall make a

point of going."

"And bring Dormer if you can: the audience will be better. Will you

come, Dormer?" Mr. Nash continued, appealing to his friend--"will you

come with me to hear an English amateur recite and an old French actress

pitch into her?"

Nick looked round from his talk with his mother and Grace. "I'll go

anywhere with you so that, as I've told you, I mayn't lose sight of

you--may keep hold of you."

"Poor Mr. Nash, why is he so useful?" Lady Agnes took a cold freedom to

inquire.

"He steadies me, mother."

"Oh I wish you'd take \_me\_, Peter," Biddy broke out wistfully to her

cousin.

"To spend an hour with an old French actress? Do \_you\_ want to go upon

the stage?" the young man asked.

"No, but I want to see something--to know something."

"Madame CarrÃ©'s wonderful in her way, but she's hardly company for a

little English girl."

"I'm not little, I'm only too big; and \_she\_ goes, the person you speak

of."

"For a professional purpose and with her good mother," smiled Mr. Nash.

"I think Lady Agnes would hardly venture----!"

"Oh I've seen her good mother!" said Biddy as if she had her impression

of what the worth of that protection might be.

"Yes, but you haven't heard her. It's then that you measure her."

Biddy was wistful still. "Is it the famous Honorine CarrÃ©, the great

celebrity?"

"Honorine in person: the incomparable, the perfect!" said Peter

Sherringham. "The first artist of our time, taking her altogether. She

and I are old pals; she has been so good as to come and 'say'

things--which she does sometimes still \_dans le monde\_ as no one else

\_can\_--- in my rooms."

"Make her come then. We can go \_there\_!"

"One of these days!"

"And the young lady--Miriam, Maud, Gladys--make her come too."

Sherringham looked at Nash and the latter was bland. "Oh you'll have no

difficulty. She'll jump at it!"

"Very good. I'll give a little artistic tea--with Julia too of course.

And you must come, Mr. Nash." This gentleman promised with an

inclination, and Peter continued: "But if, as you say, you're not for

helping the young lady, how came you to arrange this interview with the

great model?"

"Precisely to stop her short. The great model will find her very bad.

Her judgements, as you probably know, are Rhadamanthine."

"Unfortunate creature!" said Biddy. "I think you're cruel."

"Never mind--I'll look after them," Sherringham laughed.

"And how can Madame CarrÃ© judge if the girl recites English?"

"She's so intelligent that she could judge if she recited Chinese,"

Peter declared.

"That's true, but the \_jeune Anglaise\_ recites also in French," said

Gabriel Nash.

"Then she isn't stupid."

"And in Italian, and in several more tongues, for aught I know."

Sherringham was visibly interested. "Very good--we'll put her through

them all."

"She must be \_most\_ clever," Biddy went on yearningly.

"She has spent her life on the Continent; she has wandered about with

her mother; she has picked up things."

"And is she a lady?" Biddy asked.

"Oh tremendous! The great ones of the earth on the mother's side. On the

father's, on the other hand, I imagine, only a Jew stockbroker in the

City."

"Then they're rich--or ought to be," Sherringham suggested.

"Ought to be--ah there's the bitterness! The stockbroker had too short a

go--he was carried off in his flower. However, he left his wife a

certain property, which she appears to have muddled away, not having the

safeguard of being herself a Hebrew. This is what she has lived on till

to-day--this and another resource. Her husband, as she has often told

me, had the artistic temperament: that's common, as you know, among \_ces

messieurs\_. He made the most of his little opportunities and collected

various pictures, tapestries, enamels, porcelains, and similar gewgaws.

He parted with them also, I gather, at a profit; in short he carried on

a neat little business as a \_brocanteur\_. It was nipped in the bud, but

Mrs. Rooth was left with a certain number of these articles in her

hands; indeed they must have formed her only capital. She was not a

woman of business; she turned them, no doubt, to indifferent account;

but she sold them piece by piece, and they kept her going while her

daughter grew up. It was to this precarious traffic, conducted with

extraordinary mystery and delicacy, that, five years ago, in Florence, I

was indebted for my acquaintance with her. In those days I used to

collect--heaven help me!--I used to pick up rubbish which I could ill

afford. It was a little phase--we have our little phases, haven't we?"

Mr. Nash asked with childlike trust--"and I've come out on the other

side. Mrs. Rooth had an old green pot and I heard of her old green pot.

To hear of it was to long for it, so that I went to see it under cover

of night. I bought it and a couple of years ago I overturned and smashed

it. It was the last of the little phase. It was not, however, as you've

seen, the last of Mrs. Rooth. I met her afterwards in London, and I

found her a year or two ago in Venice. She appears to be a great

wanderer. She had other old pots, of other colours, red, yellow, black,

or blue--she could produce them of any complexion you liked. I don't

know whether she carried them about with her or whether she had little

secret stores in the principal cities of Europe. To-day at any rate they

seem all gone. On the other hand she has her daughter, who has grown up

and who's a precious vase of another kind--less fragile I hope than the

rest. May she not be overturned and smashed!"

Peter Sherringham and Biddy Dormer listened with attention to this

history, and the girl testified to the interest with which she had

followed it by saying when Mr. Nash had ceased speaking: "A Jewish

stockbroker, a dealer in curiosities: what an odd person to marry--for a

person who was well born! I daresay he was a German."

"His name must have been simply Roth, and the poor lady, to smarten it

up, has put in another \_o\_," Sherringham ingeniously suggested.

"You're both very clever," said Gabriel, "and Rudolf Roth, as I happen

to know, was indeed the designation of Maud Vavasour's papa. But so far

as the question of derogation goes one might as well drown as

starve--for what connexion is \_not\_ a misalliance when one happens to

have the unaccommodating, the crushing honour of being a Neville-Nugent

of Castle Nugent? That's the high lineage of Maud's mamma. I seem to

have heard it mentioned that Rudolf Roth was very versatile and, like

most of his species, not unacquainted with the practice of music. He had

been employed to teach the harmonium to Miss Neville-Nugent and she had

profited by his lessons. If his daughter's like him--and she's not like

her mother--he was darkly and dangerously handsome. So I venture rapidly

to reconstruct the situation."

A silence, for the moment, had fallen on Lady Agnes and her other two

children, so that Mr. Nash, with his universal urbanity, practically

addressed these last remarks to them as well as to his other auditors.

Lady Agnes looked as if she wondered whom he was talking about, and

having caught the name of a noble residence she inquired: "Castle

Nugent--where in the world's that?"

"It's a domain of immeasurable extent and almost inconceivable

splendour, but I fear not to be found in any prosaic earthly geography!"

Lady Agnes rested her eyes on the tablecloth as if she weren't sure a

liberty had not been taken with her, or at least with her "order," and

while Mr. Nash continued to abound in descriptive suppositions--"It must

be on the banks of the Manzanares or the Guadalquivir"--Peter

Sherringham, whose imagination had seemingly been kindled by the sketch

of Miriam Rooth, took up the argument and reminded him that he had a

short time before assigned a low place to the dramatic art and had not

yet answered the question as to whether he believed in the theatre.

Which gave the speaker a further chance. "I don't know that I understand

your question; there are different ways of taking it. Do I think it's

important? Is that what you mean? Important certainly to managers and

stage-carpenters who want to make money, to ladies and gentlemen who

want to produce themselves in public by limelight, and to other ladies

and gentlemen who are bored and stupid and don't know what to do with

their evening. It's a commercial and social convenience which may be

infinitely worked. But important artistically, intellectually? How \_can\_

it be--so poor, so limited a form?"

"Upon my honour it strikes me as rich and various! Do \_you\_ think it's a

poor and limited form, Nick?" Sherringham added, appealing to his

kinsman.

"I think whatever Nash thinks. I've no opinion to-day but his."

This answer of the hope of the Dormers drew the eyes of his mother and

sisters to him and caused his friend to exclaim that he wasn't used to

such responsibilities--so few people had ever tested his presence of

mind by agreeing with him. "Oh I used to be of your way of feeling,"

Nash went on to Sherringham. "I understand you perfectly. It's a phase

like another. I've been through it--\_j'ai Ã©tÃ© comme Ã§a.\_"

"And you went then very often to the ThÃ©Ã¢tre FranÃ§ais, and it was there

I saw you. I place you now."

"I'm afraid I noticed none of the other spectators," Nash explained. "I

had no attention but for the great CarrÃ©--she was still on the stage.

Judge of my infatuation, and how I can allow for yours, when I tell you

that I sought her acquaintance, that I couldn't rest till I had told her

how I hung upon her lips."

"That's just what \_I\_ told her," Sherringham returned.

"She was very kind to me. She said: '\_Vous me rendez des forces\_.'"

"That's just what she said to me!"

"And we've remained very good friends."

"So have we!" laughed Sherringham. "And such perfect art as hers--do you

mean to say you don't consider \_that\_ important, such a rare dramatic

intelligence?"

"I'm afraid you read the \_feuilletons\_. You catch their phrases"--Nash

spoke with pity. "Dramatic intelligence is never rare; nothing's more

common."

"Then why have we so many shocking actors?"

"Have we? I thought they were mostly good; succeeding more easily and

more completely in that business than in anything else. What could they

do--those people generally--if they didn't do that poor thing? And

reflect that the poor thing enables them to succeed! Of course, always,

there are numbers of people on the stage who are no actors at all, for

it's even easier to our poor humanity to be ineffectively stupid and

vulgar than to bring down the house."

"It's not easy, by what I can see, to produce, completely, any artistic

effect," Sherringham declared; "and those the actor produces are among

the most momentous we know. You'll not persuade me that to watch such an

actress as Madame CarrÃ© wasn't an education of the taste, an enlargement

of one's knowledge."

"She did what she could, poor woman, but in what belittling, coarsening

conditions! She had to interpret a character in a play, and a character

in a play--not to say the whole piece: I speak more particularly of

modern pieces--is such a wretchedly small peg to hang anything on! The

dramatist shows us so little, is so hampered by his audience, is

restricted to so poor an analysis."

"I know the complaint. It's all the fashion now. The \_raffinÃ©s\_ despise

the theatre," said Peter Sherringham in the manner of a man abreast with

the culture of his age and not to be captured by a surprise. "\_Connu,

connu\_!"

"It will be known better yet, won't it? when the essentially brutal

nature of the modern audience is still more perceived, when it has been

properly analysed: the \_omnium gatherum\_ of the population of a big

commercial city at the hour of the day when their taste is at its

lowest, flocking out of hideous hotels and restaurants, gorged with

food, stultified with buying and selling and with all the other sordid

preoccupations of the age, squeezed together in a sweltering mass,

disappointed in their seats, timing the author, timing the actor,

wishing to get their money back on the spot--all before eleven o'clock.

Fancy putting the exquisite before such a tribunal as that! There's not

even a question of it. The dramatist wouldn't if he could, and in nine

cases out of ten he couldn't if he would. He has to make the basest

concessions. One of his principal canons is that he must enable his

spectators to catch the suburban trains, which stop at 11.30. What would

you think of any other artist--the painter or the novelist--whose

governing forces should be the dinner and the suburban trains? The old

dramatists didn't defer to them--not so much at least--and that's why

they're less and less actable. If they're touched--the large loose

men--it's only to be mutilated and trivialised. Besides, they had a

simpler civilisation to represent--societies in which the life of man

was in action, in passion, in immediate and violent expression. Those

things could be put upon the playhouse boards with comparatively little

sacrifice of their completeness and their truth. To-day we're so

infinitely more reflective and complicated and diffuse that it makes all

the difference. What can you do with a character, with an idea, with a

feeling, between dinner and the suburban trains? You can give a gross,

rough sketch of them, but how little you touch them, how bald you leave

them! What crudity compared with what the novelist does!"

"Do you write novels, Mr. Nash?" Peter candidly asked.

"No, but I read them when they're extraordinarily good, and I don't go

to plays. I read Balzac for instance--I encounter the admirable portrait

of ValÃ©rie Marneffe in \_La Cousine Bette\_."

"And you contrast it with the poverty of Emile Augier's SÃ©raphine in

\_Les Lionnes Pauvres\_? I was awaiting you there. That's the \_cheval de

bataille\_ of you fellows."

"What an extraordinary discussion! What dreadful authors!" Lady Agnes

murmured to her son. But he was listening so attentively to the other

young men that he made no response, and Peter Sherringham went on:

"I've seen Madame CarrÃ© in things of the modern repertory, which she has

made as vivid to me, caused to abide as ineffaceably in my memory, as

ValÃ©rie Marneffe. She's the Balzac, as one may say, of actresses."

"The miniaturist, as it were, of whitewashers!" Nash offered as a

substitute.

It might have been guessed that Sherringham resented his damned freedom,

yet could but emulate his easy form. "You'd be magnanimous if you

thought the young lady you've introduced to our old friend would be

important."

Mr. Nash lightly weighed it. "She might be much more so than she ever

will be."

Lady Agnes, however, got up to terminate the scene and even to signify

that enough had been said about people and questions she had never so

much as heard of. Every one else rose, the waiter brought Nicholas the

receipt of the bill, and Sherringham went on, to his interlocutor:

"Perhaps she'll be more so than you think."

"Perhaps--if you take an interest in her!"

"A mystic voice seems to exhort me to do so, to whisper that though I've

never seen her I shall find something in her." On which Peter appealed.

"What do you say, Biddy--shall I take an interest in her?"

The girl faltered, coloured a little, felt a certain embarrassment in

being publicly treated as an oracle. "If she's not nice I don't advise

it."

"And if she \_is\_ nice?"

"You advise it still less!" her brother exclaimed, laughing and putting

his arm round her.

Lady Agnes looked sombre--she might have been saying to herself: "Heaven

help us, what chance has a girl of mine with a man who's so agog about

actresses?" She was disconcerted and distressed; a multitude of

incongruous things, all the morning, had been forced upon her

attention--displeasing pictures and still more displeasing theories

about them, vague portents of perversity on Nick's part and a strange

eagerness on Peter's, learned apparently in Paris, to discuss, with a

person who had a tone she never had been exposed to, topics irrelevant

and uninteresting, almost disgusting, the practical effect of which was

to make light of her presence. "Let us leave this--let us leave this!"

she grimly said. The party moved together toward the door of departure,

and her ruffled spirit was not soothed by hearing her son remark to his

terrible friend: "You know you don't escape me; I stick to you!"

At this Lady Agnes broke out and interposed. "Pardon my reminding you

that you're going to call on Julia."

"Well, can't Nash also come to call on Julia? That's just what I

want--that she should see him."

Peter Sherringham came humanely to his kinswoman's assistance. "A better

way perhaps will be for them to meet under my auspices at my 'dramatic

tea.' This will enable me to return one favour for another. If Mr. Nash

is so good as to introduce me to this aspirant for honours we estimate

so differently, I'll introduce him to my sister, a much more positive

quantity."

"It's easy to see who'll have the best of it!" Grace Dormer declared;

while Nash stood there serenely, impartially, in a graceful detached way

which seemed characteristic of him, assenting to any decision that

relieved him of the grossness of choice and generally confident that

things would turn out well for him. He was cheerfully helpless and

sociably indifferent; ready to preside with a smile even at a

discussion of his own admissibility.

"Nick will bring you. I've a little corner at the embassy," Sherringham

continued.

"You're very kind. You must bring \_him\_ then to-morrow--Rue de

Constantinople."

"At five o'clock--don't be afraid."

"Oh dear!" Biddy wailed as they went on again and Lady Agnes, seizing

his arm, marched off more quickly with her son. When they came out into

the Champs ElysÃ©es Nick Dormer, looking round, saw his friend had

disappeared. Biddy had attached herself to Peter, and Grace couldn't

have encouraged Mr. Nash.

V

Lady Agnes's idea had been that her son should go straight from the

Palais de l'Industrie to the HÃ´tel de Hollande, with or without his

mother and his sisters as his humour should seem to recommend. Much as

she desired to see their valued Julia, and as she knew her daughters

desired it, she was quite ready to put off their visit if this sacrifice

should contribute to a speedy confrontation for Nick. She was anxious he

should talk with Mrs. Dallow, and anxious he should be anxious himself;

but it presently appeared that he was conscious of no pressure of

eagerness. His view was that she and the girls should go to their cousin

without delay and should, if they liked, spend the rest of the day in

her society. He would go later; he would go in the evening. There were

lots of things he wanted to do meanwhile.

This question was discussed with some intensity, though not at length,

while the little party stood on the edge of the Place de la Concorde, to

which they had proceeded on foot; and Lady Agnes noticed that the "lots

of things" to which he proposed to give precedence over an urgent duty,

a conference with a person who held out full hands to him, were implied

somehow in the friendly glance with which he covered the great square,

the opposite bank of the Seine, the steep blue roofs of the quay, the

bright immensity of Paris. What in the world could be more important

than making sure of his seat?--so quickly did the good lady's

imagination travel. And now that idea appealed to him less than a ramble

in search of old books and prints--since she was sure this was what he

had in his head. Julia would be flattered should she know it, but of

course she mustn't know it. Lady Agnes was already thinking of the least

injurious account she could give of the young man's want of

precipitation. She would have liked to represent him as tremendously

occupied, in his room at their own hotel, in getting off political

letters to every one it should concern, and particularly in drawing up

his address to the electors of Harsh. Fortunately she was a woman of

innumerable discretions, and a part of the worn look that sat in her

face came from her having schooled herself for years, in commerce with

her husband and her sons, not to insist unduly. She would have liked to

insist, nature had formed her to insist, and the self-control had told

in more ways than one. Even now it was powerless to prevent her

suggesting that before doing anything else Nick should at least repair

to the inn and see if there weren't some telegrams.

He freely consented to do as much as this, and, having called a cab that

she might go her way with the girls, kissed her again as he had done at

the exhibition. This was an attention that could never displease her,

but somehow when he kissed her she was really the more worried: she had

come to recognise it as a sign that he was slipping away from her, and

she wished she might frankly take it as his clutch at her to save him.

She drove off with a vague sense that at any rate she and the girls

might do something toward keeping the place warm for him. She had been a

little vexed that Peter had not administered more of a push toward the

HÃ´tel de Hollande, clear as it had become to her now that there was a

foreignness in Peter which was not to be counted on and which made him

speak of English affairs and even of English domestic politics as local

and even "funny." They were very grandly local, and if one recalled, in

public life, an occasional droll incident wasn't that, liberally viewed,

just the warm human comfort of them? As she left the two young men

standing together in the middle of the Place de la Concorde, the grand

composition of which Nick, as she looked back, appeared to have paused

to admire--as if he hadn't seen it a thousand times!--she wished she

might have thought of Peter's influence with her son as exerted a little

more in favour of localism. She had a fear he wouldn't abbreviate the

boy's ill-timed \_flÃ¢nerie\_. However, he had been very nice: he had

invited them all to dine with him that evening at a convenient cafÃ©,

promising to bring Julia and one of his colleagues. So much as this he

had been willing to do to make sure Nick and his sister should meet. His

want of localism, moreover, was not so great as that if it should turn

out that there \_was\_ anything beneath his manner toward Biddy--! The

upshot of this reflexion might have been represented by the circumstance

of her ladyship's remarking after a minute to her younger daughter, who

sat opposite her in the \_voiture de place\_, that it would do no harm if

she should get a new hat and that the search might be instituted that

afternoon.

"A French hat, mamma?" said Grace. "Oh do wait till she gets home!"

"I think they're really prettier here, you know," Biddy opined; and Lady

Agnes said simply: "I daresay they're cheaper." What was in her mind in

fact was: "I daresay Peter thinks them becoming." It will be seen she

had plenty of inward occupation, the sum of which was not lessened by

her learning when she reached the top of the Rue de la Paix that Mrs.

Dallow had gone out half an hour before and had left no message. She was

more disconcerted by this incident than she could have explained or than

she thought was right, as she had taken for granted Julia would be in a

manner waiting for them. How could she be sure Nick wasn't coming? When

people were in Paris a few days they didn't mope in the house, but she

might have waited a little longer or have left an explanation. Was she

then not so much in earnest about Nick's standing? Didn't she recognise

the importance of being there to see him about it? Lady Agnes wondered

if her behaviour were a sign of her being already tired of the way this

young gentleman treated her. Perhaps she had gone out because an

instinct told her that the great propriety of their meeting early would

make no difference with him--told her he wouldn't after all come. His

mother's heart sank as she glanced at this possibility that their

precious friend was already tired, she having on her side an intuition

that there were still harder things in store. She had disliked having to

tell Mrs. Dallow that Nick wouldn't see her till the evening, but now

she disliked still more her not being there to hear it. She even

resented a little her kinswoman's not having reasoned that she and the

girls would come in any event, and not thought them worth staying in

for. It came up indeed that she would perhaps have gone to their hotel,

which was a good way up the Rue de Rivoli, near the Palais Royal--on

which the cabman was directed to drive to that establishment.

As he jogged along she took in some degree the measure of what that

might mean, Julia's seeking a little to avoid them. Was she growing to

dislike them? Did she think they kept too sharp an eye on her, so that

the idea of their standing in a still closer relation wouldn't be

enticing? Her conduct up to this time had not worn such an appearance,

unless perhaps a little, just a very little, in the matter of her ways

with poor Grace. Lady Agnes knew she wasn't particularly fond of poor

Grace, and could even sufficiently guess the reason--the manner in which

Grace betrayed most how they wanted to make sure of her. She remembered

how long the girl had stayed the last time she had been at Harsh--going

for an acceptable week and dragging out her visit to a month. She took a

private heroic vow that Grace shouldn't go near the place again for a

year; not, that is, unless Nick and Julia were married within the time.

If that were to happen she shouldn't care. She recognised that it wasn't

absolutely everything Julia should be in love with Nick; it was also

better she should dislike his mother and sisters after a probable

pursuit of him than before. Lady Agnes did justice to the natural rule

in virtue of which it usually comes to pass that a woman doesn't get on

with her husband's female belongings, and was even willing to be

sacrificed to it in her disciplined degree. But she desired not to be

sacrificed for nothing: if she was to be objected to as a mother-in-law

she wished to be the mother-in-law first.

At the hotel in the Rue de Rivoli she had the disappointment of finding

that Mrs. Dallow had not called, and also that no telegrams had come.

She went in with the girls for half an hour and then straggled out with

them again. She was undetermined and dissatisfied and the afternoon was

rather a problem; of the kind, moreover, that she disliked most and was

least accustomed to: not a choice between different things to do--her

life had been full of that--but a want of anything to do at all. Nick

had said to her before they separated: "You can knock about with the

girls, you know; everything's amusing here." That was easily said while

he sauntered and gossiped with Peter Sherringham and perhaps went to

see more pictures like those in the Salon. He was usually, on such

occasions, very good-natured about spending his time with them; but this

episode had taken altogether a perverse, profane form. She had no desire

whatever to knock about and was far from finding everything in Paris

amusing. She had no aptitude for aimlessness, and moreover thought it

vulgar. If she had found Julia's card at the hotel--the sign of a hope

of catching them just as they came back from the Salon--she would have

made a second attempt to see her before the evening; but now certainly

they would leave her alone. Lady Agnes wandered joylessly with the girls

in the Palais Royal and the Rue de Richelieu, and emerged upon the

Boulevard, where they continued their frugal prowl, as Biddy rather

irritatingly called it. They went into five shops to buy a hat for

Biddy, and her ladyship's presumptions of cheapness were woefully

belied.

"Who in the world's your comic friend?" Peter Sherringham was meanwhile

asking of his kinsman as they walked together.

"Ah there's something else you lost by going to Cambridge--you lost

Gabriel Nash!"

"He sounds like an Elizabethan dramatist," Sherringham said. "But I

haven't lost him, since it appears now I shan't be able to have you

without him."

"Oh, as for that, wait a little. I'm going to try him again, but I don't

know how he wears. What I mean is that you've probably lost his

freshness, which was the great thing. I rather fear he's becoming

conventional, or at any rate serious."

"Bless me, do you call that serious?"

"He used to be so gay. He had a real genius for playing with ideas. He

was a wonderful talker."

"It seems to me he does very well now," said Peter Sherringham.

"Oh this is nothing. He had great flights of old, very great flights;

one saw him rise and rise and turn somersaults in the blue--one wondered

how far he could go. He's very intelligent, and I should think it might

be interesting to find out what it is that prevents the whole man from

being as good as his parts. I mean in case he isn't so good."

"I see you more than suspect that. Mayn't it be simply that he's too

great an ass?"

"That would be the whole--I shall see in time--but it certainly isn't

one of the parts. It may be the effect, but it isn't the cause, and it's

for the cause I claim an interest. Do you think him an ass for what he

said about the theatre--his pronouncing it a coarse art?"

"To differ from you about him that reason would do," said Sherringham.

"The only bad one would be one that shouldn't preserve our difference.

You needn't tell me you agree with him, for frankly I don't care."

"Then your passion still burns?" Nick Dormer asked.

"My passion--?"

"I don't mean for any individual exponent of the equivocal art: mark the

guilty conscience, mark the rising blush, mark the confusion of mind! I

mean the old sign one knew you best by; your permanent stall at the

FranÃ§ais, your inveterate attendance at \_premiÃ¨res\_, the way you

'follow' the young talents and the old."

"Yes, it's still my little hobby, my little folly if you like,"

Sherringham said. "I don't find I get tired of it. What will you have?

Strong predilections are rather a blessing; they're simplifying. I'm

fond of representation--the representation of life: I like it better, I

think, than the real thing. You like it too, you'd be ready in other

conditions to go in for it, in your way--so you've no right to cast the

stone. You like it best done by one vehicle and I by another; and our

preference on either side has a deep root in us. There's a fascination

to me in the way the actor does it, when his talent--ah he must have

that!--has been highly trained. Ah it must \_be\_ that! The things he can

do in this effort at representation, with the dramatist to back him,

seem to me innumerable--he can carry it to a point!--and I take great

pleasure in observing them, in recognising and comparing them. It's an

amusement like another--I don't pretend to call it by any exalted name,

but in this vale of friction it will serve. One can lose one's self in

it, and it has the recommendation--in common, I suppose, with the study

of the other arts--that the further you go in it the more you find. So I

go rather far, if you will. But is it the principal sign one knows me

by?" Peter abruptly asked.

"Don't be ashamed of it," Nick returned--"else it will be ashamed of

you. I ought to discriminate. You're distinguished among my friends and

relations by your character of rising young diplomatist; but you know I

always want the final touch to the picture, the last fruit of analysis.

Therefore I make out that you're conspicuous among rising young

diplomatists for the infatuation you describe in such pretty terms."

"You evidently believe it will prevent my ever rising very high. But

pastime for pastime is it any idler than yours?"

"Than mine?"

"Why you've half-a-dozen while I only allow myself the luxury of one.

For the theatre's my sole vice, really. Is this more wanton, say, than

to devote weeks to the consideration of the particular way in which your

friend Mr. Nash may be most intensely a twaddler and a bore? That's not

my ideal of choice recreation, but I'd undertake to satisfy you about

him sooner. You're a young statesman--who happens to be an \_en

disponibilitÃ©\_ for the moment--but you spend not a little of your time

in besmearing canvas with bright-coloured pigments. The idea of

representation fascinates you, but in your case it's representation in

oils--or do you practise water-colours and pastel too? You even go much

further than I, for I study my art of predilection only in the works of

others. I don't aspire to leave works of my own. You're a painter,

possibly a great one; but I'm not an actor." Nick Dormer declared he

would certainly become one--he was so well on the way to it; and

Sherringham, without heeding this charge, went on: "Let me add that,

considering you \_are\_ a painter, your portrait of the complicated Nash

is lamentably dim."

"He's not at all complicated; he's only too simple to give an account

of. Most people have a lot of attributes and appendages that dress them

up and superscribe them, and what I like Gabriel for is that he hasn't

any at all. It makes him, it keeps him, so refreshingly cool."

"By Jove, you match him there! Isn't it an appendage and an attribute to

escape kicking? How does he manage that?" Sherringham asked.

"I haven't the least idea--I don't know that he doesn't rouse the

kicking impulse. Besides, he can kick back and I don't think any one has

ever seen him duck or dodge. His means, his profession, his belongings

have never anything to do with the question. He doesn't shade off into

other people; he's as neat as an outline cut out of paper with scissors.

I like him, therefore, because in dealing with him you know what you've

got hold of. With most men you don't: to pick the flower you must break

off the whole dusty, thorny, worldly branch; you find you're taking up

in your grasp all sorts of other people and things, dangling accidents

and conditions. Poor Nash has none of those encumbrances: he's the

solitary-fragrant blossom."

"My dear fellow, you'd be better for a little of the same pruning!"

Sherringham retorted; and the young men continued their walk and their

gossip, jerking each other this way and that, punching each other here

and there, with an amicable roughness consequent on their having, been

boys together. Intimacy had reigned of old between the little

Sherringhams and the little Dormers, united in the country by ease of

neighbouring and by the fact that there was first cousinship, not

neglected, among the parents, Lady Agnes standing in this plastic

relation to Lady Windrush, the mother of Peter and Julia as well as of

other daughters and of a maturer youth who was to inherit, and who since

then had inherited, the ancient barony. Many things had altered later

on, but not the good reasons for not explaining. One of our young men

had gone to Eton and the other to Harrow--the scattered school on the

hill was the tradition of the Dormers--and the divergence had rather

taken its course in university years. Bricket, however, had remained

accessible to Windrush, and Windrush to Bricket, to which estate

Percival Dormer had now succeeded, terminating the interchange a trifle

rudely by letting out that pleasant white house in the midlands--its

expropriated inhabitants, Lady Agnes and her daughters, adored it--to an

American reputed rich, who in the first flush of his sense of contrasts

considered that for twelve hundred a year he got it at a bargain.

Bricket had come to the late Sir Nicholas from his elder brother, dying

wifeless and childless. The new baronet, so different from his

father--though recalling at some points the uncle after whom he had

been named--that Nick had to make it up by cultivating conformity,

roamed about the world, taking shots which excited the enthusiasm of

society, when society heard of them, at the few legitimate creatures of

the chase the British rifle had up to that time spared. Lady Agnes

meanwhile settled with her girls in a gabled, latticed house in a

mentionable quarter, though it still required a little explaining, of

the temperate zone of London. It was not into her lap, poor woman, that

the revenues of Bricket were poured. There was no dower-house attached

to that moderate property, and the allowance with which the estate was

charged on her ladyship's behalf was not an incitement to grandeur.

Nick had a room under his mother's roof, which he mainly used to dress

for dinner when dining in Calcutta Gardens, and he had "kept on" his

chambers in the Temple; for to a young man in public life an independent

address was indispensable. Moreover, he was suspected of having a studio

in an out-of-the-way district, the indistinguishable parts of South

Kensington, incongruous as such a retreat might seem in the case of a

member of Parliament. It was an absurd place to see his constituents

unless he wanted to paint their portraits, a kind of "representation"

with which they would scarce have been satisfied; and in fact the only

question of portraiture had been when the wives and daughters of several

of them expressed a wish for the picture of their handsome young member.

Nick had not offered to paint it himself, and the studio was taken for

granted rather than much looked into by the ladies in Calcutta Gardens.

Too express a disposition to regard whims of this sort as extravagance

pure and simple was known by them to be open to correction; for they

were not oblivious that Mr. Carteret had humours which weighed against

them in the shape of convenient cheques nestling between the inside

pages of legible letters of advice. Mr. Carteret was Nick's providence,

just as Nick was looked to, in a general way, to be that of his mother

and sisters, especially since it had become so plain that Percy, who was

not subtly selfish, would operate, mainly with a "six-bore," quite out

of that sphere. It was not for studios certainly that Mr. Carteret sent

cheques; but they were an expression of general confidence in Nick, and

a little expansion was natural to a young man enjoying such a luxury as

that. It was sufficiently felt in Calcutta Gardens that he could be

looked to not to betray such confidence; for Mr. Carteret's behaviour

could have no name at all unless one were prepared to call it

encouraging. He had never promised anything, but he was one of the

delightful persons with whom the redemption precedes or dispenses with

the vow. He had been an early and lifelong friend of the late right

honourable gentleman, a political follower, a devoted admirer, a stanch

supporter in difficult hours. He had never married, espousing nothing

more reproductive than Sir Nicholas's views--he used to write letters to

the \_Times\_ in favour of them--and had, so far as was known, neither

chick nor child; nothing but an amiable little family of eccentricities,

the flower of which was his odd taste for living in a small, steep,

clean country town, all green gardens and red walls with a girdle of

hedge-rows, all clustered about an immense brown old abbey. When Lady

Agnes's imagination rested upon the future of her second son she liked

to remember that Mr. Carteret had nothing to "keep up": the inference

seemed so direct that he would keep up Nick.

The most important event in the life of this young man had been

incomparably his success, under his father's eyes, more than two years

before, in the sharp contest for Crockhurst--a victory which his

consecrated name, his extreme youth, his ardour in the fray, the marked

personal sympathy of the party, and the attention excited by the fresh

cleverness of his speeches, tinted with young idealism and yet sticking

sufficiently to the question--the burning question which has since

burned out--had made quite splendid. There had been leaders in the

newspapers about it, half in compliment to her husband, who was known to

be failing so prematurely--he was almost as young to die, and to die

famous, for Lady Agnes regarded it as famous, as his son had been to

stand--tributes the boy's mother religiously preserved, cut out and tied

together with a ribbon, in the innermost drawer of a favourite cabinet.

But it had been a barren, or almost a barren triumph, for in the order

of importance in Nick's history another incident had run it, as the

phrase is, very close: nothing less than the quick dissolution of the

Parliament in which he was so manifestly destined to give symptoms of a

future. He had not recovered his seat at the general election, for the

second contest was even sharper than the first and the Tories had put

forward a loud, vulgar, rattling, bullying, money-spending man. It was

to a certain extent a comfort that poor Sir Nicholas, who had been

witness of the bright hour, should have passed away before the darkness.

He died with all his hopes on his second son's head, unconscious of near

disappointment, handing on the torch and the tradition, after a long,

supreme interview with Nick at which Lady Agnes had not been present,

but which she knew to have been a thorough paternal dedication, an

august communication of ideas on the highest national questions (she had

reason to believe he had touched on those of external as well as of

domestic and of colonial policy) leaving on the boy's nature and manner

from that moment the most unmistakable traces. If his tendency to

reverie increased it was because he had so much to think over in what

his pale father had said to him in the hushed dim chamber, laying on him

the great mission that death had cut short, breathing into him with

unforgettable solemnity the very accents--Sir Nicholas's voice had been

wonderful for richness--that he was to sound again. It was work cut out

for a lifetime, and that "co-ordinating power in relation to detail"

which was one of the great characteristics of the lamented statesman's

high distinction--the most analytic of the weekly papers was always

talking about it--had enabled him to rescue the prospect from any shade

of vagueness or of ambiguity.

Five years before Nick Dormer went up to be questioned by the electors

of Crockhurst Peter Sherringham had appeared before a board of examiners

who let him off much less easily, though there were also some flattering

prejudices in his favour; such influences being a part of the copious,

light, unembarrassing baggage with which each of the young men began

life. Peter passed, however, passed high, and had his reward in prompt

assignment to small, subordinate, diplomatic duties in Germany. Since

then he had had his professional adventures, which need not arrest us,

inasmuch as they had all paled in the light of his appointment, nearly

three years previous to the moment of our making his acquaintance, to a

secretaryship of embassy in Paris. He had done well and had gone fast

and for the present could draw his breath at ease. It pleased him better

to remain in Paris as a subordinate than to go to Honduras as a

principal, and Nick Dormer had not put a false colour on the matter in

speaking of his stall at the ThÃ©Ã¢tre FranÃ§ais as a sedative to his

ambition. Nick's inferiority in age to his cousin sat on him more

lightly than when they had been in their teens; and indeed no one can

very well be much older than a young man who has figured for a year,

however imperceptibly, in the House of Commons. Separation and diversity

had made them reciprocally strange enough to give a price to what they

shared; they were friends without being particular friends; that further

degree could always hang before them as a suitable but not oppressive

contingency, and they were both conscious that it was in their interest

to keep certain differences to "chaff" each other about--so possible was

it that they might have quarrelled if they had had everything in common.

Peter, as being wide-minded, was a little irritated to find his cousin

always so intensely British, while Nick Dormer made him the object of

the same compassionate criticism, recognised in him a rare knack with

foreign tongues, but reflected, and even with extravagance declared,

that it was a pity to have gone so far from home only to remain so

homely. Moreover, Nick had his ideas about the diplomatic mind, finding

in it, for his own sympathy, always the wrong turn. Dry, narrow, barren,

poor he pronounced it in familiar conversation with the clever

secretary; wanting in imagination, in generosity, in the finest

perceptions and the highest courage. This served as well as anything

else to keep the peace between them; it was a necessity of their

friendly intercourse that they should scuffle a little, and it scarcely

mattered what they scuffled about. Nick Dormer's express enjoyment of

Paris, the shop-windows on the quays, the old books on the parapet, the

gaiety of the river, the grandeur of the Louvre, every fine feature of

that prodigious face, struck his companion as a sign of insularity; the

appreciation of such things having become with Sherringham an

unconscious habit, a contented assimilation. If poor Nick, for the

hour, was demonstrative and lyrical, it was because he had no other way

of sounding the note of farewell to the independent life of which the

term seemed now definitely in sight--the sense so pressed upon him that

these were the last moments of his freedom. He would waste time till

half-past seven, because half-past seven meant dinner, and dinner meant

his mother solemnly attended by the strenuous shade of his father and

re-enforced by Julia.

VI

When he arrived with the three members of his family at the restaurant

of their choice Peter Sherringham was already seated there by one of the

immaculate tables, but Mrs. Dallow was not yet on the scene, and they

had time for a sociable settlement--time to take their places and unfold

their napkins, crunch their rolls, breathe the savoury air, and watch

the door, before the usual raising of heads and suspension of forks, the

sort of stir that accompanied most of this lady's movements, announced

her entrance. The \_dame de comptoir\_ ducked and re-ducked, the people

looked round, Peter and Nick got up, there was a shuffling of

chairs--Julia had come. Peter was relating how he had stopped at her

hotel to bring her with him and had found her, according to her custom,

by no means ready; on which, fearing his guests would arrive first at

the rendezvous and find no proper welcome, he had come off without her,

leaving her to follow. He had not brought a friend, as he intended,

having divined that Julia would prefer a pure family party if she wanted

to talk about her candidate. Now she stood looking down at the table and

her expectant kinsfolk, drawing off her gloves, letting her brother draw

off her jacket, lifting her hands for some rearrangement of her hat. She

looked at Nick last, smiling, but only for a moment. She said to Peter:

"Are we going to dine here? Oh dear, why didn't you have a private

room?"

Nick had not seen her at all for several weeks and had seen her but

little for a year, but her off-hand cursory manner had not altered in

the interval. She spoke remarkably fast, as if speech were not in itself

a pleasure--to have it over as soon as possible; and her \_brusquerie\_

was of the dark shade friendly critics account for by pleading shyness.

Shyness had never appeared to him an ultimate quality or a real

explanation of anything; it only explained an effect by another effect,

neither with a cause to boast of. What he suspected in Julia was that

her mind was less pleasing than her person; an ugly, a really blighting

idea, which as yet he had but half accepted. It was a case in which she

was entitled to the benefit of every doubt and oughtn't to be judged

without a complete trial. Nick meanwhile was afraid of the trial--this

was partly why he had been of late to see her so little--because he was

afraid of the sentence, afraid of anything that might work to lessen the

charm it was actually in the power of her beauty to shed. There were

people who thought her rude, and he hated rude women. If he should

fasten on that view, or rather if that view should fasten on him, what

could still please and what he admired in her would lose too much of its

sweetness. If it be thought odd that he had not yet been able to read

the character of a woman he had known since childhood the answer is that

this character had grown faster than Nick's observation. The growth was

constant, whereas the observation was but occasional, though it had

begun early. If he had attempted inwardly to phrase the matter, as he

probably had not, he might have pronounced the effect she produced upon

him too much a compulsion; not the coercion of design, of importunity,

nor the vulgar pressure of family expectation, a betrayed desire he

should like her enough to marry her, but a mixture of divers urgent

things; of the sense that she was imperious and generous--probably more

the former than the latter--and of a certain prevision of doom, the

influence of the idea that he should come to it, that he was

predestined.

This had made him shrink from knowing the worst about her; not the wish

to get used to it in time, but what was more characteristic of him, the

wish to interpose a temporary illusion. Illusions and realities and

hopes and fears, however, fell into confusion whenever he met her after

a separation. The separation, so far as seeing her alone or as

continuous talk was concerned, had now been tolerably long; had lasted

really ever since his failure to regain his seat. An impression had come

to him that she judged that failure rather stiffly, had thought, and had

somewhat sharply said, that he ought to have done better. This was a

part of her imperious way, and a part not \_all\_ to be overlooked on a

mere present basis. If he were to marry her he should come to an

understanding with her: he should give her his own measure as well as

take hers. But the understanding might in the actual case suggest too

much that he \_was\_ to marry her. You could quarrel with your wife

because there were compensations--for her; but you mightn't be prepared

to offer these compensations as prepayment for the luxury of

quarrelling.

It was not that such a luxury wouldn't be considerable, our young man

none the less thought as Julia Dallow's fine head poised itself before

him again; a high spirit was of course better than a mawkish to be

mismated with, any day in the year. She had much the same colour as her

brother, but as nothing else in her face was the same the resemblance

was not striking. Her hair was of so dark a brown that it was commonly

regarded as black, and so abundant that a plain arrangement was required

to keep it in natural relation to the rest of her person. Her eyes were

of a grey sometimes pronounced too light, and were not sunken in her

face, but placed well on the surface. Her nose was perfect, but her

mouth was too small; and Nick Dormer, and doubtless other persons as

well, had sometimes wondered how with such a mouth her face could have

expressed decision. Her figure helped it, for she appeared tall--being

extremely slender--yet was not; and her head took turns and positions

which, though a matter of but half an inch out of the common this way or

that, somehow contributed to the air of resolution and temper. If it had

not been for her extreme delicacy of line and surface she might have

been called bold; but as it was she looked refined and quiet--refined by

tradition and quiet for a purpose. And altogether she was beautiful,

with the gravity of her elegant head, her hair like the depths of

darkness, her eyes like its earlier clearing, her mouth like a rare pink

flower.

Peter said he had not taken a private room because he knew Biddy's

tastes; she liked to see the world--she had told him so--the curious

people, the coming and going of Paris. "Oh anything for Biddy!" Julia

replied, smiling at the girl and taking her place. Lady Agnes and her

elder daughter exchanged one of their looks, and Nick exclaimed jocosely

that he didn't see why the whole party should be sacrificed to a

presumptuous child. The presumptuous child blushingly protested she had

never expressed any such wish to Peter, upon which Nick, with broader

humour, revealed that Peter had served them so out of stinginess: he had

pitchforked them together in the public room because he wouldn't go to

the expense of a \_cabinet\_. He had brought no guest, no foreigner of

distinction nor diplomatic swell, to honour them, and now they would see

what a paltry dinner he would give them. Peter stabbed him indignantly

with a long roll, and Lady Agnes, who seemed to be waiting for some

manifestation on Mrs. Dallow's part which didn't come, concluded, with a

certain coldness, that they quite sufficed to themselves for privacy as

well as for society. Nick called attention to this fine phrase of his

mother's and said it was awfully neat, while Grace and Biddy looked

harmoniously at Julia's clothes. Nick felt nervous and joked a good deal

to carry it off--a levity that didn't prevent Julia's saying to him

after a moment: "You might have come to see me to-day, you know. Didn't

you get my message from Peter?"

"Scold him, Julia--scold him well. I begged him to go," said Lady Agnes;

and to this Grace added her voice with an "Oh Julia, do give it to him!"

These words, however, had not the effect they suggested, since Mrs.

Dallow only threw off for answer, in her quick curt way, that that would

be making far too much of him. It was one of the things in her that Nick

mentally pronounced ungraceful, the perversity of pride or of shyness

that always made her disappoint you a little if she saw you expected a

thing. She snubbed effusiveness in a way that yet gave no interesting

hint of any wish to keep it herself in reserve. Effusiveness, however,

certainly, was the last thing of which Lady Agnes would have consented

to be accused; and Nick, while he replied to Julia that he was sure he

shouldn't have found her, was not unable to perceive the operation on

his mother of that shade of manner. "He ought to have gone; he owed you

that," she went on; "but it's very true he would have had the same luck

as we. I went with the girls directly after luncheon. I suppose you got

our card."

"He might have come after I came in," said Mrs. Dallow.

"Dear Julia, I'm going to see you to-night. I've been waiting for that,"

Nick returned.

"Of course \_we\_ had no idea when you'd come in," said Lady Agnes.

"I'm so sorry. You must come to-morrow. I hate calls at night," Julia

serenely added.

"Well then, will you roam with me? Will you wander through Paris on my

arm?" Nick asked, smiling. "Will you take a drive with me?"

"Oh that would be perfection!" cried Grace.

"I thought we were all going somewhere--to the Hippodrome, Peter," Biddy

said.

"Oh not all; just you and me!" laughed Peter.

"I'm going home to my bed. I've earned my rest," Lady Agnes sighed.

"Can't Peter take \_us\_?" demanded Grace. "Nick can take you home, mamma,

if Julia won't receive him, and I can look perfectly after Peter and

Biddy."

"Take them to something amusing; please take them," Mrs. Dallow said to

her brother. Her voice was kind, but had the expectation of assent in

it, and Nick observed both the good nature and the pressure. "You're

tired, poor dear," she continued to Lady Agnes. "Fancy your being

dragged about so! What did you come over for?"

"My mother came because I brought her," Nick said. "It's I who have

dragged her about. I brought her for a little change. I thought it would

do her good. I wanted to see the Salon."

"It isn't a bad time. I've a carriage and you must use it; you must use

nothing else. It shall take you everywhere. I'll drive you about

to-morrow." Julia dropped these words with all her air of being able

rather than of wanting; but Nick had already noted, and he noted now

afresh and with pleasure, that her lack of unction interfered not a bit

with her always acting. It was quite sufficiently manifest to him that

for the rest of the time she might be near his mother she would do for

her numberless good turns. She would give things to the girls--he had a

private adumbration of that; expensive Parisian, perhaps not perfectly

useful, things.

Lady Agnes was a woman who measured outlays and returns, but she was

both too acute and too just not to recognise the scantest offer from

which an advantage could proceed. "Dear Julia!" she exclaimed

responsively; and her tone made this brevity of acknowledgment adequate.

Julia's own few words were all she wanted. "It's so interesting about

Harsh," she added. "We're immensely excited."

"Yes, Nick looks it. \_Merci, pas de vin\_. It's just the thing for you,

you know," Julia said to him.

"To be sure he knows it. He's immensely grateful. It's really very kind

of you."

"You do me a very great honour, Julia," Nick hastened to add.

"Don't be tiresome, please," that lady returned.

"We'll talk about it later. Of course there are lots of points," Nick

pursued. "At present let's be purely convivial. Somehow Harsh is such a

false note here. \_Nous causerons de Ã§a\_."

"My dear fellow, you've caught exactly the tone of Mr. Gabriel Nash,"

Peter Sherringham declared on this.

"Who's Mr. Gabriel Nash?" Mrs. Dallow asked.

"Nick, is he a gentleman? Biddy says so," Grace Dormer interposed before

this inquiry was answered.

"It's to be supposed that any one Nick brings to lunch with us--!" Lady

Agnes rather coldly sighed.

"Ah Grace, with your tremendous standard!" her son said; while Peter

Sherringham explained to his sister that Mr. Nash was Nick's new Mentor

or oracle--whom, moreover, she should see if she would come and have tea

with him.

"I haven't the least desire to see him," Julia made answer, "any more

than I have to talk about Harsh and bore poor Peter."

"Oh certainly, dear, you'd bore me," her brother rang out.

"One thing at a time then. Let us by all means be convivial. Only you

must show me how," Mrs. Dallow went on to Nick. "What does he mean,

Cousin Agnes? Does he want us to drain the wine-cup, to flash with

repartee?"

"You'll do very well," said Nick. "You're thoroughly charming to-night."

"Do go to Peter's, Julia, if you want something exciting. You'll see a

wonderful girl," Biddy broke in with her smile on Peter.

"Wonderful for what?"

"For thinking she can act when she can't," said the roguish Biddy.

"Dear me, what people you all know! I hate Peter's theatrical people."

"And aren't you going home, Julia?" Lady Agnes inquired.

"Home to the hotel?"

"Dear, no, to Harsh--to see about everything."

"I'm in the midst of telegrams. I don't know yet."

"I suppose there's no doubt they'll have him," Lady Agnes decided to

pursue.

"Who'll have whom?"

"Why, the local people and the party managers. I'm speaking of the

question of my son's standing."

"They'll have the person I want them to have, I daresay. There are so

many people in it, in one way or another--it's dreadful. I like the way

you sit there," Julia went on to Nick.

"So do I," he smiled back at her; and he thought she \_was\_ charming now,

because she was gay and easy and willing really, though she might plead

incompetence, to understand how jocose a dinner in a pothouse in a

foreign town might be. She was in good humour or was going to be, and

not grand nor stiff nor indifferent nor haughty nor any of the things

people who disliked her usually found her and sometimes even a little

made him believe her. The spirit of mirth in some cold natures manifests

itself not altogether happily, their effort of recreation resembles too

much the bath of the hippopotamus; but when Mrs. Dallow put her elbows

on the table one felt she could be trusted to get them safely off again.

For a family in mourning the dinner was lively; the more so that before

it was half over Julia had arranged that her brother, eschewing the

inferior spectacle, should take the girls to the ThÃ©Ã¢tre FranÃ§ais. It

was her idea, and Nick had a chance to observe how an idea was apt to be

not successfully controverted when it was Julia's. Even the programme

appeared to have been prearranged to suit it, just the thing for the

cheek of the young person--\_Il ne Faut Jurer de Rien\_ and \_Mademoiselle

de la SeigliÃ¨re\_. Peter was all willingness, but it was Julia who

settled it, even to sending for the newspaper--he was by a rare accident

unconscious of the evening's bill--and to reassuring Biddy, who was

happy but anxious, on the article of their being too late for good

places. Peter could always get good places: a word from him and the best

box was at his disposal. She made him write the word on a card and saw a

messenger despatched with it to the Rue de Richelieu; and all this

without loudness or insistence, parenthetically and authoritatively. The

box was bespoken and the carriage, as soon as they had had their coffee,

found to be in attendance. Peter drove off in it with the girls,

understanding that he was to send it back, and Nick waited for it over

the finished repast with the two ladies. After this his mother was

escorted to it and conveyed to her apartments, and all the while it had

been Julia who governed the succession of events. "Do be nice to her,"

Lady Agnes breathed to him as he placed her in the vehicle at the door

of the cafÃ©; and he guessed it gave her a comfort to have left him

sitting there with Mrs. Dallow.

He had every disposition to be nice to his charming cousin; if things

went as she liked them it was the proof of a certain fine force in

her--the force of assuming they would. Julia had her differences--some

of them were much for the better; and when she was in a mood like this

evening's, liberally dominant, he was ready to encourage most of what

she took for granted. While they waited for the return of the carriage,

which had rolled away with his mother, she sat opposite him with her

elbows on the table, playing first with one and then with another of the

objects that encumbered it; after five minutes of which she exclaimed,

"Oh I say, well go!" and got up abruptly, asking for her jacket. He said

something about the carriage and its order to come back for them, and

she replied, "Well, it can go away again. I don't want a carriage," she

added: "I want to walk"--and in a moment she was out of the place, with

the people at the tables turning round again and the \_caissiÃ¨re\_ swaying

in her high seat. On the pavement of the boulevard she looked up and

down; there were people at little tables by the door; there were people

all over the broad expanse of the asphalt; there was a profusion of

light and a pervasion of sound; and everywhere, though the establishment

at which they had been dining was not in the thick of the fray, the

tokens of a great traffic of pleasure, that night-aspect of Paris which

represents it as a huge market for sensations. Beyond the Boulevard des

Capucines it flared through the warm evening like a vast bazaar, and

opposite the CafÃ© Durand the Madeleine rose theatrical, a high artful

\_dÃ©cor\_ before the footlights of the Rue Royale. "Where shall we go,

what shall we do?" Mrs. Dallow asked, looking at her companion and

somewhat to his surprise, as he had supposed she wanted but to go home.

"Anywhere you like. It's so warm we might drive instead of going

indoors. We might go to the Bois. That would be agreeable."

"Yes, but it wouldn't be walking. However, that doesn't matter. It's

mild enough for anything--for sitting out like all these people. And

I've never walked in Paris at night. It would amuse me."

Nick hesitated. "So it might, but it isn't particularly recommended to

ladies."

"I don't care for that if it happens to suit me."

"Very well then, we'll walk to the Bastille if you like."

Julia hesitated, on her side, still looking about. "It's too far; I'm

tired; we'll sit here." And she dropped beside an empty table on the

"terrace" of M. Durand. "This will do; it's amusing enough and we can

look at the Madeleine--that's respectable. If we must have something

we'll have a \_madÃ¨re\_--is that respectable? Not particularly? So much

the better. What are those people having? \_Bocks\_? Couldn't we have

\_bocks\_? Are they very low? Then I shall have one. I've been so

wonderfully good--I've been staying at Versailles: \_je me dois bien

cela\_."

She insisted, but pronounced the thin liquid in the tall glass very

disgusting when it was brought. Nick was amazed, reflecting that it was

not for such a discussion as this that his mother had left him with

hands in his pockets. He had been looking out, but as his eloquence

flowed faster he turned to his friend, who had dropped upon a sofa with

her face to the window. She had given her jacket and gloves to her maid,

but had kept on her hat; and she leaned forward a little as she sat,

clasping her hands together in her lap and keeping her eyes on him. The

lamp, in a corner, was so thickly veiled that the room was in tempered

obscurity, lighted almost equally from the street and the brilliant

shop-fronts opposite. "Therefore why be sapient and solemn about it,

like an editorial in a newspaper?" Nick added with a smile.

She continued to look at him after he had spoken, then she said: "If you

don't want to stand you've only to say so. You needn't give your

reasons."

"It's too kind of you to let me off that! And then I'm a tremendous

fellow for reasons; that's my strong point, don't you know? I've a lot

more besides those I've mentioned, done up and ready for delivery. The

odd thing is that they don't always govern my behaviour. I rather think

I do want to stand."

"Then what you said just now was a speech," Julia declared.

"A speech?"

"The 'rot,' the humbug of the hustings."

"No, those great truths remain, and a good many others. But an inner

voice tells me I'm in for it. And it will be much more graceful to

embrace this opportunity, accepting your co-operation, than to wait for

some other and forfeit that advantage."

"I shall be very glad to help you anywhere," she went on.

"Thanks awfully," he returned, still standing there with his hands in

his pockets. "You'd do it best in your own place, and I've no right to

deny myself such a help."

Julia calmly considered. "I don't do it badly."

"Ah you're so political!"

"Of course I am; it's the only decent thing to be. But I can only help

you if you'll help yourself. I can do a good deal, but I can't do

everything. If you'll work I'll work with you; but if you're going into

it with your hands in your pockets I'll have nothing to do with you."

Nick instantly changed the position of these members and sank into a

seat with his elbows on his knees. "You're very clever, but you must

really take a little trouble. Things don't drop into people's mouths."

"I'll try--I'll try. I've a great incentive," he admitted.

"Of course you have."

"My mother, my poor mother." Julia breathed some vague sound and he went

on: "And of course always my father, dear good man. My mother's even

more political than you."

"I daresay she is, and quite right!" said Mrs. Dallow.

"And she can't tell me a bit more than you can what she thinks, what she

believes, what she wants."

"Pardon me, I can tell you perfectly. There's one thing I always

immensely want--to keep out a Tory."

"I see. That's a great philosophy."

"It will do very well. And I desire the good of the country. I'm not

ashamed of that."

"And can you give me an idea of what it is--the good of the country?"

"I know perfectly what it isn't. It isn't what the Tories want to do."

"What do they want to do?"

"Oh it would take me long to tell you. All sorts of trash."

"It would take you long, and it would take them longer! All they want

to do is to prevent \_us\_ from doing. On our side we want to prevent them

from preventing us. That's about as clearly as we all see it. So on both

sides it's a beautiful, lucid, inspiring programme."

"I don't believe in you," Mrs. Dallow replied to this, leaning back on

her sofa.

"I hope not, Julia, indeed!" He paused a moment, still with his face

toward her and his elbows on his knees; then he pursued: "You're a very

accomplished woman and a very zealous one; but you haven't an idea, you

know--not to call an idea. What you mainly want is to be at the head of

a political salon; to start one, to keep it up, to make it a success."

"Much you know me!" Julia protested; but he could see, through the

dimness, that her face spoke differently.

"You'll have it in time, but I won't come to it," Nick went on.

"You can't come less than you do."

"When I say you'll have it I mean you've already got it. That's why I

don't come."

"I don't think you know what you mean," said Mrs. Dallow. "I've an idea

that's as good as any of yours, any of those you've treated me to this

evening, it seems to me--the simple idea that one ought to do something

or other for one's country."

"'Something or other' certainly covers all the ground. There's one thing

one can always do for one's country, which is not to be afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

Nick Dormer waited a little, as if his idea amused him, but he presently

said, "I'll tell you another time. It's very well to talk so glibly of

standing," he added; "but it isn't absolutely foreign to the question

that I haven't got the cash."

"What did you do before?" she asked.

"The first time my father paid."

"And the other time?"

"Oh Mr. Carteret."

"Your expenses won't be at all large; on the contrary," said Julia.

"They shan't be; I shall look out sharp for that. I shall have the great

Hutchby."

"Of course; but you know I want you to do it well." She paused an

instant and then: "Of course you can send the bill to me."

"Thanks awfully; you're tremendously kind. I shouldn't think of that."

Nick Dormer got up as he spoke, and walked to the window again, his

companion's eyes resting on him while he stood with his back to her. "I

shall manage it somehow," he wound up.

"Mr. Carteret will be delighted," said Julia.

"I daresay, but I hate taking people's money."

"That's nonsense--when it's for the country. Isn't it for \_them\_?"

"When they get it back!" Nick replied, turning round and looking for his

hat. "It's startlingly late; you must be tired." Mrs. Dallow made no

response to this, and he pursued his quest, successful only when he

reached a duskier corner of the room, to which the hat had been

relegated by his cousin's maid. "Mr. Carteret will expect so much if he

pays. And so would you."

"Yes, I'm bound to say I should! I should expect a great

deal--everything." And Mrs. Dallow emphasised this assertion by the way

she rose erect. "If you're riding for a fall, if you're only going in to

miss it, you had better stay out."

"How can I miss it with \_you\_?" the young man smiled. She uttered a

word, impatiently but indistinguishably, and he continued: "And even if

I do it will have been immense fun."

"It is immense fun," said Julia. "But the best fun is to win. If you

don't----!"

"If I don't?" he repeated as she dropped.

"I'll never speak to you again."

"How much you expect even when you don't pay!"

Mrs. Dallow's rejoinder was a justification of this remark, expressing

as it did the fact that should they receive on the morrow information on

which she believed herself entitled to count, information tending to

show how hard the Conservatives meant to fight, she should look to him

to be in the field as early as herself. Sunday was a lost day; she

should leave Paris on Monday.

"Oh they'll fight it hard; they'll put up Kingsbury," said Nick,

smoothing his hat. "They'll all come down--all that can get away. And

Kingsbury has a very handsome wife."

"She's not so handsome as your cousin," Julia smiled.

"Oh dear, no--a cousin sooner than a wife any day!" Nick laughed as soon

as he had said this, as if the speech had an awkward side; but the

reparation perhaps scarcely mended it, the exaggerated mock-meekness

with which he added: "I'll do any blessed thing you tell me."

"Come here to-morrow then--as early as ten." She turned round, moving to

the door with him; but before they reached it she brought out: "Pray

isn't a gentleman to do anything, to be anything?"

"To be anything----?"

"If he doesn't aspire to serve the State."

"Aspire to make his political fortune, do you mean? Oh bless me, yes,

there are other things."

"What other things that can compare with that?"

"Well, I for instance, I'm very fond of the arts."

"Of the arts?" she echoed.

"Did you never hear of them? I'm awfully fond of painting."

At this Julia stopped short, and her fine grey eyes had for a moment the

air of being set further forward in her head. "Don't be odious!

Good-night," she said, turning away and leaving him to go.

BOOK SECOND

VII

Peter Sherringham reminded Nick the next day that he had promised to be

present at Madame CarrÃ©'s interview with the ladies introduced to her by

Gabriel Nash; and in the afternoon, conformably to this arrangement, the

two men took their way to the Rue de Constantinople. They found Mr. Nash

and his friends in the small beflounced drawing-room of the old actress,

who, as they learned, had sent in a request for ten minutes' grace,

having been detained at a lesson--a rehearsal of the \_comÃ©die de salon\_

about to be given for a charity by a fine lady, at which she had

consented to be present as an adviser. Mrs. Rooth sat on a black satin

sofa with her daughter beside her while Gabriel Nash, wandering about

the room, looked at the votive offerings which converted the little

panelled box, decorated in sallow white and gold, into a theatrical

museum: the presents, the portraits, the wreaths, the diadems, the

letters, framed and glazed, the trophies and tributes and relics

collected by Madame CarrÃ© during half a century of renown. The profusion

of this testimony was hardly more striking than the confession of

something missed, something hushed, which seemed to rise from it all and

make it melancholy, like a reference to clappings which, in the nature

of things, could now only be present as a silence: so that if the place

was full of history it was the form without the fact, or at the most a

redundancy of the one to a pinch of the other--the history of a mask,

of a squeak, of a series of vain gestures.

Some of the objects exhibited by the distinguished artist, her early

portraits, in lithograph or miniature, represented the costume and

embodied the manner of a period so remote that Nick Dormer, as he

glanced at them, felt a quickened curiosity to look at the woman who

reconciled being alive to-day with having been alive so long ago. Peter

Sherringham already knew how she managed this miracle, but every visit

he paid her added to his amused, charmed sense that it \_was\_ a miracle

and that his extraordinary old friend had seen things he should never,

never see. Those were just the things he wanted to see most, and her

duration, her survival, cheated him agreeably and helped him a little to

guess them. His appreciation of the actor's art was so systematic that

it had an antiquarian side, and at the risk of representing him as

attached to an absurd futility it must be said that he had as yet hardly

known a keener regret for anything than for the loss of that antecedent

world, and in particular for his having belatedly missed the great

\_comÃ©dienne\_, the light of the French stage in the early years of the

century, of whose example and instruction Madame CarrÃ© had had the

inestimable benefit. She had often described to him her rare

predecessor, straight from whose hands she had received her most

celebrated parts and of whom her own manner was often a religious

imitation; but her descriptions troubled him more than they consoled,

only confirming his theory, to which so much of his observation had

already ministered, that the actor's art in general was going down and

down, descending a slope with abysses of vulgarity at its foot, after

having reached its perfection, more than fifty years ago, in the talent

of the lady in question. He would have liked to dwell for an hour

beneath the meridian.

Gabriel Nash introduced the new-comers to his companions; but the

younger of the two ladies gave no sign of lending herself to this

transaction. The girl was very white; she huddled there, silent and

rigid, frightened to death, staring, expressionless. If Bridget Dormer

had seen her at this moment she might have felt avenged for the

discomfiture of her own spirit suffered at the Salon, the day before,

under the challenging eyes of Maud Vavasour. It was plain at the present

hour that Miss Vavasour would have run away had she not regarded the

persons present as so many guards and keepers. Her appearance made Nick

feel as if the little temple of art in which they were collected had

been the waiting-room of a dentist. Sherringham had seen a great many

nervous girls tremble before the same ordeal, and he liked to be kind to

them, to say things that would help them to do themselves justice. The

probability in a given case was almost overwhelmingly in favour of their

having any other talent one could think of in a higher degree than the

dramatic; but he could rarely refrain from some care that the occasion

shouldn't be, even as against his conscience, too cruel. There were

occasions indeed that could scarce be too cruel to punish properly

certain examples of presumptuous ineptitude. He remembered what Mr. Nash

had said about this blighted maiden, and perceived that though she might

be inept she was now anything but presumptuous. Gabriel fell to talking

with Nick Dormer while Peter addressed himself to Mrs. Rooth. There was

no use as yet for any direct word to the girl, who was too scared even

to hear. Mrs. Rooth, with her shawl fluttering about her, nestled

against her daughter, putting out her hand to take one of Miriam's

soothingly. She had pretty, silly, near-sighted eyes, a long thin nose,

and an upper lip which projected over the under as an ornamental cornice

rests on its support. "So much depends--really everything!" she said in

answer to some sociable observation of Sherringham's. "It's either

this," and she rolled her eyes expressively about the room, "or it's--I

don't know what!"

"Perhaps we're too many," Peter hazarded to her daughter. "But really

you'll find, after you fairly begin, that you'll do better with four or

five."

Before she answered she turned her head and lifted her fine eyes. The

next instant he saw they were full of tears. The words she spoke,

however, though uttered as if she had tapped a silver gong, had not the

note of sensibility: "Oh, I don't care for \_you\_!" He laughed at this,

declared it was very well said and that if she could give Madame CarrÃ©

such a specimen as that----! The actress came in before he had finished

his phrase, and he observed the way the girl ruefully rose to the

encounter, hanging her head a little and looking out from under her

brows. There was no sentiment in her face--only a vacancy of awe and

anguish which had not even the merit of being fine of its kind, for it

spoke of no spring of reaction. Yet the head was good, he noted at the

same moment; it was strong and salient and made to tell at a distance.

Madame CarrÃ© scarcely heeded her at first, greeting her only in her

order among the others and pointing to seats, composing the circle with

smiles and gestures, as if they were all before the prompter's box. The

old actress presented herself to a casual glance as a red-faced, raddled

woman in a wig, with beady eyes, a hooked nose, and pretty hands; but

Nick Dormer, who had a sense for the over-scored human surface, soon

observed that these comparatively gross marks included a great deal of

delicate detail--an eyebrow, a nostril, a flitting of expressions, as if

a multitude of little facial wires were pulled from within. This

accomplished artist had in particular a mouth which was visibly a rare

instrument, a pair of lips whose curves and fine corners spoke of a

lifetime of "points" unerringly made and verses exquisitely spoken,

helping to explain the purity of the sound that issued from them. Her

whole countenance had the look of long service--of a thing infinitely

worn and used, drawn and stretched to excess, with its elasticity

overdone and its springs relaxed, yet religiously preserved and kept in

repair, even as some valuable old timepiece which might have quivered

and rumbled but could be trusted to strike the hour. At the first words

she spoke Gabriel Nash exclaimed endearingly: \_"Ah la voix de

CÃ©limÃ¨ne!"\_ CÃ©limÃ¨ne, who wore a big red flower on the summit of her

dense wig, had a very grand air, a toss of the head, and sundry little

majesties of manner; in addition to which she was strange, almost

grotesque, and to some people would have been even terrifying, capable

of reappearing, with her hard eyes, as a queer vision of the darkness.

She excused herself for having made the company wait, and mouthed and

mimicked in the drollest way, with intonations as fine as a flute, the

performance and the pretensions of the \_belles dames\_ to whom she had

just been endeavouring to communicate a few of the rudiments. \_"Mais

celles-lÃ , c'est une plaisanterie,"\_ she went on to Mrs. Rooth; "whereas

you and your daughter, \_chÃ¨re madame\_--I'm sure you are quite another

matter."

The girl had got rid of her tears, and was gazing at her, and Mrs. Rooth

leaned forward and said portentously: "She knows four languages."

Madame CarrÃ© gave one of her histrionic stares, throwing back her head.

"That's three too many. The thing's to do something proper with one."

"We're very much in earnest," continued Mrs. Rooth, who spoke excellent

French.

"I'm glad to hear it--\_il n'y a que Ã§a. La tÃªte est bien\_--the head's

very good," she said as she looked at the girl. "But let us see, my dear

child, what you've got in it!" The young lady was still powerless to

speak; she opened her lips, but nothing came. With the failure of this

effort she turned her deep sombre eyes to the three men. "\_Un beau

regard\_--it carries well." Madame CarrÃ© further commented. But even as

she spoke Miss Rooth's fine gaze was suffused again and the next moment

she had definitely begun to weep. Nick Dormer sprung up; he felt

embarrassed and intrusive--there was such an indelicacy in sitting there

to watch a poor working-girl's struggle with timidity. There was a

momentary confusion; Mrs. Rooth's tears were seen also to flow; Mr. Nash

took it gaily, addressing, however, at the same time, the friendliest,

most familiar encouragement to his companions, and Peter Sherringham

offered to retire with Nick on the spot, should their presence incommode

the young lady. But the agitation was over in a minute; Madame CarrÃ©

motioned Mrs. Rooth out of her seat and took her place beside the girl,

and Nash explained judiciously to the other men that she'd be worse

should they leave her. Her mother begged them to remain, "so that there

should be at least some English"; she spoke as if the old actress were

an army of Frenchwomen. The young heroine of the occasion quickly came

round, and Madame CarrÃ©, on the sofa beside her, held her hand and

emitted a perfect music of reassurance. "The nerves, the nerves--they're

half our affair. Have as many as you like, if you've got something else

too. \_Voyons\_--do you know anything?"

"I know some pieces."

"Some pieces of the \_rÃ©pertoire\_?"

Miriam Rooth stared as if she didn't understand. "I know some poetry."

"English, French, Italian, German," said her mother.

Madame CarrÃ© gave Mrs. Rooth a look which expressed irritation at the

recurrence of this announcement. "Does she wish to act in all those

tongues? The phrase-book isn't the comedy!"

"It's only to show you how she has been educated."

"Ah, \_chÃ¨re madame\_, there's no education that matters! I mean save the

right one. Your daughter must have a particular form of speech, like me,

like \_ces messieurs\_."

"You see if I can speak French," said the girl, smiling dimly at her

hostess. She appeared now almost to have collected herself.

"You speak it in perfection."

"And English just as well," said Miss Rooth.

"You oughtn't to be an actress--you ought to be a governess."

"Oh don't tell us that: it's to escape from that!" pleaded Mrs. Rooth.

"I'm very sure your daughter will escape from that," Peter Sherringham

was moved to interpose.

"Oh if \_you\_ could help her!" said the lady with a world of longing.

"She has certainly all the qualities that strike the eye," Peter

returned.

"You're \_most\_ kind, sir!" Mrs. Rooth declared, elegantly draping

herself.

"She knows CÃ©limÃ¨ne; I've heard her do CÃ©limÃ¨ne," Gabriel Nash said to

Madame CarrÃ©".

"And she knows Juliet, she knows Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra," added Mrs.

Rooth.

"\_Voyons\_, my dear child, do you wish to work for the French stage or

for the English?" the old actress demanded.

"Ours would have sore need of you, Miss Rooth," Sherringham gallantly

threw off.

"Could you speak to any one in London--could you introduce her?" her

mother eagerly asked.

"Dear madam, I must hear her first, and hear what Madame CarrÃ© says."

"She has a voice of rare beauty, and I understand voices," said Mrs.

Rooth.

"Ah then if she has intelligence she has every gift."

"She has a most poetic mind," the old lady went on.

"I should like to paint her portrait; she's made for that," Nick Dormer

ventured to observe to Mrs. Rooth; partly because struck with the girl's

suitability for sitting, partly to mitigate the crudity of inexpressive

spectatorship.

"So all the artists say. I've had three or four heads of her, if you

would like to see them: she has been done in several styles. If you were

to do her I'm sure it would make her celebrated."

"And me too," Nick easily laughed.

"It would indeed--a member of Parliament!" Nash declared.

"Ah, I have the honour----?" murmured Mrs. Rooth, looking gratified and

mystified.

Nick explained that she had no honour at all, and meanwhile Madame CarrÃ©

had been questioning the girl "\_ChÃ¨re madame\_, I can do nothing with

your daughter: she knows too much!" she broke out. "It's a pity, because

I like to catch them wild."

"Oh she's wild enough, if that's all! And that's the very point, the

question of where to try," Mrs. Rooth went on. "Into what do I launch

her--upon what dangerous stormy sea? I've thought of it so anxiously."

"Try here--try the French public: they're so much the most serious,"

said Gabriel Nash.

"Ah no, try the English: there's such a rare opening!" Sherringham urged

in quick opposition.

"Oh it isn't the public, dear gentlemen. It's the private side, the

other people--it's the life, it's the moral atmosphere."

"\_Je ne connais qu'une scÃ¨ne,--la nÃ´tre\_," Madame CarrÃ© declared. "I'm

assured by every one who knows that there's no other."

"Very correctly assured," said Mr. Nash. "The theatre in our countries

is puerile and barbarous."

"There's something to be done for it, and perhaps mademoiselle's the

person to do it," Sherringham contentiously suggested.

"Ah but, \_en attendant\_, what can it do for her?" Madame CarrÃ© asked.

"Well, anything I can help to bring about," said Peter Sherringham, more

and more struck with the girl's rich type. Miriam Rooth sat in silence

while this discussion went on, looking from one speaker to the other

with a strange dependent candour.

"Ah, if your part's marked out I congratulate you, mademoiselle!"--and

the old actress underlined the words as she had often underlined others

on the stage. She smiled with large permissiveness on the young

aspirant, who appeared not to understand her. Her tone penetrated,

however, to certain depths in the mother's nature, adding another stir

to agitated waters.

"I feel the responsibility of what she shall find in the life, the

standards, of the theatre," Mrs. Rooth explained. "Where is the purest

tone--where are the highest standards? That's what I ask," the good lady

continued with a misguided intensity which elicited a peal of

unceremonious but sociable laughter from Gabriel Nash.

"The purest tone--\_qu'est-ce que c'est que Ã§a\_?" Madame CarrÃ© demanded

in the finest manner of modern comedy.

"We're very, \_very\_ respectable," Mrs. Rooth went on, but now smiling

and achieving lightness too.

"What I want is to place my daughter where the conduct--and the picture

of conduct in which she should take part--wouldn't be quite absolutely

dreadful. Now, \_chÃ¨re madame\_, how about all that; how about \_conduct\_

in the French theatre--all the things she should see, the things she

should hear, the things she should learn?"

Her hostess took it, as Sherringham felt, \_de trÃ¨s-haut\_. "I don't think

I know what you're talking about. They're the things she may see and

hear and learn everywhere; only they're better done, they're better

said, above all they're better taught. The only conduct that concerns

an, actress, it seems to me, is her own, and the only way for her to

behave herself is not to be a helpless stick. I know no other conduct."

"But there are characters, there are situations, which I don't think I

should like to see \_her\_ undertake."

"There are many, no doubt, which she would do well to leave alone!"

laughed the Frenchwoman.

"I shouldn't like to see her represent a very bad woman--a \_really\_ bad

one," Mrs. Rooth serenely pursued.

"Ah in England then, and in your theatre, every one's immaculately good?

Your plays must be even more ingenious than I supposed!"

"We haven't any plays," said Gabriel Nash.

"People will write them for Miss Rooth--it will be a new era,"

Sherringham threw in with wanton, or at least with combative, optimism.

"Will \_you\_, sir--will you do something? A sketch of one of our grand

English ideals?" the old lady asked engagingly.

"Oh I know what you do with our pieces--to show your superior virtue!"

Madame CarrÃ© cried before he had time to reply that he wrote nothing

but diplomatic memoranda. "Bad women? \_Je n'ai jouÃ© que Ã§a, madame\_.

'Really' bad? I tried to make them real!"

"I can say 'L'AventuriÃ¨re,'" Miriam interrupted in a cold voice which

seemed to hint at a want of participation in the maternal solicitudes.

"Allow us the pleasure of hearing you then. Madame CarrÃ© will give you

the \_rÃ©plique\_," said Peter Sherringham.

"Certainly, my child; I can say it without the book," Madame CarrÃ©

responded. "Put yourself there--move that chair a little away." She

patted her young visitor, encouraging her to rise, settling with her the

scene they should take, while the three men sprang up to arrange a place

for the performance. Miriam left her seat and looked vaguely about her;

then having taken off her hat and given it to her mother she stood on

the designated spot with her eyes to the ground. Abruptly, however,

instead of beginning the scene, Madame CarrÃ© turned to the elder lady

with an air which showed that a rejoinder to this visitor's remarks of a

moment before had been gathering force in her breast.

"You mix things up, \_chÃ¨re madame\_, and I have it on my heart to tell

you so. I believe it's rather the case with you other English, and I've

never been able to learn that either your morality or your talent is the

gainer by it. To be too respectable to go where things are done best is

in my opinion to be very vicious indeed; and to do them badly in order

to preserve your virtue is to fall into a grossness more shocking than

any other. To do them well is virtue enough, and not to make a mess of

it the only respectability. That's hard enough to merit Paradise.

Everything else is base humbug! \_VoilÃ , chÃ¨re madame\_, the answer I have

for your scruples!"

"It's admirable--admirable; and I am glad my friend Dormer here has had

the great advantage of hearing you utter it!" Nash exclaimed with a free

designation of Nick.

That young man thought it in effect a speech denoting an intelligence of

the question, yet he rather resented the idea that Gabriel should assume

it would strike him as a revelation; and to show his familiarity with

the line of thought it indicated, as well as to play his part

appreciatively in the little circle, he observed to Mrs. Rooth, as if

they might take many things for granted: "In other words, your daughter

must find her safeguard in the artistic conscience." But he had no

sooner spoken than he was struck with the oddity of their discussing so

publicly, and under the poor girl's handsome nose, the conditions which

Miss Rooth might find the best for the preservation of her personal

integrity. However, the anomaly was light and unoppressive--the echoes

of a public discussion of delicate questions seemed to linger so

familiarly in the egotistical little room. Moreover, the heroine of the

occasion evidently was losing her embarrassment; she was the priestess

on the tripod, awaiting the afflatus and thinking only of that. Her

bared head, of which she had changed the position, holding it erect,

while her arms hung at her sides, was admirable; her eyes gazed straight

out of the window and at the houses on the opposite side of the Rue de

Constantinople.

Mrs. Rooth had listened to Madame CarrÃ© with startled, respectful

attention, but Nick, considering her, was very sure she hadn't at all

taken in the great artist's little lesson. Yet this didn't prevent her

from exclaiming in answer to himself: "Oh a fine artistic life--what

indeed is more beautiful?"

Peter Sherringham had said nothing; he was watching Miriam and her

attitude. She wore a black dress which fell in straight folds; her face,

under her level brows, was pale and regular--it had a strange, strong,

tragic beauty. "I don't know what's in her," he said to himself;

"nothing, it would seem, from her persistent vacancy. But such a face as

that, such a head, is a fortune!" Madame CarrÃ© brought her to book,

giving her the first line of the speech of Clorinde: "\_Vous ne me fuyez

pas, mon enfant, aujourd'hui\_." But still the girl hesitated, and for an

instant appeared to make a vain, convulsive effort. In this convulsion

she frowned portentously; her low forehead overhung her eyes; the eyes

themselves, in shadow, stared, splendid and cold, and her hands clinched

themselves at her sides. She looked austere and terrible and was during

this moment an incarnation the vividness of which drew from Sherringham

a stifled cry. "\_Elle est bien belle--ah Ã§a\_," murmured the old

actress; and in the pause which still preceded the issue of sound from

the girl's lips Peter turned to his kinsman and said in a low tone: "You

must paint her just like that."

"Like that?"

"As the Tragic Muse."

She began to speak; a long, strong, colourless voice quavered in her

young throat. She delivered the lines of Clorinde in the admired

interview with CÃ©lie, the gem of the third act, with a rude monotony,

and then, gaining confidence, with an effort at modulation which was not

altogether successful and which evidently she felt not to be so. Madame

CarrÃ© sent back the ball without raising her hand, repeating the

speeches of CÃ©lie, which her memory possessed from their having so often

been addressed to her, and uttering the verses with soft, communicative

art. So they went on through the scene, which, when it was over, had not

precisely been a triumph for Miriam Rooth. Sherringham forbore to look

at Gabriel Nash, and Madame CarrÃ© said: "I think you've a voice, \_ma

fille\_, somewhere or other. We must try and put our hand on it." Then

she asked her what instruction she had had, and the girl, lifting her

eyebrows, looked at her mother while her mother prompted her.

"Mrs. Delamere in London; she was once an ornament of the English stage.

She gives lessons just to a very few; it's a great favour. Such a very

nice person! But above all, Signor Ruggieri--I think he taught us most."

Mrs. Rooth explained that this gentleman was an Italian tragedian, in

Rome, who instructed Miriam in the proper manner of pronouncing his

language and also in the art of declaiming and gesticulating.

"Gesticulating I'll warrant!" declared their hostess. "They mimic as for

the deaf, they emphasise as for the blind. Mrs. Delamere is doubtless an

epitome of all the virtues, but I never heard of her. You travel too

much," Madame CarrÃ© went on; "that's very amusing, but the way to study

is to stay at home, to shut yourself up and hammer at your scales." Mrs.

Rooth complained that they had no home to stay at; in reply to which the

old actress exclaimed: "Oh you English, you're \_d'une lÃ©gÃ¨retÃ© Ã  faire

frÃ©mir.\_ If you haven't a home you must make, or at least for decency

pretend to, one. In our profession it's the first requisite."

"But where? That's what I ask!" said Mrs. Rooth.

"Why not here?" Sherringham threw out.

"Oh here!" And the good lady shook her head with a world of sad

significance.

"Come and live in London and then I shall be able to paint your

daughter," Nick Dormer interposed.

"Is that all it will take, my dear fellow?" asked Gabriel Nash.

"Ah, London's full of memories," Mrs. Rooth went on. "My father had a

great house there--we always came up. But all that's over."

"Study here and then go to London to appear," said Peter, feeling

frivolous even as he spoke.

"To appear in French?"

"No, in the language of Shakespeare."

"But we can't study that here."

"Mr. Sherringham means that he will give you lessons," Madame CarrÃ©

explained. "Let me not fail to say it--he's an excellent critic."

"How do you know that--you who're beyond criticism and perfect?" asked

Sherringham: an inquiry to which the answer was forestalled by the

girl's rousing herself to make it public that she could recite the

"Nights" of Alfred de Musset.

"Diable!" said the actress: "that's more than I can! By all means give

us a specimen."

The girl again placed herself in position and rolled out a fragment of

one of the splendid conversations of Musset's poet with his muse--rolled

it loudly and proudly, tossed it and tumbled it about the room. Madame

CarrÃ© watched her at first, but after a few moments she shut her eyes,

though the best part of the business was to take in her young

candidate's beauty. Sherringham had supposed Miriam rather abashed by

the flatness of her first performance, but he now saw how little she

could have been aware of this: she was rather uplifted and emboldened.

She made a mush of the divine verses, which in spite of certain

sonorities and cadences, an evident effort to imitate a celebrated

actress, a comrade of Madame CarrÃ©, whom she had heard declaim them, she

produced as if she had been dashing blindfold at some playfellow she was

to "catch." When she had finished Madame CarrÃ© passed no judgement, only

dropping: "Perhaps you had better say something English." She suggested

some little piece of verse--some fable if there were fables in English.

She appeared but scantily surprised to hear that there were not--it was

a language of which one expected so little. Mrs. Rooth said: "She knows

her Tennyson by heart. I think he's much deeper than La Fontaine"; and

after some deliberation and delay Miriam broke into "The Lotus-Eaters,"

from which she passed directly, almost breathlessly, to "Edward Gray."

Sherringham had by this time heard her make four different attempts, and

the only generalisation very present to him was that she uttered these

dissimilar compositions in exactly the same tone--a solemn, droning,

dragging measure suggestive of an exhortation from the pulpit and

adopted evidently with the "affecting" intention and from a crude idea

of "style." It was all funereal, yet was artlessly rough. Sherringham

thought her English performance less futile than her French, but he

could see that Madame CarrÃ© listened to it even with less pleasure. In

the way the girl wailed forth some of her Tennysonian lines he detected

a faint gleam as of something pearly in deep water. But the further she

went the more violently she acted on the nerves of Mr. Gabriel Nash:

that also he could discover from the way this gentleman ended by

slipping discreetly to the window and leaning there with his head out

and his back to the exhibition. He had the art of mute expression; his

attitude said as clearly as possible: "No, no, you can't call me either

ill-mannered or ill-natured. I'm the showman of the occasion, moreover,

and I avert myself, leaving you to judge. If there's a thing in life I

hate it's this idiotic new fashion of the drawing-room recitation and of

the insufferable creatures who practise it, who prevent conversation,

and whom, as they're beneath it, you can't punish by criticism.

Therefore what I'm doing's only too magnanimous--bringing these

benighted women here, paying with my person, stifling my just

repugnance."

While Sherringham judged privately that the manner in which Miss Rooth

had acquitted herself offered no element of interest, he yet remained

aware that something surmounted and survived her failure, something that

would perhaps be worth his curiosity. It was the element of outline and

attitude, the way she stood, the way she turned her eyes, her head, and

moved her limbs. These things held the attention; they had a natural

authority and, in spite of their suggesting too much the school-girl in

the \_tableau-vivant\_, a "plastic" grandeur. Her face, moreover, grew as

he watched it; something delicate dawned in it, a dim promise of variety

and a touching plea for patience, as if it were conscious of being able

to show in time more shades than the simple and striking gloom which had

as yet mainly graced it. These rather rude physical felicities formed in

short her only mark of a vocation. He almost hated to have to recognise

them; he had seen them so often when they meant nothing at all that he

had come at last to regard them as almost a guarantee of incompetence.

He knew Madame CarrÃ© valued them singly so little that she counted them

out in measuring an histrionic nature; when deprived of the escort of

other properties which helped and completed them she almost held them a

positive hindrance to success--success of the only kind she esteemed.

Far oftener than himself she had sat in judgement on young women for

whom hair and eyebrows and a disposition for the statuesque would have

worked the miracle of sanctifying their stupidity if the miracle were

workable. But that particular miracle never was. The qualities she rated

highest were not the gifts but the conquests, the effects the actor had

worked hard for, had dug out of the mine by unwearied study.

Sherringham remembered to have had in the early part of their

acquaintance a friendly dispute with her on this subject, he having been

moved at that time to defend doubtless to excess the cause of the gifts.

She had gone so far as to say that a serious comedian ought to be

ashamed of them--ashamed of resting his case on them; and when

Sherringham had cited the great Rachel as a player whose natural

endowment was rich and who had owed her highest triumphs to it, she had

declared that Rachel was the very instance that proved her point;--a

talent assisted by one or two primary aids, a voice and a portentous

brow, but essentially formed by work, unremitting and ferocious work. "I

don't care a straw for your handsome girls," she said; "but bring me one

who's ready to drudge the tenth part of the way Rachel drudged, and I'll

forgive her her beauty. Of course, \_notez bien\_, Rachel wasn't a \_grosse

bÃªte\_: that's a gift if you like!"

Mrs. Rooth, who was evidently very proud of the figure her daughter had

made--her daughter who for all one could tell affected their hostess

precisely as a \_grosse bÃªte\_--appealed to Madame CarrÃ© rashly and

serenely for a verdict; but fortunately this lady's voluble \_bonne\_ came

rattling in at the same moment with the tea-tray. The old actress busied

herself in dispensing this refreshment, an hospitable attention to her

English visitors, and under cover of the diversion thus obtained, while

the others talked together, Sherringham put her the question: "Well, is

there anything in my young friend?"

"Nothing I can see. She's loud and coarse."

"She's very much afraid. You must allow for that."

"Afraid of me, immensely, but not a bit afraid of her authors--nor of

you!" Madame CarrÃ© smiled.

"Aren't you prejudiced by what that fellow Nash has told you?"

"Why prejudiced? He only told me she was very handsome."

"And don't you think her so?"

"Admirable. But I'm not a photographer nor a dressmaker nor a coiffeur.

I can't do anything with 'back hair' nor with a mere big stare."

"The head's very noble," said Peter Sherringham. "And the voice, when

she spoke English, had some sweet tones."

"Ah your English--possibly! All I can say is that I listened to her

conscientiously, and I didn't perceive in what she did a single

\_nuance\_, a single inflexion or intention. But not one, \_mon cher\_. I

don't think she's intelligent."

"But don't they often seem stupid at first?"

"Say always!"

"Then don't some succeed--even when they're handsome?"

"When they're handsome they always succeed--in one way or another."

"You don't understand us English," said Peter Sherringham.

Madame CarrÃ© drank her tea; then she replied: "Marry her, my son, and

give her diamonds. Make her an ambassadress; she'll look very well."

"She interests you so little that you don't care to do anything for

her?"

"To do anything?"

"To give her a few lessons."

The old actress looked at him a moment; after which, rising from her

place near the table on which the tea had been served, she said to

Miriam Rooth: "My dear child, I give my voice for the \_scÃ¨ne anglaise\_.

You did the English things best."

"Did I do them well?" asked the girl.

"You've a great deal to learn; but you've rude force. The main things

\_sont encore a dÃ©gager\_, but they'll come. You must work."

"I think she has ideas," said Mrs. Rooth.

"She gets them from you," Madame CarrÃ© replied.

"I must say that if it's to be \_our\_ theatre I'm relieved. I do think

ours safer," the good lady continued.

"Ours is dangerous, no doubt."

"You mean you're more severe," said the girl.

"Your mother's right," the actress smiled; "you have ideas."

"But what shall we do then--how shall we proceed?" Mrs. Rooth made this

appeal, plaintively and vaguely, to the three gentlemen; but they had

collected a few steps off and were so occupied in talk that it failed to

reach them.

"Work--work--work!" exclaimed the actress.

"In English I can play Shakespeare. I want to play Shakespeare," Miriam

made known.

"That's fortunate, as in English you haven't any one else to play."

"But he's so great--and he's so pure!" said Mrs. Rooth.

"That indeed seems the saving of you," Madame CarrÃ© returned.

"You think me actually pretty bad, don't you?" the girl demanded with

her serious face.

"\_Mon Dieu, que vous dirai-je?\_ Of course you're rough; but so was I at

your age. And if you find your voice it may carry you far. Besides, what

does it matter what I think? How can I judge for your English public?"

"How shall I find my voice?" asked Miriam Rooth.

"By trying. \_Il n'y a que Ã§a\_. Work like a horse, night and day.

Besides, Mr. Sherringham, as he says, will help you."

That gentleman, hearing his name, turned round and the girl appealed to

him. "Will you help me really?"

"To find her voice," said Madame CarrÃ©.

"The voice, when it's worth anything, comes from the heart; so I suppose

that's where to look for it," Gabriel Nash suggested.

"Much you know; you haven't got any!" Miriam retorted with the first

scintillation of gaiety she had shown on this occasion.

"Any voice, my child?" Mr. Nash inquired.

"Any heart--or any manners!"

Peter Sherringham made the secret reflexion that he liked her better

lugubrious, as the note of pertness was not totally absent from her mode

of emitting these few words. He was irritated, moreover, for in the

brief conference he had just had with the young lady's introducer he had

had to meet the rather difficult call of speaking of her hopefully. Mr.

Nash had said with his bland smile, "And what impression does my young

friend make?"--in respect to which Peter's optimism felt engaged by an

awkward logic. He answered that he recognised promise, though he did

nothing of the sort;--at the same time that the poor girl, both with the

exaggerated "points" of her person and the vanity of her attempt at

expression, constituted a kind of challenge, struck him as a subject for

inquiry, a problem, an explorable tract. She was too bad to jump at and

yet too "taking"--perhaps after all only vulgarly--to overlook,

especially when resting her tragic eyes on him with the trust of her

deep "Really?" This note affected him as addressed directly to his

honour, giving him a chance to brave verisimilitude, to brave ridicule

even a little, in order to show in a special case what he had always

maintained in general, that the direction of a young person's studies

for the stage may be an interest of as high an order as any other

artistic appeal.

"Mr. Nash has rendered us the great service of introducing us to Madame

CarrÃ©, and I'm sure we're immensely indebted to him," Mrs. Rooth said to

her daughter with an air affectionately corrective.

"But what good does that do us?" the girl asked, smiling at the actress

and gently laying her finger-tips upon her hand. "Madame CarrÃ© listens

to me with adorable patience, and then sends me about my business--ah in

the prettiest way in the world."

"Mademoiselle, you're not so rough; the tone of that's very \_juste. A la

bonne heure\_; work--work!" the actress cried. "There was an inflexion

there--or very nearly. Practise it till you've got it."

"Come and practise it to \_me\_, if your mother will be so kind as to

bring you," said Peter Sherringham.

"Do you give lessons--do you understand?" Miriam asked.

"I'm an old play-goer and I've an unbounded belief in my own judgement."

"'Old,' sir, is too much to say," Mrs. Rooth remonstrated. "My daughter

knows your high position, but she's very direct. You'll always find her

so. Perhaps you'll say there are less honourable faults. We'll come to

see you with pleasure. Oh I've been at the embassy when I was her age.

Therefore why shouldn't she go to-day? That was in Lord Davenant's

time."

"A few people are coming to tea with me to-morrow. Perhaps you'll come

then at five o'clock."

"It will remind me of the dear old times," said Mrs. Rooth.

"Thank you; I'll try and do better to-morrow," Miriam professed very

sweetly.

"You do better every minute!" Sherringham returned--and he looked at

their hostess in support of this declaration.

"She's finding her voice," Madame CarrÃ© acknowledged.

"She's finding a friend!" Mrs. Rooth threw in.

"And don't forget, when you come to London, my hope that you'll come and

see \_me\_," Nick Dormer said to the girl. "To try and paint you--that

would do me good!"

"She's finding even two," said Madame CarrÃ©.

"It's to make up for one I've lost!" And Miriam looked with very good

stage-scorn at Gabriel Nash. "It's he who thinks I'm bad."

"You say that to make me drive you home; you know it will," Nash

returned.

"We'll all take you home; why not?" Sherringham asked.

Madame CarrÃ© looked at the handsome girl, handsomer than ever at this

moment, and at the three young men who had taken their hats and stood

ready to accompany her. A deeper expression came for an instant into her

hard, bright eyes. "\_Ah la jeunesse\_!" she sighed. "You'd always have

that, my child, if you were the greatest goose on earth!"

VIII

At Peter Sherringham's the next day Miriam had so evidently come with

the expectation of "saying" something that it was impossible such a

patron of the drama should forbear to invite her, little as the

exhibition at Madame CarrÃ©'s could have contributed to render the

invitation prompt. His curiosity had been more appeased than stimulated,

but he felt none the less that he had "taken up" the dark-browed girl

and her reminiscential mother and must face the immediate consequences

of the act. This responsibility weighed upon him during the twenty-four

hours that followed the ultimate dispersal of the little party at the

door of the HÃ´tel de la Garonne.

On quitting Madame CarrÃ© the two ladies had definitely declined Mr.

Nash's offered cab and had taken their way homeward on foot and with the

gentlemen in attendance. The streets of Paris at that hour were bright

and episodical, and Sherringham trod them good-humouredly enough and not

too fast, leaning a little to talk with Miriam as he went. Their pace

was regulated by her mother's, who advanced on the arm of Gabriel Nash

(Nick Dormer was on her other side) in refined deprecation. Her sloping

back was before them, exempt from retentive stillness in spite of her

rigid principles, with the little drama of her lost and recovered shawl

perpetually going on.

Sherringham said nothing to the girl about her performance or her

powers; their talk was only of her manner of life with her mother--their

travels, their \_pensions\_, their economies, their want of a home, the

many cities she knew well, the foreign tongues and the wide view of the

world she had acquired. He guessed easily enough the dolorous type of

exile of the two ladies, wanderers in search of Continental cheapness,

inured to queer contacts and compromises, "remarkably well connected" in

England, but going out for their meals. The girl was but indirectly

communicative; though seemingly less from any plan of secrecy than from

the habit of associating with people whom she didn't honour with her

confidence. She was fragmentary and abrupt, as well as not in the least

shy, subdued to dread of Madame CarrÃ© as she had been for the time. She

gave Sherringham a reason for this fear, and he thought her reason

innocently pretentious. "She admired a great artist more than anything

in the world; and in the presence of art, of \_great\_ art, her heart beat

so fast." Her manners were not perfect, and the friction of a varied

experience had rather roughened than smoothed her. She said nothing that

proved her intelligent, even though he guessed this to be the design of

two or three of her remarks; but he parted from her with the suspicion

that she was, according to the contemporary French phrase, a "nature."

The HÃ´tel de la Garonne was in a small unrenovated street in which the

cobble-stones of old Paris still flourished, lying between the Avenue de

l'OpÃ©ra and the Place de la Bourse. Sherringham had occasionally

traversed the high dimness, but had never noticed the tall, stale

\_maison meublÃ©e\_, the aspect of which, that of a third-rate provincial

inn, was an illustration of Mrs. Rooth's shrunken standard. "We would

ask you to come up, but it's quite at the top and we haven't a

sitting-room," the poor lady bravely explained. "We had to receive Mr.

Nash at a cafÃ©."

Nick Dormer declared that he liked cafÃ©s, and Miriam, looking at his

cousin, dropped with a flash of passion the demand: "Do you wonder I

should want to do something--so that we can stop living like pigs?"

Peter recognised the next day that though it might be boring to listen

to her it was better to make her recite than to let her do nothing, so

effectually did the presence of his sister and that of Lady Agnes, and

even of Grace and Biddy, appear, by a strange tacit opposition, to

deprive hers, ornamental as it was, of a reason. He had only to see them

all together to perceive that she couldn't pass for having come to

"meet" them--even her mother's insinuating gentility failed to put the

occasion on that footing--and that she must therefore be assumed to have

been brought to show them something. She was not subdued, not colourless

enough to sit there for nothing, or even for conversation--the sort of

conversation that was likely to come off--so that it was inevitable to

treat her position as connected with the principal place on the carpet,

with silence and attention and the pulling together of chairs. Even when

so established it struck him at first as precarious, in the light, or

the darkness, of the inexpressive faces of the other ladies, seated in

couples and rows on sofas--there were several in addition to Julia and

the Dormers; mainly the wives, with their husbands, of Sherringham's

fellow-secretaries--scarcely one of whom he felt he might count upon for

a modicum of gush when the girl should have finished.

Miss Rooth gave a representation of Juliet drinking the potion,

according to the system, as her mother explained, of the famous Signor

Ruggieri--a scene of high fierce sound, of many cries and contortions:

she shook her hair (which proved magnificent) half-down before the

performance was over. Then she declaimed several short poems by Victor

Hugo, selected among many hundred by Mrs. Rooth, as the good lady was

careful to make known. After this she jumped to the American lyre,

regaling the company with specimens, both familiar and fresh, of

Longfellow, Lowell, Whittier, Holmes, and of two or three poetesses now

revealed to Sherringham for the first time. She flowed so copiously,

keeping the floor and rejoicing visibly in her luck, that her host was

mainly occupied with wondering how he could make her leave off. He was

surprised at the extent of her repertory, which, in view of the

circumstance that she could never have received much encouragement--it

must have come mainly from her mother, and he didn't believe in Signor

Ruggieri--denoted a very stiff ambition and a blundering energy. It was

her mother who checked her at last, and he found himself suspecting that

Gabriel Nash had intimated to the old woman that interference was

necessary. For himself he was chiefly glad Madame CarrÃ© hadn't come. It

was present to him that she would have judged the exhibition, with its

badness, its impudence, the absence of criticism, wholly indecent.

His only new impression of the heroine of the scene was that of this

same high assurance--her coolness, her complacency, her eagerness to go

on. She had been deadly afraid of the old actress but was not a bit

afraid of a cluster of \_femmes du monde\_, of Julia, of Lady Agnes, of

the smart women of the embassy. It was positively these personages who

were rather in fear; there was certainly a moment when even Julia was

scared for the first time he had ever remarked it. The space was too

small, the cries, the convulsions and rushes of the dishevelled girl

were too near. Lady Agnes wore much of the time the countenance she

might have shown at the theatre during a play in which pistols were

fired; and indeed the manner of the young reciter had become more

spasmodic and more explosive. It appeared, however, that the company in

general thought her very clever and successful; which showed, to

Sherringham's sense, how little they understood the matter. Poor Biddy

was immensely struck; she grew flushed and absorbed in proportion as

Miriam, at her best moments, became pale and fatal. It was she who spoke

to her first, after it was agreed that they had better not fatigue her

any more; she advanced a few steps, happening to be nearest--she

murmured: "Oh thank you so much. I never saw anything so beautiful, so

grand."

She looked very red and very pretty as she said this, and Peter

Sherringham liked her enough to notice her more and like her better when

she looked prettier than usual. As he turned away he heard Miriam make

answer with no great air of appreciation of her tribute: "I've seen you

before--two days ago at the Salon with Mr. Dormer. Yes, I know he's your

brother. I've made his acquaintance since. He wants to paint my

portrait. Do you think he'll do it well?" He was afraid the girl was

something of a brute--also somewhat grossly vain. This impression would

perhaps have been confirmed if a part of the rest of the short

conversation of the two young women had reached his ear. Biddy ventured

to observe that she herself had studied modelling a little and that she

could understand how any artist would think Miss Rooth a splendid

subject. If indeed \_she\_ could attempt her head, that would be a chance

indeed.

"Thank you," said Miriam with a laugh as of high comedy. "I think I had

rather not \_passer par toute la famille\_!" Then she added: "If your

brother's an artist I don't understand how he's in Parliament."

"Oh he isn't in Parliament now--we only hope he will be."

"Ah I see."

"And he isn't an artist either," Biddy felt herself conscientiously

bound to state.

"Then he isn't anything," said Miss Rooth.

"Well--he's immensely clever."

"Ah I see," Miss Rooth again replied. "Mr. Nash has puffed him up so."

"I don't know Mr. Nash," said Biddy, guilty of a little dryness as well

as of a little misrepresentation, and feeling rather snubbed.

"Well, you needn't wish to."

Biddy stood with her a moment longer, still looking at her and not

knowing what to say next, but not finding her any less handsome because

she had such odd manners. Biddy had an ingenious little mind, which

always tried as much as possible to keep different things separate. It

was pervaded now by the reflexion, attended with some relief, that if

the girl spoke to her with such unexpected familiarity of Nick she said

nothing at all about Peter. Two gentlemen came up, two of Peter's

friends, and made speeches to Miss Rooth of the kind Biddy supposed

people learned to make in Paris. It was also doubtless in Paris, the

girl privately reasoned, that they learned to listen to them as this

striking performer listened. She received their advances very

differently from the way she had received Biddy's. Sherringham noticed

his young kinswoman turn away, still very red, to go and sit near her

mother again, leaving Miriam engaged with the two men. It appeared to

have come over her that for a moment she had been strangely spontaneous

and bold, and that she had paid a little of the penalty. The seat next

her mother was occupied by Mrs. Rooth, toward whom Lady Agnes's head had

inclined itself with a preoccupied tolerance. He had the conviction

Mrs. Rooth was telling her about the Neville-Nugents of Castle Nugent

and that Lady Agnes was thinking it odd she never had heard of them. He

said to himself that Biddy was generous. She had urged Julia to come in

order that they might see how bad the strange young woman would be, but

now that the event had proved dazzling she forgot this calculation and

rejoiced in what she innocently supposed to be the performer's triumph.

She kept away from Julia, however; she didn't even look at her to invite

her also to confess that, in vulgar parlance, they had been sold. He

himself spoke to his sister, who was leaning back with a detached air in

the corner of a sofa, saying something which led her to remark in reply:

"Ah I daresay it's extremely fine, but I don't care for tragedy when it

treads on one's toes. She's like a cow who has kicked over the

milking-pail. She ought to be tied up."

"My poor Julia, it isn't extremely fine; it isn't fine at all,"

Sherringham returned with some irritation.

"Pardon me then. I thought that was why you invited us."

"I imagined she was different," Peter said a little foolishly.

"Ah if you don't care for her so much the better. It has always seemed

to me you make too awfully much of those people."

"Oh I do care for her too--rather. She's interesting." His sister gave

him a momentary, mystified glance and he added: "And she's dreadful." He

felt stupidly annoyed and was ashamed of his annoyance, as he could have

assigned no reason for it. It didn't grow less for the moment from his

seeing Gabriel Nash approach Julia, introduced by Nick Dormer. He gave

place to the two young men with some alacrity, for he had a sense of

being put in the wrong in respect to their specimen by Nash's very

presence. He remembered how it had been a part of their bargain, as it

were, that he should present that gentleman to his sister. He was not

sorry to be relieved of the office by Nick, and he even tacitly and

ironically wished his kinsman's friend joy of a colloquy with Mrs.

Dallow. Sherringham's life was spent with people, he was used to people,

and both as host and as guest he carried the social burden in general

lightly. He could observe, especially in the former capacity, without

uneasiness and take the temperature without anxiety. But at present his

company oppressed him; he felt worried and that he showed it--which was

the thing in the world he had ever held least an honour to a gentleman

dedicated to diplomacy. He was vexed with the levity that had made him

call his roomful together on so poor a pretext, and yet was vexed with

the stupidity that made the witnesses so evidently find the pretext

sufficient. He inwardly groaned at the delusion under which he had

saddled himself with the Tragic Muse--a tragic muse who was strident and

pert--and yet wished his visitors would go away and leave him alone with

her.

Nick Dormer said to Mrs. Dallow that he wanted her to know an old friend

of his, one of the cleverest men he knew; and he added the hope that she

would be gentle and encouraging with him; he was so timid and so easily

disconcerted. Mr. Nash hereupon dropped into a chair by the arm of her

sofa, their companion went away, and Mrs. Dallow turned her glance upon

her new acquaintance without a perceptible change of position. Then she

emitted with rapidity the remark: "It's very awkward when people are

told one's clever."

"It's only awkward if one isn't," Gabriel smiled.

"Yes, but so few people are--enough to be talked about."

"Isn't that just the reason why such a matter, such an exception, ought

to be mentioned to them?" he asked. "They mightn't find it out for

themselves. Of course, however, as you say, there ought to be a

certainty; then they're surer to know it. Dormer's a dear fellow, but

he's rash and superficial."

Mrs. Dallow, at this incitement, turned her glance a second time on her

visitor; but during the rest of the conversation she rarely repeated the

movement. If she liked Nick Dormer extremely--and it may without more

delay be communicated to the reader that she did--her liking was of a

kind that opposed no difficulty whatever to her not liking, in case of

such a complication, a person attached or otherwise belonging to him. It

was not in her nature to "put up" with others for the sake of an

individual she loved: the putting up was usually consumed in the loving,

and with nothing left over. If the affection that isolates and

simplifies its object may be distinguished from the affection that seeks

communications and contracts for it, Julia Dallow's was quite of the

encircling, not to say the narrowing sort. She was not so much jealous

as essentially exclusive. She desired no experience for the familiar and

yet partly unsounded kinsman in whom she took an interest that she

wouldn't have desired for herself; and indeed the cause of her interest

in him was partly the vision of his helping her to the particular

extensions she did desire--the taste and thrill of great affairs and of

public action. To have such ambitions for him appeared to her the

highest honour she could do him; her conscience was in it as well as her

inclination, and her scheme, to her sense, was noble enough to varnish

over any disdain she might feel for forces drawing him another way. She

had a prejudice, in general, against his existing connexions, a

suspicion of them, and a supply of off-hand contempt in waiting. It was

a singular circumstance that she was sceptical even when, knowing her as

well as he did, he thought them worth recommending to her: the

recommendation indeed mostly confirmed the suspicion.

This was a law from which Gabriel Nash was condemned to suffer, if

suffering could on any occasion be predicated of Gabriel Nash. His

pretension was in truth that he had purged his life of such

possibilities of waste, though probably he would have admitted that if

that fair vessel should spring a leak the wound in its side would have

been dealt by a woman's hand. In dining two evenings before with her

brother and with the Dormers Mrs. Dallow had been moved to exclaim that

Peter and Nick knew the most extraordinary people. As regards Peter the

attitudinising girl and her mother now pointed that moral with

sufficient vividness; so that there was little arrogance in taking a

similar quality for granted of the conceited man at her elbow, who sat

there as if he might be capable from one moment to another of leaning

over the arm of her sofa. She had not the slightest wish to talk with

him about himself, and was afraid for an instant that he was on the

point of passing from the chapter of his cleverness to that of his

timidity. It was a false alarm, however, for he only animadverted on the

pleasures of the elegant extract hurled--literally \_hurlÃ©\_ in

general--from the centre of the room at one's defenceless head. He

intimated that in his opinion these pleasures were all for the

performers. The auditors had at any rate given Miss Rooth a charming

afternoon; that of course was what Mrs. Dallow's kind brother had mainly

intended in arranging the little party. (Julia hated to hear him call

her brother "kind": the term seemed offensively patronising.) But he

himself, he related, was now constantly employed in the same

beneficence, listening two-thirds of his time to "intonations" and

shrieks. She had doubtless observed it herself, how the great current of

the age, the adoration of the mime, was almost too strong for any

individual; how it swept one along and dashed one against the rocks. As

she made no response to this proposition Gabriel Nash asked her if she

hadn't been struck with the main sign of the time, the preponderance of

the mountebank, the glory and renown, the personal favour, he enjoyed.

Hadn't she noticed what an immense part of the public attention he held

in London at least? For in Paris society was not so pervaded with him,

and the women of the profession, in particular, were not in every

drawing-room.

"I don't know what you mean," Mrs. Dallow said. "I know nothing of any

such people."

"Aren't they under your feet wherever you turn--their performances,

their portraits, their speeches, their autobiographies, their names,

their manners, their ugly mugs, as the people say, and their idiotic

pretensions?"

"I daresay it depends on the places one goes to. If they're

everywhere"--and she paused a moment--"I don't go everywhere."

"I don't go anywhere, but they mount on my back at home like the Old Man

of the Sea. Just observe a little when you return to London," Mr. Nash

went on with friendly instructiveness. Julia got up at this--she didn't

like receiving directions; but no other corner of the room appeared to

offer her any particular reason for crossing to it: she never did such a

thing without a great inducement. So she remained standing there as if

she were quitting the place in a moment, which indeed she now

determined to do; and her interlocutor, rising also, lingered beside

her unencouraged but unperturbed. He proceeded to remark that Mr.

Sherringham was quite right to offer Miss Rooth an afternoon's sport;

she deserved it as a fine, brave, amiable girl. She was highly educated,

knew a dozen languages, was of illustrious lineage, and was immensely

particular.

"Immensely particular?" Mrs. Dallow repeated.

"Perhaps I should say rather that her mother's so on her behalf.

Particular about the sort of people they meet--the tone, the standard.

I'm bound to say they're like \_you\_: they don't go everywhere. That

spirit's not so common in the mob calling itself good society as not to

deserve mention."

She said nothing for a moment; she looked vaguely round the room, but

not at Miriam Rooth. Nevertheless she presently dropped as in forced

reference to her an impatient shake. "She's dreadfully vulgar."

"Ah don't say that to my friend Dormer!" Mr. Nash laughed.

"Are you and he such great friends?" Mrs. Dallow asked, meeting his

eyes.

"Great enough to make me hope we shall be greater."

Again for a little she said nothing, but then went on: "Why shouldn't I

say to him that she's vulgar?"

"Because he admires her so much. He wants to paint her."

"To paint her?"

"To paint her portrait."

"Oh I see. I daresay she'd do for that."

Mr. Nash showed further amusement. "If that's your opinion of her you're

not very complimentary to the art he aspires to practise."

"He aspires to practise?" she echoed afresh.

"Haven't you talked with him about it? Ah you must keep him up to it!"

Julia Dallow was conscious for a moment of looking uncomfortable; but it

relieved her to be able to demand of her neighbour with a certain

manner: "Are you an artist?"

"I try to be," Nash smiled, "but I work in such difficult material."

He spoke this with such a clever suggestion of mysterious things that

she was to hear herself once more pay him the attention of taking him

up. "Difficult material?"

"I work in life!"

At this she turned away, leaving him the impression that she probably

misunderstood his speech, thinking he meant that he drew from the living

model or some such platitude: as if there could have been any likelihood

he would have dealings with the dead. This indeed would not fully have

explained the abruptness with which she dropped their conversation.

Gabriel, however, was used to sudden collapses and even to sudden

ruptures on the part of those addressed by him, and no man had more the

secret of remaining gracefully with his conversational wares on his

hands. He saw Mrs. Dallow approach Nick Dormer, who was talking with one

of the ladies of the embassy, and apparently signify that she wished to

speak to him. He got up and they had a minute's talk, after which he

turned and took leave of his fellow-visitors. She said a word to her

brother, Nick joined her, and they then came together to the door. In

this movement they had to pass near Nash, and it gave her an opportunity

to nod good-bye to him, which he was by no means sure she would have

done if Nick hadn't been with her. The young man just stopped; he said

to Nash: "I should like to see you this evening late. You must meet me

somewhere."

"Well take a walk--I should like that," Nash replied. "I shall smoke a

cigar at the cafÃ© on the corner of the Place de l'OpÃ©ra--you'll find me

there." He prepared to compass his own departure, but before doing so he

addressed himself to the duty of a few civil words to Lady Agnes. This

effort proved vain, for on one side she was defended by the wall of the

room and on the other rendered inaccessible by Miriam's mother, who

clung to her with a quickly-rooted fidelity, showing no symptom of

desistance. Nash declined perforce upon her daughter Grace, who said to

him: "You were talking with my cousin Mrs. Dallow."

"To her rather than with her," he smiled.

"Ah she's very charming," Grace said.

"She's very beautiful."

"And very clever," the girl continued.

"Very, very intelligent." His conversation with Miss Dormer went little

beyond this, and he presently took leave of Peter Sherringham, remarking

to him as they shook hands that he was very sorry for him. But he had

courted his fate.

"What do you mean by my fate?" Sherringham asked.

"You've got them for life."

"Why for life, when I now clearly and courageously recognise that she

isn't good?"

"Ah but she'll become so," said Gabriel Nash.

"Do you think that?" Sherringham brought out with a candour that made

his visitor laugh.

"\_You\_ will--that's more to the purpose!" the latter declared as he went

away.

Ten minutes later Lady Agnes substituted a general, vague assent for all

further particular ones, drawing off from Mrs. Rooth and from the rest

of the company with her daughters. Peter had had very little talk with

Biddy, but the girl kept her disappointment out of her pretty eyes and

said to him: "You told us she didn't know how--but she does!" There was

no suggestion of disappointment in this.

Sherringham held her hand a moment. "Ah it's you who know how, dear

Biddy!" he answered; and he was conscious that if the occasion had been

more private he would have all lawfully kissed her.

Presently three more of his guests took leave, and Mr. Nash's assurance

that he had them for life recurred to him as he observed that Mrs. Rooth

and her damsel quite failed to profit by so many examples. The Lovicks

remained--a colleague and his sociable wife--and Peter gave them a hint

that they were not to plant him there only with the two ladies. Miriam

quitted Mrs. Lovick, who had attempted, with no great subtlety, to

engage her, and came up to her host as if she suspected him of a design

of stealing from the room and had the idea of preventing it.

"I want some more tea: will you give me some more? I feel quite faint.

You don't seem to suspect how this sort of thing takes it out of one."

Peter apologised extravagantly for not having seen to it that she had

proper refreshment, and took her to the round table, in a corner, on

which the little collation had been served. He poured out tea for her

and pressed bread and butter on her and \_petits fours\_, of all which she

profusely and methodically partook. It was late; the afternoon had faded

and a lamp been brought in, the wide shade of which shed a fair glow on

the tea-service and the plates of pretty food. The Lovicks sat with Mrs.

Rooth at the other end of the room, and the girl stood at the table,

drinking her tea and eating her bread and butter. She consumed these

articles so freely that he wondered if she had been truly in want of a

meal--if they were so poor as to have to count with that sort of

privation. This supposition was softening, but still not so much so as

to make him ask her to sit down. She appeared indeed to prefer to stand:

she looked better so, as if the freedom, the conspicuity of being on her

feet and treading a stage were agreeable to her. While Sherringham

lingered near her all vaguely, his hands in his pockets and his mind now

void of everything but a planned evasion of the theatrical

question--there were moments when he was so plentifully tired of it--she

broke out abruptly: "Confess you think me intolerably bad!"

"Intolerably--no."

"Only tolerably! I find that worse."

"Every now and then you do something very right," Sherringham said.

"How many such things did I do to-day?"

"Oh three or four. I don't know that I counted very carefully."

She raised her cup to her lips, looking at him over the rim of it--a

proceeding that gave her eyes a strange expression. "It bores you and

you think it disagreeable," she then said--"I mean a girl always talking

about herself." He protested she could never bore him and she added: "Oh

I don't want compliments--I want the hard, the precious truth. An

actress has to talk about herself. What else can she talk about, poor

vain thing?"

"She can talk sometimes about other actresses."

"That comes to the same thing. You won't be serious. I'm awfully

serious." There was something that caught his attention in the note of

this--a longing half hopeless, half argumentative to be believed in. "If

one really wants to do anything one must worry it out; of course

everything doesn't come the first day," she kept on. "I can't see

everything at once; but I can see a little more--step by step--as I go;

can't I?"

"That's the way--that's the way," he gently enough returned. "When you

see the things to do the art of doing them will come--if you hammer

away. The great point's to see them."

"Yes; and you don't think me clever enough for that."

"Why do you say so when I've asked you to come here on purpose?"

"You've asked me to come, but I've had no success."

"On the contrary; every one thought you wonderful."

"Oh but they don't know!" said Miriam Rooth. "You've not said a word to

me. I don't mind your not having praised me; that would be too banal.

But if I'm bad--and I know I'm dreadful--I wish you'd talk to me about

it."

"It's delightful to talk to you," Peter found himself saying.

"No, it isn't, but it's kind"; and she looked away from him.

Her voice had with this a quality which made him exclaim: "Every now and

then you 'say' something--!"

She turned her eyes back to him and her face had a light. "I don't want

it to come by accident." Then she added: "If there's any good to be got

from trying, from showing one's self, how can it come unless one hears

the simple truth, the truth that turns one inside out? It's all for

that--to know what one is, if one's a stick!"

"You've great courage, you've rare qualities," Sherringham risked. She

had begun to touch him, to seem different: he was glad she had not gone.

But for a little she made no answer, putting down her empty cup and

yearning over the table as for something more to eat. Suddenly she

raised her head and broke out with vehemence: "I will, I will, I will!"

"You'll do what you want, evidently."

"I \_will\_ succeed--I \_will\_ be great. Of course I know too little, I've

seen too little. But I've always liked it; I've never liked anything

else. I used to learn things and do scenes and rant about the room when

I was but five years old." She went on, communicative, persuasive,

familiar, egotistical (as was necessary), and slightly common, or

perhaps only natural; with reminiscences, reasons, and anecdotes, an

unexpected profusion, and with an air of comradeship, of freedom in any

relation, which seemed to plead that she was capable at least of

embracing that side of the profession she desired to adopt. He noted

that if she had seen very little, as she said, she had also seen a great

deal; but both her experience and her innocence had been accidental and

irregular. She had seen very little acting--the theatre was always too

expensive. If she could only go often--in Paris for instance every night

for six months--to see the best, the worst, everything, she would make

things out, would observe and learn what to do, what not to do: it would

be a school of schools. But she couldn't without selling the clothes off

her back. It was vile and disgusting to be poor, and if ever she were to

know the bliss of having a few francs in her pocket she would make up

for it--that she could promise! She had never been acquainted with any

one who could tell her anything--if it was good or bad or right or

wrong--except Mrs. Delamere and poor Ruggieri. She supposed they had

told her a great deal, but perhaps they hadn't, and she was perfectly

willing to give it up if it was bad. Evidently Madame CarrÃ© thought so;

she thought it was horrid. Wasn't it perfectly divine, the way the old

woman had said those verses, those speeches of CÃ©lie? If she would only

let her come and listen to her once in a while like that it was all she

would ask. She had got lots of ideas just from that half-hour; she had

practised them over, over, and over again, the moment she got home. He

might ask her mother--he might ask the people next door. If Madame CarrÃ©

didn't think she could work, she might have heard, could she have

listened at the door, something that would show her. But she didn't

think her even good enough to criticise--since that wasn't criticism,

telling her her head was good. Of course her head was good--she needn't

travel up to the \_quartiers excentriques\_ to find that out. It was her

mother, the way she talked, who gave the idea that she wanted to be

elegant and moral and a \_femme du monde\_ and all that sort of trash. Of

course that put people off, when they were only thinking of the real

right way. Didn't she know, Miriam herself, that this was the one thing

to think of? But any one would be kind to her mother who knew what a

dear she was. "She doesn't know when any thing's right or wrong, but

she's a perfect saint," said the girl, obscuring considerably her

vindication. "She doesn't mind when I say things over by the hour,

dinning them into her ears while she sits there and reads. She's a

tremendous reader; she's awfully up in literature. She taught me

everything herself. I mean all that sort of thing. Of course I'm not so

fond of reading; I go in for the book of life." Sherringham wondered if

her mother had not at any rate taught her that phrase--he thought it

highly probable. "It would give on \_my\_ nerves, the life I lead her,"

Miriam continued; "but she's really a delicious woman."

The oddity of this epithet made Peter laugh, and altogether, in a few

minutes, which is perhaps a sign that he abused his right to be a man of

moods, the young lady had produced in him a revolution of curiosity, set

his sympathy in motion. Her mixture, as it spread itself before him, was

an appeal and a challenge: she was sensitive and dense, she was

underbred and fine. Certainly she was very various, and that was rare;

quite not at this moment the heavy-eyed, frightened creature who had

pulled herself together with such an effort at Madame CarrÃ©'s, nor the

elated "phenomenon" who had just been declaiming, nor the rather

affected and contradictious young person with whom he had walked home

from the Rue de Constantinople. Was this succession of phases a sign she

was really a case of the celebrated artistic temperament, the nature

that made people provoking and interesting? That Sherringham himself was

of this shifting complexion is perhaps proved by his odd capacity for

being of two different minds very nearly at the same time. Miriam was

pretty now, with felicities and graces, with charming, unusual eyes.

Yes, there were things he could do for her; he had already forgotten the

chill of Mr. Nash's irony, of his prophecy. He was even scarce conscious

how little in general he liked hints, insinuations, favours asked

obliquely and plaintively: that was doubtless also because the girl was

suddenly so taking and so fraternising. Perhaps indeed it was unjust to

qualify as roundabout the manner in which Miss Rooth conveyed that it

was open to him not only to pay for her lessons, but to meet the expense

of her nightly attendance with her mother at instructive exhibitions of

theatrical art. It was a large order, sending the pair to all the plays;

but what Peter now found himself thinking of was not so much its

largeness as the possible interest of going with them sometimes and

pointing the moral--the technical one--of showing her the things he

liked, the things he disapproved. She repeated her declaration that she

recognised the fallacy of her mother's view of heroines impossibly

virtuous and of the importance of her looking out for such tremendously

proper people. "One must let her talk, but of course it creates a

prejudice," she said with her eyes on Mr. and Mrs. Lovick, who had got

up, terminating their communion with Mrs. Rooth. "It's a great muddle, I

know, but she can't bear anything coarse or nasty--and quite right too.

I shouldn't either if I didn't have to. But I don't care a sou where I

go if I can get to act, or who they are if they'll help me. I want to

act--that's what I want to do; I don't want to meddle in people's

affairs. I can look out for myself--I'm all right!" the girl exclaimed

roundly, frankly, with a ring of honesty which made her crude and pure.

"As for doing the bad ones I'm not afraid of that."

"The bad ones?"

"The bad women in the plays--like Madame CarrÃ©. I'll do any vile

creature."

"I think you'll do best what you are"--and Sherringham laughed for the

interest of it. "You're a strange girl."

"\_Je crois bien\_! Doesn't one have to be, to want to go and exhibit

one's self to a loathsome crowd, on a platform, with trumpets and a big

drum, for money--to parade one's body and one's soul?"

He looked at her a moment: her face changed constantly; now it had a

fine flush and a noble delicacy. "Give it up. You're too good for it,"

he found himself pleading. "I doubt if you've an idea of what girls have

to go through."

"Never, never--never till I'm pelted!" she cried.

"Then stay on here a bit. I'll take you to the theatres."

"Oh you dear!" Miriam delightedly exclaimed. Mr. and Mrs. Lovick,

accompanied by Mrs. Rooth, now crossed the room to them, and the girl

went on in the same tone: "Mamma dear, he's the best friend we've ever

had--he's a great deal nicer than I thought."

"So are you, mademoiselle," said Peter Sherringham.

"Oh, I trust Mr. Sherringham--I trust him infinitely," Mrs. Rooth

returned, covering him with her mild, respectable, wheedling eyes. "The

kindness of every one has been beyond everything. Mr. and Mrs. Lovick

can't say enough. They make the most obliging offers. They want you to

know their brother."

"Oh I say, he's no brother of mine," Mr. Lovick protested

good-naturedly.

"They think he'll be so suggestive, he'll put us up to the right

things," Mrs. Rooth went on.

"It's just a little brother of mine--such a dear, amusing, clever boy,"

Mrs. Lovick explained.

"Do you know she has got nine? Upon my honour she has!" said her

husband. "This one is the sixth. Fancy if I had to take them all over!"

"Yes, it makes it rather awkward," Mrs. Lovick amiably conceded. "He has

gone on the stage, poor darling--but he acts rather well."

"He tried for the diplomatic service, but he didn't precisely dazzle his

examiners," Mr. Lovick further mentioned.

"Edmund's very nasty about him. There are lots of gentlemen on the

stage--he's not the first."

"It's such a comfort to hear that," said Mrs. Rooth.

"I'm much obliged to you. Has he got a theatre?" Miriam asked.

"My dear young lady, he hasn't even got an engagement," replied the

young man's terrible brother-in-law.

"He hasn't been at it very long, but I'm sure he'll get on. He's

immensely in earnest and very good-looking. I just said that if he

should come over to see us you might rather like to meet him. He might

give you some tips, as my husband says."

"I don't care for his looks, but I should like his tips," Miriam

liberally smiled.

"And is he coming over to see you?" asked Sherringham, to whom, while

this exchange of remarks, which he had not lost, was going on, Mrs.

Rooth had in lowered accents addressed herself.

"Not if I can help it I think!" But Mr. Lovick was so gaily rude that it

wasn't embarrassing.

"Oh sir, I'm sure you're fond of him," Mrs. Rooth remonstrated as the

party passed together into the antechamber.

"No, really, I like some of the others--four or five of them; but I

don't like Arty."

"We'll make it up to him, then; \_we\_'ll like him," Miriam answered with

spirit; and her voice rang in the staircase--Sherringham attended them a

little way--with a charm which her host had rather missed in her

loudness of the day before.

IX

Nick Dormer found his friend Nash that evening at the place of their

tryst--smoking a cigar, in the warm bright night, on the terrace of the

cafÃ© forming one of the angles of the Place de l'OpÃ©ra. He sat down with

him, but at the end of five minutes uttered a protest against the crush

and confusion, the publicity and vulgarity of the place, the shuffling

procession of the crowd, the jostle of fellow-customers, the perpetual

brush of waiters. "Come away; I want to talk to you and I can't talk

here. I don't care where we go. It will be pleasant to walk; well stroll

away to the \_quartiers sÃ©rieux\_. Each time I come to Paris I at the end

of three days take the Boulevard, with its conventional grimace, into

greater aversion. I hate even to cross it--I go half a mile round to

avoid it."

The young men took their course together down the Rue de la Paix to the

Rue de Rivoli, which they crossed, passing beside the gilded rails of

the Tuileries. The beauty of the night--the only defect of which was

that the immense illumination of Paris kept it from being quite night

enough, made it a sort of bedizened, rejuvenated day--gave a charm to

the quieter streets, drew our friends away to the right, to the river

and the bridges, the older, duskier city. The pale ghost of the palace

that had perished by fire hung over them a while, and, by the passage

now open at all times across the garden of the Tuileries, they came out

upon the Seine. They kept on and on, moving slowly, smoking, talking,

pausing, stopping to look, to emphasise, to compare. They fell into

discussion, into confidence, into inquiry, sympathetic or satiric, and

into explanations which needed in turn to be explained. The balmy night,

the time for talk, the amusement of Paris, the memory of younger

passages, gave a lift to the occasion. Nick had already forgotten his

little brush with Julia on his leaving Peter's tea-party at her side,

and that he had been almost disconcerted by the asperity with which she

denounced the odious man he had taken it into his head to force upon

her. Impertinent and fatuous she had called him; and when Nick began to

plead that he was really neither of these things, though he could

imagine his manner might sometimes suggest them, she had declared that

she didn't wish to argue about him or ever to hear of him again. Nick

hadn't counted on her liking Gabriel Nash, but had thought her not

liking him wouldn't perceptibly matter. He had given himself the

diversion, not cruel surely to any one concerned, of seeing what she

would make of a type she had never before met. She had made even less

than he expected, and her intimation that he had played her a trick had

been irritating enough to prevent his reflecting that the offence might

have been in some degree with Nash. But he had recovered from his

resentment sufficiently to ask this personage, with every possible

circumstance of implied consideration for the lady, what had been the

impression made by his charming cousin.

"Upon my word, my dear fellow, I don't regard that as a fair question,"

Gabriel said. "Besides, if you think Mrs. Dallow charming what on earth

need it matter to you what I think? The superiority of one man's

opinion over another's is never so great as when the opinion's about a

woman."

"It was to help me to find out what I think of yourself," Nick returned.

"Oh, that you'll never do. I shall bewilder you to the end. The lady

with whom you were so good as to make me acquainted is a beautiful

specimen of the English garden-flower, the product of high cultivation

and much tending; a tall, delicate stem with the head set upon it in a

manner which, as a thing seen and remembered, should doubtless count for

us as a gift of the gods. She's the perfect type of the object \_raised\_

or bred, and everything about her hangs together and conduces to the

effect, from the angle of her elbow to the way she drops that vague,

conventional, dry little 'Oh!' which dispenses with all further

performance. That degree of completeness is always satisfying. But I

didn't satisfy her, and she didn't understand me. I don't think they

usually understand."

"She's no worse than I then."

"Ah she didn't try."

"No, she doesn't try. But she probably thought you a monster of conceit,

and she would think so still more if she were to hear you talk about her

trying."

"Very likely--very likely," said Gabriel Nash. "I've an idea a good many

people think that. It strikes me as comic. I suppose it's a result of my

little system."

"What little system?"

"Oh nothing more wonderful than the idea of being just the same to every

one. People have so bemuddled themselves that the last thing they can

conceive is that one should be simple."

"Lord, do you call yourself simple?" Nick ejaculated.

"Absolutely; in the sense of having no interest of my own to push, no

nostrum to advertise, no power to conciliate, no axe to grind. I'm not a

savage--ah far from it!--but I really think I'm perfectly independent."

"Well, that's always provoking!" Nick knowingly returned.

"So it would appear, to the great majority of one's fellow-mortals; and

I well remember the pang with which I originally made that discovery. It

darkened my spirit at a time when I had no thought of evil. What we

like, when we're unregenerate, is that a new-comer should give us a

password, come over to our side, join our little camp or religion, get

into our little boat, in short, whatever it is, and help us to row it.

It's natural enough; we're mostly in different tubs and cockles,

paddling for life. Our opinions, our convictions and doctrines and

standards, are simply the particular thing that will make the boat

go--\_our boat\_, naturally, for they may very often be just the thing

that will sink another. If you won't get in people generally hate you."

"Your metaphor's very lame," said Nick. "It's the overcrowded boat that

goes to the bottom."

"Oh I'll give it another leg or two! Boats can be big, in the infinite

of space, and a doctrine's a raft that floats the better the more

passengers it carries. A passenger jumps over from time to time, not so

much from fear of sinking as from a want of interest in the course or

the company. He swims, he plunges, he dives, he dips down and visits the

fishes and the mermaids and the submarine caves; he goes from craft to

craft and splashes about, on his own account, in the blue, cool water.

The regenerate, as I call them, are the passengers who jump over in

search of better fun. I jumped over long ago."

"And now of course you're at the head of the regenerate; for, in your

turn"--Nick found the figure delightful--"you all form a select school

of porpoises."

"Not a bit, and I know nothing about heads--in the sense you mean. I've

grown a tail if you will; I'm the merman wandering free. It's the

jolliest of trades!"

Before they had gone many steps further Nick Dormer stopped short with a

question. "I say, my dear fellow, do you mind mentioning to me whether

you're the greatest humbug and charlatan on earth, or a genuine

intelligence, one that has sifted things for itself?"

"I do lead your poor British wit a dance--I'm so sorry," Nash replied

benignly. "But I'm very sincere. And I \_have\_ tried to straighten out

things a bit for myself."

"Then why do you give people such a handle?"

"Such a handle?"

"For thinking you're an--for thinking you're a mere \_farceur\_."

"I daresay it's my manner: they're so unused to any sort of candour."

"Well then why don't you try another?" Nick asked.

"One has the manner that one can, and mine moreover's a part of my

little system."

"Ah if you make so much of your little system you're no better than any

one else," Nick returned as they went on.

"I don't pretend to be better, for we're all miserable sinners; I only

pretend to be bad in a pleasanter, brighter way--by what I can see. It's

the simplest thing in the world; just take for granted our right to be

happy and brave. What's essentially kinder and more helpful than that,

what's more beneficent? But the tradition of dreariness, of stodginess,

of dull, dense, literal prose, has so sealed people's eyes that they've

ended by thinking the most natural of all things the most perverse. Why

so keep up the dreariness, in our poor little day? No one can tell me

why, and almost every one calls me names for simply asking the question.

But I go on, for I believe one can do a little good by it. I want so

much to do a little good," Gabriel Nash continued, taking his

companion's arm. "My persistence is systematic: don't you see what I

mean? I won't be dreary--no, no, no; and I won't recognise the

necessity, or even, if there be any way out of it, the accident, of

dreariness in the life that surrounds me. That's enough to make people

stare: they're so damned stupid!"

"They think you so damned impudent," Nick freely explained.

At this Nash stopped him short with a small cry, and, turning his eyes,

Nick saw under the lamps of the quay that he had brought a flush of pain

into his friend's face. "I don't strike you that way?"

"Oh 'me!' Wasn't it just admitted that I don't in the least make you

out?"

"That's the last thing!" Nash declared, as if he were thinking the idea

over, with an air of genuine distress. "But with a little patience we'll

clear it up together--if you care enough about it," he added more

cheerfully. Letting his companion proceed again he continued: "Heaven

help us all, what do people mean by impudence? There are many, I think,

who don't understand its nature or its limits; and upon my word I've

literally seen mere quickness of intelligence or of perception, the jump

of a step or two, a little whirr of the wings of talk, mistaken for it.

Yes, I've encountered men and women who thought you impudent if you

weren't simply so stupid as they. The only impudence is unprovoked, or

even mere dull, aggression, and I indignantly protest that I'm never

guilty of \_that\_ clumsiness. Ah for what do they take one, with \_their\_

beastly presumption? Even to defend myself sometimes I've to make

believe to myself that I care. I always feel as if I didn't successfully

make others think so. Perhaps they see impudence in that. But I daresay

the offence is in the things that I take, as I say, for granted; for if

one tries to be pleased one passes perhaps inevitably for being pleased

above all with one's self. That's really not my case--I find my capacity

for pleasure deplorably below the mark I've set. This is why, as I've

told you, I cultivate it, I try to bring it up. And I'm actuated by

positive benevolence; I've that impudent pretension. That's what I mean

by being the same to every one, by having only one manner. If one's

conscious and ingenious to that end what's the harm--when one's motives

are so pure? By never, \_never\_ making the concession, one may end by

becoming a perceptible force for good."

"What concession are you talking about, in God's name?" Nick demanded.

"Why, that we're here all for dreariness. It's impossible to grant it

sometimes if you wish to deny it ever."

"And what do you mean then by dreariness? That's modern slang and

terribly vague. Many good things are dreary--virtue and decency and

charity, and perseverance and courage and honour."

"Say at once that life's dreary, my dear fellow!" Gabriel Nash

exclaimed.

"That's on the whole my besetting impression."

"\_Cest lÃ  que je vous attends!\_ I'm precisely engaged in trying what can

be done in taking it the other way. It's my little personal experiment.

Life consists of the personal experiments of each of us, and the point

of an experiment is that it shall succeed. What we contribute is our

treatment of the material, our rendering of the text, our style. A sense

of the qualities of a style is so rare that many persons should

doubtless be forgiven for not being able to read, or at all events to

enjoy, us; but is that a reason for giving it up--for not being, in this

other sphere, if one possibly can, an Addison, a Ruskin, a Renan? Ah we

must write our best; it's the great thing we can do in the world, on the

right side. One has one's form, \_que diable\_, and a mighty good thing

that one has. I'm not afraid of putting all life into mine, and without

unduly squeezing it. I'm not afraid of putting in honour and courage and

charity--without spoiling them: on the contrary I shall only do them

good. People may not read you at sight, may not like you, but there's a

chance they'll come round; and the only way to court the chance is to

keep it up--always to keep it up. That's what I do, my dear man--if you

don't think I've perseverance. If some one's touched here and there, if

you give a little impression of truth and charm, that's your reward;

besides of course the pleasure for yourself."

"Don't you think your style's a trifle affected?" Nick asked for further

amusement.

"That's always the charge against a personal manner: if you've any at

all people think you've too much. Perhaps, perhaps--who can say? The

lurking unexpressed is infinite, and affectation must have begun, long

ago, with the first act of reflective expression--the substitution of

the few placed articulate words for the cry or the thump or the hug. Of

course one isn't perfect; but that's the delightful thing about art,

that there's always more to learn and more to do; it grows bigger the

more one uses it and meets more questions the more they come up. No

doubt I'm rough still, but I'm in the right direction: I make it my

business to testify for the fine."

"Ah the fine--there it stands, over there!" said Nick Dormer. "I'm not

so sure about yours--I don't know what I've got hold of. But Notre Dame

\_is\_ truth; Notre Dame \_is\_ charm; on Notre Dame the distracted mind can

rest. Come over with me and look at her!"

They had come abreast of the low island from which the great cathedral,

disengaged to-day from her old contacts and adhesions, rises high and

fair, with her front of beauty and her majestic mass, darkened at that

hour, or at least simplified, under the stars, but only more serene and

sublime for her happy union far aloft with the cool distance and the

night. Our young men, fantasticating as freely as I leave the reader to

estimate, crossed the wide, short bridge which made them face toward the

monuments of old Paris--the Palais de Justice, the Conciergerie, the

holy chapel of Saint Louis. They came out before the church, which looks

down on a square where the past, once so thick in the very heart of

Paris, has been made rather a blank, pervaded however by the everlasting

freshness of the vast cathedral-face. It greeted Nick Dormer and Gabriel

Nash with a kindness the long centuries had done nothing to dim. The

lamplight of the old city washed its foundations, but the towers and

buttresses, the arches, the galleries, the statues, the vast

rose-window, the large full composition, seemed to grow clearer while

they climbed higher, as if they had a conscious benevolent answer for

the upward gaze of men.

"How it straightens things out and blows away one's vapours--anything

that's \_done\_!" said Nick; while his companion exclaimed blandly and

affectionately:

"The dear old thing!"

"The great point's to do something, instead of muddling and questioning;

and, by Jove, it makes me want to!"

"Want to build a cathedral?" Nash inquired.

"Yes, just that."

"It's you who puzzle \_me\_ then, my dear fellow. You can't build them out

of words."

"What is it the great poets do?" asked Nick.

"\_Their\_ words are ideas--their words are images, enchanting

collocations and unforgettable signs. But the verbiage of parliamentary

speeches--!"

"Well," said Nick with a candid, reflective sigh, "you can rear a great

structure of many things--not only of stones and timbers and painted

glass." They walked round this example of one, pausing, criticising,

admiring, and discussing; mingling the grave with the gay and paradox

with contemplation. Behind and at the sides the huge, dusky vessel of

the church seemed to dip into the Seine or rise out of it, floating

expansively--a ship of stone with its flying buttresses thrown forth

like an array of mighty oars. Nick Dormer lingered near it in joy, in

soothing content, as if it had been the temple of a faith so dear to him

that there was peace and security in its precinct. And there was comfort

too and consolation of the same sort in the company at this moment of

Nash's equal appreciation, of his response, by his own signs, to the

great effect. He took it all in so and then so gave it all out that Nick

was reminded of the radiance his boyish admiration had found in him of

old, the easy grasp of everything of that kind. "Everything of that

kind" was to Nick's sense the description of a wide and bright domain.

They crossed to the farther side of the river, where the influence of

the Gothic monument threw a distinction even over the Parisian

smartnesses--the municipal rule and measure, the importunate

symmetries, the "handsomeness" of everything, the extravagance of

gaslight, the perpetual click on the neat bridges. In front of a quiet

little cafÃ© on the left bank Gabriel Nash said, "Let's sit down"--he was

always ready to sit down. It was a friendly establishment and an

unfashionable quarter, far away from the caravan-series; there were the

usual little tables and chairs on the quay, the muslin curtains behind

the glazed front, the general sense of sawdust and of drippings of

watery beer. The place was subdued to stillness, but not extinguished,

by the lateness of the hour; no vehicles passed, only now and then a

light Parisian foot. Beyond the parapet they could hear the flow of the

Seine. Nick Dormer said it made him think of the old Paris, of the great

Revolution, of Madame Roland, \_quoi\_! Gabriel said they could have

watery beer but were not obliged to drink it. They sat a long time; they

talked a great deal, and the more they said the more the unsaid came up.

Presently Nash found occasion to throw out: "I go about my business like

any good citizen--that's all."

"And what is your business?"

"The spectacle of the world."

Nick laughed out. "And what do you do with that?"

"What does any one do with spectacles? I look at it. I see."

"You're full of contradictions and inconsistencies," Nick however

objected. "You described yourself to me half an hour ago as an apostle

of beauty."

"Where's the inconsistency? I do it in the broad light of day, whatever

I do: that's virtually what I meant. If I look at the spectacle of the

world I look in preference at what's charming in it. Sometimes I've to

go far to find it--very likely; but that's just what I do. I go far--as

far as my means permit me. Last year I heard of such a delightful little

spot; a place where a wild fig-tree grows in the south wall, the outer

side, of an old Spanish city. I was told it was a deliciously brown

corner--the sun making it warm in winter. As soon as I could I went

there."

"And what did you do?"

"I lay on the first green grass--I liked it."

"If that sort of thing's all you accomplish you're not encouraging."

"I accomplish my happiness--it seems to me that's something. I have

feelings, I have sensations: let me tell you that's not so common. It's

rare to have them, and if you chance to have them it's rare not to be

ashamed of them. I go after them--when I judge they won't hurt any one."

"You're lucky to have money for your travelling expenses," said Nick.

"No doubt, no doubt; but I do it very cheap. I take my stand on my

nature, on my fortunate character. I'm not ashamed of it, I don't think

it's so horrible, my character. But we've so befogged and befouled the

whole question of liberty, of spontaneity, of good humour and

inclination and enjoyment, that there's nothing that makes people stare

so as to see one natural."

"You're always thinking too much of 'people.'"

"They say I think too little," Gabriel smiled.

"Well, I've agreed to stand for Harsh," said Nick with a roundabout

transition.

"It's you then who are lucky to have money."

"I haven't," Nick explained. "My expenses are to be paid."

"Then you too must think of 'people.'"

Nick made no answer to this, but after a moment said: "I wish very much

you had more to show for it."

"To show for what?"

"Your little system--the Ã¦sthetic life."

Nash hesitated, tolerantly, gaily, as he often did, with an air of being

embarrassed to choose between several answers, any one of which would be

so right. "Oh having something to show's such a poor business. It's a

kind of confession of failure."

"Yes, you're more affected than anything else," said Nick impatiently.

"No, my dear boy, I'm more good-natured: don't I prove it? I'm rather

disappointed to find you not more accessible to esoteric doctrine. But

there is, I confess, another plane of intelligence, honourable, and very

honourable, in its way, from which it may legitimately appear important

to have something to show. If you must confine yourself to that plane I

won't refuse you my sympathy. After all that's what I have to show! But

the degree of my sympathy must of course depend on the nature of the

demonstration you wish to make."

"You know it very well--you've guessed it," Nick returned, looking

before him in a conscious, modest way which would have been called

sheepish had he been a few years younger.

"Ah you've broken the scent with telling me you're going back to the

House of Commons," said Nash.

"No wonder you don't make it out! My situation's certainly absurd

enough. What I really hanker for is to be a painter; and of portraits,

on the whole, I think. That's the abject, crude, ridiculous fact. In

this out-of-the-way corner, at the dead of night, in lowered tones, I

venture to disclose it to you. Isn't that the Ã¦sthetic life?"

"Do you know how to paint?" asked Nash.

"Not in the least. No element of burlesque is therefore wanting to my

position."

"That makes no difference. I'm so glad."

"So glad I don't know how?"

"So glad of it all. Yes, that only makes it better. You're a delightful

case, and I like delightful cases. We must see it through. I rejoice I

met you again."

"Do you think I can do anything?" Nick inquired.

"Paint good pictures? How can I tell without seeing some of your work?

Doesn't it come back to me that at Oxford you used to sketch very

prettily? But that's the last thing that matters."

"What does matter then?" Nick asked with his eyes on his companion.

"To be on the right side--on the side of the 'fine.'"

"There'll be precious little of the 'fine' if I produce nothing but

daubs."

"Ah you cling to the old false measure of success! I must cure you of

that. There'll be the beauty of having been disinterested and

independent; of having taken the world in the free, brave, personal

way."

"I shall nevertheless paint decently if I can," Nick presently said.

"I'm almost sorry! It will make your case less clear, your example less

grand."

"My example will be grand enough, with the fight I shall have to make."

"The fight? With whom?"

"With myself first of all. I'm awfully against it."

"Ah but you'll have me on the other side," Nash smiled.

"Well, you'll have more than a handful to meet--everything, every one

that belongs to me, that touches me near or far; my family, my blood, my

heredity, my traditions, my promises, my circumstances, my prejudices;

my little past--such as it is; my great future--such as it has been

supposed it may be."

"I see, I see. It's splendid!" Nash exclaimed. "And Mrs. Dallow into the

bargain," he added.

"Yes, Mrs. Dallow if you like."

"Are you in love with her?"

"Not in the least."

"Well, she is with you--so I understood."

"Don't say that," said Nick Dormer with sudden sternness.

"Ah you are, you are!" his companion pronounced, judging apparently from

this accent.

"I don't know \_what\_ I am--heaven help me!" Nick broke out, tossing his

hat down on his little tin table with vehemence. "I'm a freak of nature

and a sport of the mocking gods. Why should they go out of their way to

worry me? Why should they do everything so inconsequent, so improbable,

so preposterous? It's the vulgarest practical joke. There has never been

anything of the sort among us; we're all Philistines to the core, with

about as much esthetic sense as that hat. It's excellent soil--I don't

complain of it--but not a soil to grow that flower. From where the devil

then has the seed been dropped? I look back from generation to

generation; I scour our annals without finding the least little

sketching grandmother, any sign of a building or versifying or

collecting or even tulip-raising ancestor. They were all as blind as

bats, and none the less happy for that. I'm a wanton variation, an

unaccountable monster. My dear father, rest his soul, went through life

without a suspicion that there's anything in it that can't be boiled

into blue-books, and became in that conviction a very distinguished

person. He brought me up in the same simplicity and in the hope of the

same eminence. It would have been better if I had remained so. I think

it's partly your fault that I haven't," Nick went on. "At Oxford you

were very bad company for me--my evil genius: you opened my eyes, you

communicated the poison. Since then, little by little, it has been

working within me; vaguely, covertly, insensibly at first, but during

the last year or two with violence, pertinacity, cruelty. I've resorted

to every antidote in life; but it's no use--I'm stricken. \_C'est VÃ©nus

toute entiÃ¨re Ã  sa proie attachÃ©e\_--putting Venus for 'art.' It tears me

to pieces as I may say."

"I see, I follow you," said Nash, who had listened to this recital with

radiant interest and curiosity. "And that's why you are going to stand."

"Precisely--it's an antidote. And at present you're another."

"Another?"

"That's why I jumped at you. A bigger dose of you may disagree with me

to that extent that I shall either die or get better."

"I shall control the dilution," said Nash. "Poor fellow--if you're

elected!" he added.

"Poor fellow either way. You don't know the atmosphere in which I live,

the horror, the scandal my apostasy would provoke, the injury and

suffering it would inflict. I believe it would really kill my mother.

She thinks my father's watching me from the skies."

"Jolly to make him jump!" Nash suggested.

"He'd jump indeed--come straight down on top of me. And then the

grotesqueness of it--to \_begin\_ all of a sudden at my age."

"It's perfect indeed, it's too lovely a case," Nash raved.

"Think how it sounds--a paragraph in the London papers: 'Mr. Nicholas

Dormer, M. P. for Harsh and son of the late Right Honourable and so

forth and so forth, is about to give up his seat and withdraw from

public life in order to devote himself to the practice of

portrait-painting--and with the more commendable perseverance by reason

of all the dreadful time he has lost. Orders, in view of this,

respectfully solicited.'"

"The nineteenth century's a sweeter time than I thought," said Nash.

"It's the portrait then that haunts your dreams?"

"I wish you could see. You must of course come immediately to my place

in London."

"Perfidious wretch, you're capable of having talent--which of course

will spoil everything!" Gabriel wailed.

"No, I'm too old and was too early perverted. It's too late to go

through the mill."

"You make \_me\_ young! Don't miss your election at your peril. Think of

the edification."

"The edification--?"

"Of your throwing it all up the next moment."

"That would be pleasant for Mr. Carteret," Nick brooded.

"Mr. Carteret--?"

"A dear old family friend who'll wish to pay my agent's bill."

"Serve him right for such depraved tastes."

"You do me good," said Nick as he rose and turned away.

"Don't call me useless then."

"Ah but not in the way you mean. It's only if I don't get in that I

shall perhaps console myself with the brush," Nick returned with

humorous, edifying elegance while they retraced their steps.

"For the sake of all the muses then don't stand. For you \_will\_ get in."

"Very likely. At any rate I've promised."

"You've promised Mrs. Dallow?"

"It's her place--she'll \_put\_ me in," Nick said.

"Baleful woman! But I'll pull you out!" cried Gabriel Nash.

X

For several days Peter Sherringham had business in hand which left him

neither time nor freedom of mind to occupy himself actively with the

ladies of the HÃ´tel de la Garonne. There were moments when they brushed

across his memory, but their passage was rapid and not lighted with

complacent attention; for he shrank from bringing to the proof the

question of whether Miriam would be an interest or only a bore. She had

left him after their second meeting with a quickened sympathy, but in

the course of a few hours that flame had burned dim. Like most other men

he was a mixture of impulse and reflexion, but was peculiar in this,

that thinking things over almost always made him think less

conveniently. He found illusions necessary, so that in order to keep an

adequate number going he often forbade himself any excess of that

exercise. Mrs. Rooth and her daughter were there and could certainly be

trusted to make themselves felt. He was conscious of their anxiety and

their calculations as of a frequent oppression, and knew that whatever

results might ensue he should have to do the costly thing for them. An

idea of tenacity, of worrying feminine duration, associated itself with

their presence; he would have assented with a silent nod to the

proposition--enunciated by Gabriel Nash--that he was saddled with them.

Remedies hovered before him, but these figured also at the same time as

complications; ranging vaguely from the expenditure of money to the

discovery that he was in love. This latter accident would be

particularly tedious; he had a full perception of the arts by which the

girl's mother might succeed in making it so. It wouldn't be a

compensation for trouble, but a trouble which in itself would require

compensations. Would that balm spring from the spectacle of the young

lady's genius? The genius would have to be very great to justify a

rising young diplomatist in making a fool of himself.

With the excuse of pressing work he put off Miss Rooth from day to day,

and from day to day he expected to hear her knock at his door. It would

be time enough when they ran him to earth again; and he was unable to

see how after all he could serve them even then. He had proposed

impetuously a course of the theatres; but that would be a considerable

personal effort now that the summer was about to begin--a free bid for

bad air, stale pieces, and tired actors. When, however, more than a week

had elapsed without a reminder of his neglected promise it came over him

that he must himself in honour give a sign. There was a delicacy in such

unexpected and such difficult discretion--he was touched by being let

alone. The flurry of work at the embassy was over and he had time to ask

himself what in especial he should do. He wanted something definite to

suggest before communicating with the HÃ´tel de la Garonne.

As a consequence of this speculation he went back to Madame CarrÃ© to ask

her to reconsider her stern judgement and give the young English

lady--to oblige him--a dozen lessons of the sort she knew so well how to

give. He was aware that this request scarcely stood on its feet; for in

the first place Madame CarrÃ© never reconsidered when once she had got

her impression, and in the second never wasted herself on subjects whom

nature had not formed to do her honour. He knew his asking her to strain

a point to please him would give her a false idea--save that for that

matter she had it already--of his relations, actual or prospective, with

the girl; but he decided he needn't care for this, since Miriam herself

probably wouldn't care. What he had mainly in mind was to say to the old

actress that she had been mistaken--the \_jeune Anglaise\_ wasn't such a

\_grue\_. This would take some courage, but it would also add to the

amusement of his visit.

He found her at home, but as soon as he had expressed his conviction she

began: "Oh, your \_jeune Anglaise\_, I know a great deal more about her

than you! She has been back to see me twice; she doesn't go the longest

way round. She charges me like a grenadier and asks me to give

her--guess a little what!--private recitations all to herself. If she

doesn't succeed it won't be for want of knowing how to thump at doors.

The other day when I came in she was waiting for me; she had been there

two hours. My private recitations--have you an idea what people pay for

them?"

"Between artists, you know, there are easier conditions," Sherringham

laughed.

"How do I know if she's an artist? She won't open her mouth to me; what

she wants is to make me say things to \_her\_. She does make me--I don't

know how--and she sits there gaping at me with her big eyes. They look

like open pockets!"

"I daresay she'll profit by it," said Sherringham.

"I daresay \_you\_ will! Her face is stupid while she watches me, and when

she has tired me out she simply walks away. However, as she comes

back--!"

Madame CarrÃ© paused a moment, listened and then cried: "Didn't I tell

you?"

Sherringham heard a parley of voices in the little antechamber, and the

next moment the door was pushed open and Miriam Rooth bounded into the

room. She was flushed and breathless, without a smile, very direct.

"Will you hear me to-day? I know four things," she immediately broke

out. Then seeing Sherringham she added in the same brisk, earnest tone,

as if the matter were of the highest importance: "Oh how d'ye do? I'm

very glad you're here." She said nothing else to him than this, appealed

to him in no way, made no allusion to his having neglected her, but

addressed herself to Madame CarrÃ© as if he had not been there; making no

excuses and using no flattery; taking rather a tone of equal

authority--all as if the famous artist had an obvious duty toward her.

This was another variation Peter thought; it differed from each of the

attitudes in which he had previously seen her. It came over him suddenly

that so far from there being any question of her having the histrionic

nature she simply had it in such perfection that she was always acting;

that her existence was a series of parts assumed for the moment, each

changed for the next, before the perpetual mirror of some curiosity or

admiration or wonder--some spectatorship that she perceived or imagined

in the people about her. Interested as he had ever been in the

profession of which she was potentially an ornament, this idea startled

him by its novelty and even lent, on the spot, a formidable, a really

appalling character to Miriam Rooth. It struck him abruptly that a woman

whose only being was to "make believe," to make believe she had any and

every being you might like and that would serve a purpose and produce a

certain effect, and whose identity resided in the continuity of her

personations, so that she had no moral privacy, as he phrased it to

himself, but lived in a high wind of exhibition, of figuration--such a

woman was a kind of monster in whom of necessity there would be nothing

to "be fond" of, because there would be nothing to take hold of. He felt

for a moment how simple he had been not to have achieved before this

analysis of the actress. The girl's very face made it vivid to him

now--the discovery that she positively had no countenance of her own,

but only the countenance of the occasion, a sequence, a variety--capable

possibly of becoming immense--of representative movements. She was

always trying them, practising them, for her amusement or profit,

jumping from one to the other and extending her range; and this would

doubtless be her occupation more and more as she acquired ease and

confidence. The expression that came nearest belonging to her, as it

were, was the one that came nearest being a blank--an air of inanity

when she forgot herself in some act of sincere attention. Then her eye

was heavy and her mouth betrayed a commonness; though it was perhaps

just at such a moment that the fine line of her head told most. She had

looked slightly \_bÃªte\_ even when Sherringham, on their first meeting at

Madame CarrÃ©'s, said to Nick Dormer that she was the image of the Tragic

Muse.

Now, at any rate, he seemed to see that she might do what she liked with

her face. It was an elastic substance, an element of gutta-percha, like

the flexibility of the gymnast, the lady at the music-hall who is shot

from the mouth of a cannon. He winced a little at this coarser view of

the actress; he had somehow always looked more poetically at that

priestess of art. Yet what was she, the priestess, when one came to

think of it, but a female gymnast, a mountebank at higher wages? She

didn't literally hang by her heels from a trapeze and hold a fat man in

her teeth, but she made the same use of her tongue, of her eyes, of the

imitative trick, that her muscular sister made of leg and jaw. It was an

odd circumstance that Miss Rooth's face seemed to him to-day a finer

instrument than old Madame CarrÃ©'s. It was doubtless that the girl's was

fresh and strong and had a future in it, while poor Madame CarrÃ©'s was

worn and weary and had only a past.

The old woman said something, half in jest, half in real resentment,

about the brutality of youth while Miriam went to a mirror and quickly

took off her hat, patting and arranging her hair as a preliminary to

making herself heard. Sherringham saw with surprise and amusement that

the keen Frenchwoman, who had in her long life exhausted every

adroitness, was in a manner helpless and coerced, obliging all in spite

of herself. Her young friend had taken but a few days and a couple of

visits to become a successful force; she had imposed herself, and Madame

CarrÃ©, while she laughed--yet looked terrible too, with such high

artifices of eye and gesture--was reduced to the last line of defence;

that of pronouncing her coarse and clumsy, saying she might knock her

down, but that this proved nothing. She spoke jestingly enough not to

offend, but her manner betrayed the irritation of an intelligent woman

who at an advanced age found herself for the first time failing to

understand. What she didn't understand was the kind of social product

thus presented to her by Gabriel Nash; and this suggested to Sherringham

that the \_jeune Anglaise\_ was perhaps indeed rare, a new type, as Madame

CarrÃ© must have seen innumerable varieties. He saw the girl was

perfectly prepared to be abused and that her indifference to what might

be thought of her discretion was a proof of life, health, and spirit,

the insolence of conscious resources.

When she had given herself a touch at the glass she turned round, with a

rapid "\_Ecoutez maintenant\_!" and stood leaning a moment--slightly

lowered and inclined backward, her hands behind her and supporting

her--on the \_console\_ before the mirror. She waited an instant, turning

her eyes from one of her companions to the other as to take possession

of them--an eminently conscious, intentional proceeding, which made

Sherringham ask himself what had become of her former terror and if that

and her tears had all been a comedy: after which, abruptly straightening

herself, she began to repeat a short French poem, an ingenious thing of

the day, that she had induced Madame CarrÃ© to say over to her. She had

learned it, practised it, rehearsed it to her mother, and had now been

childishly eager to show what she could do with it. What she mainly did

was to reproduce with a crude fidelity, but in extraordinary detail, the

intonations, the personal quavers and cadences of her model.

"How bad you make me seem to myself and if I were you how much better I

should say it!" was Madame CarrÃ©'s first criticism.

Miriam allowed her, however, little time to develop it, for she broke

out, at the shortest intervals, with the several other specimens of

verse to which the old actress had handed her the key. They were all

fine lyrics, of tender or ironic intention, by contemporary poets, but

depending for effect on taste and art, a mastery of the rare shade and

the right touch, in the interpreter. Miriam had gobbled them up, and she

gave them forth in the same way as the first, with close, rude,

audacious mimicry. There was a moment for Sherringham when it might have

been feared their hostess would see in the performance a designed

burlesque of her manner, her airs and graces, her celebrated simpers and

grimaces, so extravagant did it all cause these refinements to appear.

When it was over the old woman said, "Should you like now to hear how

\_you\_ do?" and, without waiting for an answer, phrased and trilled the

last of the pieces, from beginning to end, exactly as her visitor had

done, making this imitation of an imitation the drollest thing

conceivable. If she had suffered from the sound of the girl's echo it

was a perfect revenge. Miriam had dropped on a sofa, exhausted, and she

stared at first, flushed and wild; then she frankly gave way to

pleasure, to interest and large laughter. She said afterwards, to defend

herself, that the verses in question, and indeed all those she had

recited, were of the most difficult sort: you had to do them; they

didn't do themselves--they were things in which the \_gros moyens\_ were

of no avail.

"Ah my poor child, your means are all \_gros moyens\_; you appear to have

no others," Madame CarrÃ© replied. "You do what you can, but there are

people like that; it's the way they're made. They can never come nearer

to fine truth, to the just indication; shades don't exist for them, they

don't see certain differences. It was to show you a difference that I

repeated that thing as you repeat it, as you represent my doing it. If

you're struck with the little the two ways have in common so much the

better. But you seem to me terribly to \_alourdir\_ everything you touch."

Peter read into this judgement a deep irritation--Miriam clearly set the

teeth of her instructress on edge. She acted on her nerves, was made up

of roughnesses and thicknesses unknown hitherto to her fine,

free-playing finger-tips. This exasperation, however, was a degree of

flattery; it was neither indifference nor simple contempt; it

acknowledged a mystifying reality in the \_jeune Anglaise\_ and even a

shade of importance. The latter remarked, serenely enough, that the

things she wanted most to do were just those that were not for the

\_gros moyens\_, the vulgar obvious dodges, the starts and shouts that any

one could think of and that the \_gros public\_ liked. She wanted to do

what was most difficult, and to plunge into it from the first; and she

explained as if it were a discovery of her own that there were two kinds

of scenes and speeches: those which acted themselves, of which the

treatment was plain, the only way, so that you had just to take it; and

those open to interpretation, with which you had to fight every step,

rendering, arranging, doing the thing according to your idea. Some of

the most effective passages and the most celebrated and admired, like

the frenzy of Juliet with her potion, were of the former sort; but it

was the others she liked best.

Madame CarrÃ© received this revelation good-naturedly enough, considering

its want of freshness, and only laughed at the young lady for looking so

nobly patronising while she gave it. Her laughter appeared partly

addressed to the good faith with which Miriam described herself as

preponderantly interested in the subtler problems of her art.

Sherringham was charmed with the girl's pluck--if it was pluck and not

mere density; the stout patience with which she submitted, for a

purpose, to the old woman's rough usage. He wanted to take her away, to

give her a friendly caution, to advise her not to become a bore, not to

expose herself. But she held up her beautiful head as to show how little

she cared at present for any exposure, and that (it was half

coarseness--Madame CarrÃ© was so far right--and half fortitude) she had

no intention of coming away so long as; there was anything to be picked

up. She sat and still she sat, challenging her hostess with every sort

of question--some reasonable, some ingenious, some strangely futile and

some highly indiscreet; but all with the effect that, contrary to

Peter's expectation, their distinguished friend warmed to the work of

answering and explaining, became interested, was content to keep her and

to talk. Yes, she took her ease; she relieved herself, with the rare

cynicism of the artist--all the crudity, the irony and intensity of a

discussion of esoteric things--of personal mysteries, of methods and

secrets. It was the oddest hour our young man had ever spent, even in

the course of investigations which had often led him into the \_cuisine\_,

the distillery or back shop, of the admired profession. He got up

several times to come away; then he remained, partly in order not to

leave Miriam alone with her terrible initiatress, partly because he was

both amused and edified, and partly because Madame CarrÃ© held him by the

appeal of her sharp, confidential, old eyes, addressing her talk to

himself, with Miriam but a pretext and subject, a vile illustration. She

undressed this young lady, as it were, from head to foot, turned her

inside out, weighed and measured and sounded her: it was all, for

Sherringham, a new revelation of the point to which, in her profession

and nation, an intelligence of the business, a ferocious analysis, had

been carried and a special vocabulary developed. What struck him above

all was the way she knew her grounds and reasons, so that everything was

sharp and clear in her mind and lay under her hand. If she had rare

perceptions she had traced them to their source; she could give an

account of what she did; she knew perfectly why, could explain it,

defend it, amplify it, fight for it: all of which was an intellectual

joy to her, allowing her a chance to abound and insist and discriminate.

There was a kind of cruelty or at least of hardness in it all, to poor

Peter's shy English sense, that sense which can never really reconcile

itself to any question of method and form, and has extraneous sentiments

to "square," to pacify with compromises and superficialities, the

general plea for innocence in everything and often the flagrant proof of

it. In theory there was nothing he valued more than just such a logical

passion as Madame CarrÃ©'s, but it was apt in fact, when he found himself

at close quarters with it, to appear an ado about nothing.

If the old woman was hard it was not that many of her present

conclusions about the \_jeune Anglaise\_ were not indulgent, but that she

had a vision of the great manner, of right and wrong, of the just and

the false, so high and religious that the individual was nothing before

it--a prompt and easy sacrifice. It made our friend uncomfortable, as he

had been made uncomfortable by certain \_feuilletons\_, reviews of the

theatres in the Paris newspapers, which he was committed to thinking

important but of which, when they were very good, he was rather ashamed.

When they were very good, that is when they were very thorough, they

were very personal, as was inevitable in dealing with the most personal

of the arts: they went into details; they put the dots on the \_i\_'s;

they discussed impartially the qualities of appearance, the physical

gifts of the poor aspirant, finding them in some cases reprehensibly

inadequate Peter could never rid himself of a dislike to these

pronouncements; in the case of the actresses especially they struck him

as brutal and offensive--unmanly as launched by an ensconced,

moustachioed critic over a cigar. At the same time he was aware of the

dilemma (he hated it; it made him blush still more) in which his

objection lodged him. If one was right in caring for the actor's art one

ought to have been interested in every honest judgement of it, which,

given the peculiar conditions, would be useful in proportion as it

should be free. If the criticism that recognised frankly these

conditions seemed an inferior or an unholy thing, then what was to be

said for the art itself? What an implication, if the criticism was

tolerable only so long as it was worthless--so long as it remained vague

and timid! This was a knot Peter had never straightened out: he

contented himself with feeling that there was no reason a theatrical

critic shouldn't be a gentleman, at the same time that he often dubbed

it an odious trade, which no gentleman could possibly follow. The best

of the fraternity, so conspicuous in Paris, were those who didn't follow

it--those who, while pretending to write about the stage, wrote about

everything else.

It was as if Madame CarrÃ©, in pursuance of her inflamed sense that the

art was everything and the individual nothing save as he happened to

serve it, had said: "Well, if she \_will\_ have it she shall; she shall

know what she's in for, what I went through, battered and broken in as

we all have been--all who are worthy, who have had the honour. She shall

know the real point of view." It was as if she were still beset with

Mrs. Rooth's twaddle and muddle, her hypocrisy, her idiotic

scruples--something she felt all need to belabour, to trample on. Miriam

took it all as a bath, a baptism, with shuddering joy and gleeful

splashes; staring, wondering, sometimes blushing and failing to follow,

but not shrinking nor wounded; laughing, when convicted, at her own

expense and feeling evidently that this at last was the high cold air of

art, an initiation, a discipline that nothing could undo. Sherringham

said he would see her home--he wanted to talk to her and she must walk

away with him. "And it's understood then she may come back," he added to

Madame CarrÃ©. "It's \_my\_ affair of course. You'll take an interest in

her for a month or two; she'll sit at your feet."

The old actress had an admirable shrug. "Oh I'll knock her about--she

seems stout enough!"

XI

When they had descended to the street Miriam mentioned to Peter that she

was thirsty, dying to drink something: upon which he asked her if she

should have an objection to going with him to a cafÃ©.

"Objection? I've spent my life in cafÃ©s! They're warm in winter and you

get your lamplight for nothing," she explained. "Mamma and I have sat in

them for hours, many a time, with a \_consommation\_ of three sous, to

save fire and candles at home. We've lived in places we couldn't sit in,

if you want to know--where there was only really room if we were in bed.

Mamma's money's sent out from England and sometimes it usedn't to come.

Once it didn't come for months--for months and months. I don't know how

we lived. There wasn't any to come; there wasn't any to get home. That

isn't amusing when you're away in a foreign town without any friends.

Mamma used to borrow, but people wouldn't always lend. You needn't be

afraid--she won't borrow of \_you\_. We're rather better now--something

has been done in England; I don't understand what. It's only fivepence a

year, but it has been settled; it comes regularly; it used to come only

when we had written and begged and waited. But it made no

difference--mamma was always up to her ears in books. They served her

for food and drink. When she had nothing to eat she began a novel in

ten volumes--the old-fashioned ones; they lasted longest. She knows

every \_cabinet de lecture\_ in every town; the little, cheap, shabby

ones, I mean, in the back streets, where they have odd volumes and only

ask a sou and the books are so old that they smell like close rooms. She

takes them to the cafÃ©s--the little, cheap, shabby cafÃ©s too--and she

reads there all the evening. That's very well for her, but it doesn't

feed me. I don't like a diet of dirty old novels. I sit there beside her

with nothing to do, not even a stocking to mend; she doesn't think that

\_comme il faut\_. I don't know what the people take me for. However,

we've never been spoken to: any one can see mamma's a great lady. As for

me I daresay I might be anything dreadful. If you're going to be an

actress you must get used to being looked at. There were people in

England who used to ask us to stay; some of them were our cousins--or

mamma says they were. I've never been very clear about our cousins and I

don't think they were at all clear about us. Some of them are dead; the

others don't ask us any more. You should hear mamma on the subject of

our visits in England. It's very convenient when your cousins are

dead--that explains everything. Mamma has delightful phrases: 'My family

is almost extinct.' Then your family may have been anything you like.

Ours of course was magnificent. We did stay in a place once where there

was a deer-park, and also private theatricals. I played in them; I was

only fifteen years old, but I was very big and I thought I was in

heaven. I'll go anywhere you like; you needn't be afraid; we've been in

places! I've learned a great deal that way--sitting beside mamma and

watching people, their faces, their types, their movements. There's a

great deal goes on in cafÃ©s: people come to them to talk things over,

their private affairs, their complications; they have important

meetings. Oh I've observed scenes between men and women--very quiet,

terribly quiet, but awful, pathetic, tragic! Once I saw a woman do

something that I'm going to do some day when I'm great--if I can get the

situation. I'll tell you what it is sometime--I'll do it for you. Oh it

is the book of life!"

So Miriam discoursed, familiarly, disconnectedly, as the pair went their

way down the Rue de Constantinople; and she continued to abound in

anecdote and remark after they were seated face to face at a little

marble table in an establishment Peter had selected carefully and where

he had caused her, at her request, to be accommodated with \_sirop

d'orgeat\_. "I know what it will come to: Madame CarrÃ© will want to keep

me." This was one of the felicities she presently threw off.

"To keep you?"

"For the French stage. She won't want to let you have me." She said

things of that kind, astounding in self-complacency, the assumption of

quick success. She was in earnest, evidently prepared to work, but her

imagination flew over preliminaries and probations, took no account of

the steps in the process, especially the first tiresome ones, the hard

test of honesty. He had done nothing for her as yet, given no

substantial pledge of interest; yet she was already talking as if his

protection were assured and jealous. Certainly, however, she seemed to

belong to him very much indeed as she sat facing him at the Paris cafÃ©

in her youth, her beauty, and her talkative confidence. This degree of

possession was highly agreeable to him and he asked nothing more than to

make it last and go further. The impulse to draw her out was

irresistible, to encourage her to show herself all the way; for if he

was really destined to take her career in hand he counted on some good

equivalent--such for instance as that she should at least amuse him.

"It's very singular; I know nothing like it," he said--"your equal

mastery of two languages."

"Say of half-a-dozen," Miriam smiled.

"Oh I don't believe in the others to the same degree. I don't imagine

that, with all deference to your undeniable facility, you'd be judged

fit to address a German or an Italian audience in their own tongue. But

you might a French, perfectly, and they're the most particular of all;

for their idiom's supersensitive and they're incapable of enduring the

\_baragouinage\_ of foreigners, to which we listen with such complacency.

In fact your French is better than your English--it's more conventional;

there are little queernesses and impurities in your English, as if you

had lived abroad too much. Ah you must work that."

"I'll work it with \_you\_. I like the way you speak."

"You must speak beautifully; you must do something for the standard."

"For the standard?"

"Well, there isn't any after all." Peter had a drop. "It has gone to the

dogs."

"Oh I'll bring it back. I know what you mean."

"No one knows, no one cares; the sense is gone--it isn't in the public,"

he continued, ventilating a grievance he was rarely able to forget, the

vision of which now suddenly made a mission full of possible sanctity

for his companion. "Purity of speech, on our stage, doesn't exist. Every

one speaks as he likes and audiences never notice; it's the last thing

they think of. The place is given up to abominable dialects and

individual tricks, any vulgarity flourishes, and on top of it all the

Americans, with every conceivable crudity, come in to make confusion

worse confounded. And when one laments it people stare; they don't know

what one means."

"Do you mean the grand manner, certain pompous pronunciations, the style

of the Kembles?"

"I mean any style that \_is\_ a style, that's a system, a consistency, an

art, that contributes a positive beauty to utterance. When I pay ten

shillings to hear you speak I want you to know how, \_que diable\_! Say

that to people and they're mostly lost in stupor; only a few, the very

intelligent, exclaim: 'Then you want actors to be affected?'"

"And do you?" asked Miriam full of interest.

"My poor child, what else under the sun should they be? Isn't their

whole art the affectation \_par excellence\_? The public won't stand that

to-day, so one hears it said. If that be true it simply means that the

theatre, as I care for it, that is as a personal art, is at an end."

"Never, never, never!" the girl cried in a voice that made a dozen

people look round.

"I sometimes think it--that the personal art is at an end and that

henceforth we shall have only the arts, capable no doubt of immense

development in their way--indeed they've already reached it--of the

stage-carpenter and the costumer. In London the drama is already

smothered in scenery; the interpretation scrambles off as it can. To get

the old personal impression, which used to be everything, you must go to

the poor countries, and most of all to Italy."

"Oh I've had it; it's very personal!" said Miriam knowingly.

"You've seen the nudity of the stage, the poor, painted, tattered screen

behind, and before that void the histrionic figure, doing everything it

knows how, in complete possession. The personality isn't our English

personality and it may not always carry us with it; but the direction's

right, and it has the superiority that it's a human exhibition, not a

mechanical one."

"I can act just like an Italian," Miriam eagerly proclaimed.

"I'd rather you acted like an Englishwoman if an Englishwoman would only

act."

"Oh, I'll show you!"

"But you're not English," said Peter sociably, his arms on the table.

"I beg your pardon. You should hear mamma about our 'race.'"

"You're a Jewess--I'm sure of that," he went on.

She jumped at this, as he was destined to see later she would ever jump

at anything that might make her more interesting or striking; even at

things that grotesquely contradicted or excluded each other. "That's

always possible if one's clever. I'm very willing, because I want to be

the English Rachel."

"Then you must leave Madame CarrÃ© as soon as you've got from her what

she can give."

"Oh, you needn't fear; you shan't lose me," the girl replied with

charming gross fatuity. "My name's Jewish," she went on, "but it was

that of my grandmother, my father's mother. She was a baroness in

Germany. That is, she was the daughter of a baron."

Peter accepted this statement with reservations, but he replied: "Put

all that together and it makes you very sufficiently of Rachel's tribe."

"I don't care if I'm of her tribe artistically. I'm of the family of the

artists--\_je me fiche\_ of any other! I'm in the same style as that

woman--I know it."

"You speak as if you had seen her," he said, amused at the way she

talked of "that woman." "Oh I know all about her--I know all about all

the great actors. But that won't prevent me from speaking divine

English."

"You must learn lots of verse; you must repeat it to me," Sherringham

went on. "You must break yourself in till you can say anything. You must

learn passages of Milton, passages of Wordsworth."

"Did \_they\_ write plays?"

"Oh it isn't only a matter of plays! You can't speak a part properly

till you can speak everything else, anything that comes up, especially

in proportion as it's difficult. That gives you authority."

"Oh yes, I'm going in for authority. There's more chance in English,"

the girl added in the next breath. "There are not so many others--the

terrible competition. There are so many here--not that I'm afraid," she

chattered on. "But we've got America and they haven't. America's a great

place."

"You talk like a theatrical agent. They're lucky not to have it as we

have it. Some of them do go, and it ruins them."

"Why, it fills their pockets!" Miriam cried.

"Yes, but see what they pay. It's the death of an actor to play to big

populations that don't understand his language. It's nothing then but

the \_gros moyens\_; all his delicacy perishes. However, they'll

understand \_you\_."

"Perhaps I shall be too affected," she said.

"You won't be more so than Garrick or Mrs. Siddons or John Kemble or

Edmund Kean. They understood Edmund Kean. All reflexion is affectation,

and all acting's reflexion."

"I don't know--mine's instinct," Miriam contended.

"My dear young lady, you talk of 'yours'; but don't be offended if I

tell you that yours doesn't exist. Some day it will--if the thing comes

off. Madame CarrÃ©'s does, because she has reflected. The talent, the

desire, the energy are an instinct; but by the time these things become

a performance they're an instinct put in its place."

"Madame CarrÃ©'s very philosophic. I shall never be like her."

"Of course you won't--you'll be original. But you'll have your own

ideas."

"I daresay I shall have a good many of yours"--and she smiled at him

across the table.

They sat a moment looking at each other. "Don't go in for coquetry,"

Peter then said. "It's a waste of time."

"Well, that's civil!" the girl cried.

"Oh I don't mean for me, I mean for yourself I want you to be such good

faith. I'm bound to give you stiff advice. You don't strike me as

flirtatious and that sort of thing, and it's much in your favour."

"In my favour?"

"It does save time."

"Perhaps it saves too much. Don't you think the artist ought to have

passions?"

Peter had a pause; he thought an examination of this issue premature.

"Flirtations are not passions," he replied. "No, you're simple--at least

I suspect you are; for of course with a woman one would be clever to

know."

She asked why he pronounced her simple, but he judged it best and more

consonant with fair play to defer even a treatment of this branch of the

question; so that to change the subject he said: "Be sure you don't

betray me to your friend Mr. Nash."

"Betray you? Do you mean about your recommending affectation?"

"Dear me, no; he recommends it himself. That is, he practises it, and on

a scale!"

"But he makes one hate it."

"He proves what I mean," said Sherringham: "that the great comedian's

the one who raises it to a science. If we paid ten shillings to listen

to Mr. Nash we should think him very fine. But we want to know what it's

supposed to be."

"It's too odious, the way he talks about us!" Miriam cried assentingly.

"About 'us'?"

"Us poor actors."

"It's the competition he dislikes," Peter laughed.

"However, he's very good-natured; he lent mamma thirty pounds," the girl

added honestly. Our young man, at this information, was not able to

repress a certain small twinge noted by his companion and of which she

appeared to mistake the meaning. "Of course he'll get it back," she went

on while he looked at her in silence a little. Fortune had not supplied

him profusely with money, but his emotion was caused by no foresight of

his probably having also to put his hand in his pocket for Mrs. Rooth.

It was simply the instinctive recoil of a fastidious nature from the

idea of familiar intimacy with people who lived from hand to mouth,

together with a sense that this intimacy would have to be defined if it

was to go much further. He would wish to know what it was supposed to

be, like Nash's histrionics. Miriam after a moment mistook his thought

still more completely, and in doing so flashed a portent of the way it

was in her to strike from time to time a note exasperatingly, almost

consciously vulgar, which one would hate for the reason, along with

others, that by that time one would be in love with her. "Well then, he

won't--if you don't believe it!" she easily laughed. He was saying to

himself that the only possible form was that they should borrow only

from him. "You're a funny man. I make you blush," she persisted.

"I must reply with the \_tu quoque\_, though I've not that effect on you."

"I don't understand," said the girl.

"You're an extraordinary young lady."

"You mean I'm horrid. Well, I daresay I am. But I'm better when you know

me."

He made no direct rejoinder to this, but after a moment went on: "Your

mother must repay that money. I'll give it her."

"You had better give it \_him\_!" cried Miriam. "If once mamma has it--!"

She interrupted herself and with another and a softer tone, one of her

professional transitions, remarked: "I suppose you've never known any

one that was poor."

"I'm poor myself. That is, I'm very far from rich. But why receive

favours--?" And here he in turn checked himself with the sense that he

was indeed taking a great deal on his back if he pretended already--he

had not seen the pair three times--to regulate their intercourse with

the rest of the world. But the girl instantly carried out his thought

and more than his thought.

"Favours from Mr. Nash? Oh he doesn't count!"

The way she dropped these words--they would have been admirable on the

stage--made him reply with prompt ease: "What I meant just now was that

you're not to tell him, after all my swagger, that I consider that you

and I are really required to save our theatre."

"Oh if we can save it he shall know it!" She added that she must

positively get home; her mother would be in a state: she had really

scarce ever been out alone. He mightn't think it, but so it was. Her

mother's ideas, those awfully proper ones, were not all talk. She \_did\_

keep her! Sherringham accepted this--he had an adequate and indeed an

analytic vision of Mrs. Rooth's conservatism; but he observed at the

same time that his companion made no motion to rise. He made none

either; he only said:

"We're very frivolous, the way we chatter. What you want to do to get

your foot in the stirrup is supremely difficult. There's everything to

overcome. You've neither an engagement nor the prospect of an

engagement."

"Oh you'll get me one!" Her manner presented this as so certain that it

wasn't worth dilating on; so instead of dilating she inquired abruptly a

second time: "Why do you think I'm so simple?"

"I don't then. Didn't I tell you just now that you were extraordinary?

That's the term, moreover, that you applied to yourself when you came to

see me--when you said a girl had to be a kind of monster to wish to go

on the stage. It remains the right term and your simplicity doesn't

mitigate it. What's rare in you is that you have--as I suspect at

least--no nature of your own." Miriam listened to this as if preparing

to argue with it or not, only as it should strike her as a sufficiently

brave picture; but as yet, naturally, she failed to understand. "You're

always at concert pitch or on your horse; there are no intervals. It's

the absence of intervals, of a \_fond\_ or background, that I don't

comprehend. You're an embroidery without a canvas."

"Yes--perhaps," the girl replied, her head on one side as if she were

looking at the pattern of this rarity. "But I'm very honest."

"You can't be everything, both a consummate actress and a flower of the

field. You've got to choose."

She looked at him a moment. "I'm glad you think I'm so wonderful."

"Your feigning may be honest in the sense that your only feeling is your

feigned one," Peter pursued. "That's what I mean by the absence of a

ground or of intervals. It's a kind of thing that's a labyrinth!"

"I know what I am," she said sententiously.

But her companion continued, following his own train. "Were you really

so frightened the first day you went to Madame CarrÃ©'s?"

She stared, then with a flush threw back her head. "Do you think I was

pretending?"

"I think you always are. However, your vanity--if you had any!--would be

natural."

"I've plenty of that. I'm not a bit ashamed to own it."

"You'd be capable of trying to 'do' the human peacock. But excuse the

audacity and the crudity of my speculations--it only proves my interest.

What is it that you know you are?"

"Why, an artist. Isn't that a canvas?"

"Yes, an intellectual, but not a moral."

"Ah it's everything! And I'm a good girl too--won't that do?"

"It remains to be seen," Sherringham laughed. "A creature who's

absolutely \_all\_ an artist--I'm curious to see that."

"Surely it has been seen--in lots of painters, lots of musicians."

"Yes, but those arts are not personal like yours. I mean not so much so.

There's something left for--what shall I call it?--for character."

She stared again with her tragic light. "And do you think I haven't a

character?" As he hesitated she pushed back her chair, rising rapidly.

He looked up at her an instant--she seemed so "plastic"; and then rising

too answered: "Delightful being, you've a hundred!"

XII

The summer arrived and the dense air of the Paris theatres became in

fact a still more complicated mixture; yet the occasions were not few on

which Sherringham, having placed a box near the stage (most often a

stuffy, dusky \_baignoire\_) at the disposal of Mrs. Rooth and her

daughter, found time just to look in, as he said, to spend a part of the

evening with them and point the moral of the performance. The pieces,

the successes of the winter, had entered the automatic phase: they went

on by the force of the impetus acquired, deriving little fresh life from

the interpretation, and in ordinary conditions their strong points, as

rendered by the actors, would have been as wearisome to this student as

an importunate repetition of a good story. But it was not long before he

became aware that the conditions couldn't be taken for ordinary. There

was a new infusion in his consciousness--an element in his life which

altered the relations of things. He was not easy till he had found the

right name for it--a name the more satisfactory that it was simple,

comprehensive, and plausible. A new "distraction," in the French sense,

was what he flattered himself he had discovered; he could recognise that

as freely as possible without being obliged to classify the agreeable

resource as a new entanglement. He was neither too much nor too little

diverted; he had all his usual attention to give to his work: he had

only an employment for his odd hours which, without being imperative,

had over various others the advantage of a certain continuity.

And yet, I hasten to add, he was not so well pleased with it but that

among his friends he maintained for the present a rich reserve about it.

He had no irresistible impulse to describe generally how he had

disinterred a strange, handsome girl whom he was bringing up for the

theatre. She had been seen by several of his associates at his rooms,

but was not soon to be seen there again. His reserve might by the

ill-natured have been termed dissimulation, inasmuch as when asked by

the ladies of the embassy what had become of the young person who had

amused them that day so cleverly he gave it out that her whereabouts was

uncertain and her destiny probably obscure; he let it be supposed in a

word that his benevolence had scarcely survived an accidental, a

charitable occasion. As he went about his customary business, and

perhaps even put a little more conscience into the transaction of it,

there was nothing to suggest to others that he was engaged in a private

speculation of an absorbing kind. It was perhaps his weakness that he

carried the apprehension of ridicule too far; but his excuse may have

dwelt in his holding it unpardonable for a man publicly enrolled in the

service of his country to be markedly ridiculous. It was of course not

out of all order that such functionaries, their private situation

permitting, should enjoy a personal acquaintance with stars of the

dramatic, the lyric, or even the choregraphic stage: high diplomatists

had indeed not rarely, and not invisibly, cultivated this privilege

without its proving the sepulchre of their reputation. That a gentleman

who was not a fool should consent a little to become one for the sake of

a celebrated actress or singer--\_cela s'Ã©tait vu\_, though it was not

perhaps to be recommended. It was not a tendency that was encouraged at

headquarters, where even the most rising young men were not incited to

believe they could never fall. Still, it might pass if kept in its

place; and there were ancient worthies yet in the profession--though not

those whom the tradition had helped to go furthest--who held that

something of the sort was a graceful ornament of the diplomatic

character. Sherringham was aware he was very "rising"; but Miriam Rooth

was not yet a celebrated actress. She was only a young artist in

conscientious process of formation and encumbered with a mother still

more conscientious than herself. She was a \_jeune Anglaise\_--a "lady"

withal--very earnest about artistic, about remunerative problems. He had

accepted the office of a formative influence; and that was precisely

what might provoke derision. He was a ministering angel--his patience

and good nature really entitled him to the epithet and his rewards would

doubtless some day define themselves; but meanwhile other promotions

were in precarious prospect, for the failure of which these would not

even in their abundance, be a compensation. He kept an unembarrassed eye

on Downing Street, and while it may frankly be said for him that he was

neither a pedant nor a prig he remembered that the last impression he

ought to wish to produce there was that of a futile estheticism.

He felt the case sufficiently important, however, when he sat behind

Miriam at the play and looked over her shoulder at the stage; her

observation being so keen and her comments so unexpected in their

vivacity that his curiosity was refreshed and his attention stretched

beyond its wont. If the exhibition before the footlights had now lost

much of its annual brilliancy the fashion in which she followed it was

perhaps exhibition enough. The attendance of the little party was,

moreover, in most cases at the ThÃ©Ã¢tre FranÃ§ais; and it has been

sufficiently indicated that our friend, though the child of a sceptical

age and the votary of a cynical science, was still candid enough to take

the serious, the religious view of that establishment the view of M.

Sarcey and of the unregenerate provincial mind. "In the trade I follow

we see things too much in the hard light of reason, of calculation," he

once remarked to his young charge; "but it's good for the mind to keep

up a superstition or two; it leaves a margin--like having a second horse

to your brougham for night-work. The arts, the amusements, the esthetic

part of life, are night-work, if I may say so without suggesting that

they're illicit. At any rate you want your second horse--your

superstition that stays at home when the sun's high--to go your rounds

with. The FranÃ§ais is my second horse."

Miriam's appetite for this interest showed him vividly enough how rarely

in the past it had been within her reach; and she pleased him at first

by liking everything, seeing almost no differences and taking her deep

draught undiluted. She leaned on the edge of the box with bright

voracity; tasting to the core, yet relishing the surface, watching each

movement of each actor, attending to the way each thing was said or done

as if it were the most important thing, and emitting from time to time

applausive or restrictive sounds. It was a charming show of the critical

spirit in ecstasy. Sherringham had his wonder about it, as a part of the

attraction exerted by this young lady was that she caused him to have

his wonder about everything she did. Was it in fact a conscious show, a

line taken for effect, so that at the ComÃ©die her own display should be

the most successful of all? That question danced attendance on the

liberal intercourse of these young people and fortunately as yet did

little to embitter Sherringham's share of it. His general sense that she

was personating had its especial moments of suspense and perplexity, and

added variety and even occasionally a degree of excitement to their

commerce. At the theatre, for the most part, she was really flushed with

eagerness; and with the spectators who turned an admiring eye into the

dim compartment of which she pervaded the front she might have passed

for a romantic or at least an insatiable young woman from the country.

Mrs. Rooth took a more general view, but attended immensely to the

story, in respect to which she manifested a patient good faith which had

its surprises and its comicalities for her daughter's patron. She found

no play too tedious, no \_entr'acte\_ too long, no \_baignoire\_ too hot, no

tissue of incidents too complicated, no situation too unnatural and no

sentiments too sublime. She gave him the measure of her power to sit and

sit--an accomplishment to which she owed in the struggle for existence

such superiority as she might be said to have achieved. She could

out-sit everybody and everything; looking as if she had acquired the

practice in repeated years of small frugality combined with large

leisure--periods when she had nothing but hours and days and years to

spend and had learned to calculate in any situation how long she could

stay. "Staying" was so often a saving--a saving of candles, of fire and

even (as it sometimes implied a scheme for stray refection) of food.

Peter saw soon enough how bravely her shreds and patches of gentility

and equanimity hung together, with the aid of whatever casual pins and

other makeshifts, and if he had been addicted to studying the human

mixture in its different combinations would have found in her an

interesting compendium of some of the infatuations that survive a hard

discipline. He made indeed without difficulty the reflexion that her

life might have taught her something of the real, at the same time that

he could scarce help thinking it clever of her to have so persistently

declined the lesson. She appeared to have put it by with a deprecating,

ladylike smile--a plea of being too soft and bland for experience.

She took the refined, sentimental, tender view of the universe,

beginning with her own history and feelings. She believed in everything

high and pure, disinterested and orthodox, and even at the HÃ´tel de la

Garonne was unconscious of the shabby or the ugly side of the world. She

never despaired: otherwise what would have been the use of being a

Neville-Nugent? Only not to have been one--that would have been

discouraging. She delighted in novels, poems, perversions,

misrepresentations, and evasions, and had a capacity for smooth,

superfluous falsification which made our young man think her sometimes

an amusing and sometimes a tedious inventor. But she wasn't dangerous

even if you believed her; she wasn't even a warning if you didn't. It

was harsh to call her a hypocrite, since you never could have resolved

her back into her character, there being no reverse at all to her

blazonry. She built in the air and was not less amiable than she

pretended, only that was a pretension too. She moved altogether in a

world of elegant fable and fancy, and Sherringham had to live there with

her for Miriam's sake, live there in sociable, vulgar assent and despite

his feeling it rather a low neighbourhood. He was at a loss how to take

what she said--she talked sweetly and discursively of so many

things--till he simply noted that he could only take it always for

untrue. When Miriam laughed at her he was rather disagreeably affected:

"dear mamma's fine stories" was a sufficiently cynical reference to the

immemorial infirmity of a parent. But when the girl backed her up, as

he phrased it to himself, he liked that even less.

Mrs. Rooth was very fond of a moral and had never lost her taste for

edification. She delighted in a beautiful character and was gratified to

find so many more than she had supposed represented in the contemporary

French drama. She never failed to direct Miriam's attention to them and

to remind her that there is nothing in life so grand as a sublime act,

above all when sublimely explained. Peter made much of the difference

between the mother and the daughter, thinking it singularly marked--the

way one took everything for the sense, or behaved as if she did, caring

only for the plot and the romance, the triumph or defeat of virtue and

the moral comfort of it all, and the way the other was alive but to the

manner and the art of it, the intensity of truth to appearances. Mrs.

Rooth abounded in impressive evocations, and yet he saw no link between

her facile genius and that of which Miriam gave symptoms. The poor lady

never could have been accused of successful deceit, whereas the triumph

of fraud was exactly what her clever child achieved. She made even the

true seem fictive, while Miriam's effort was to make the fictive true.

Sherringham thought it an odd unpromising stock (that of the

Neville-Nugents) for a dramatic talent to have sprung from, till he

reflected that the evolution was after all natural: the figurative

impulse in the mother had become conscious, and therefore higher,

through finding an aim, which was beauty, in the daughter. Likely enough

the Hebraic Mr. Rooth, with his love of old pots and Christian

altar-cloths, had supplied in the girl's composition the esthetic

element, the sense of colour and form. In their visits to the theatre

there was nothing Mrs. Rooth more insisted on than the unprofitableness

of deceit, as shown by the most distinguished authors--the folly and

degradation, the corrosive effect on the spirit, of tortuous ways. Their

companion soon gave up the futile task of piecing together her

incongruous references to her early life and her family in England. He

renounced even the doctrine that there was a residuum of truth in her

claim of great relationships, since, existent or not, he cared equally

little for her ramifications. The principle of this indifference was at

bottom a certain desire to disconnect and isolate Miriam; for it was

disagreeable not to be independent in dealing with her, and he could be

fully so only if she herself were.

The early weeks of that summer--they went on indeed into August--were

destined to establish themselves in his memory as a season of pleasant

things. The ambassador went away and Peter had to wait for his own

holiday, which he did during the hot days contentedly enough--waited in

spacious halls and a vast, dim, bird-haunted garden. The official world

and most other worlds withdrew from Paris, and the Place de la Concorde,

a larger, whiter desert than ever, became by a reversal of custom

explorable with safety. The Champs ElysÃ©es were dusty and rural, with

little creaking booths and exhibitions that made a noise like

grasshoppers; the Arc de Triomphe threw its cool, thick shadow for a

mile; the Palais de l'Industrie glittered in the light of the long days;

the cabmen, in their red waistcoats, dozed inside their boxes, while

Sherringham permitted himself a "pot" hat and rarely met a friend. Thus

was Miriam as islanded as the chained Andromeda, and thus was it

possible to deal with her, even Perseus-like, in deep detachment. The

theatres on the boulevard closed for the most part, but the great temple

of the Rue de Richelieu, with an esthetic responsibility, continued

imperturbably to dispense examples of style. Madame CarrÃ© was going to

Vichy, but had not yet taken flight, which was a great advantage for

Miriam, who could now solicit her attention with the consciousness that

she had no engagements \_en ville\_.

"I make her listen to me--I make her tell me," said the ardent girl, who

was always climbing the slope of the Rue de Constantinople on the shady

side, where of July mornings a smell of violets came from the moist

flower-stands of fat, white-capped \_bouquetiÃ¨res\_ in the angles of

doorways. Miriam liked the Paris of the summer mornings, the clever

freshness of all the little trades and the open-air life, the cries, the

talk from door to door, which reminded her of the south, where, in the

multiplicity of her habitations, she had lived; and most of all, the

great amusement, or nearly, of her walk, the enviable baskets of the

laundress piled up with frilled and fluted whiteness--the certain

luxury, she felt while she passed with quick prevision, of her own dawn

of glory. The greatest amusement perhaps was to recognise the pretty

sentiment of earliness, the particular congruity with the hour, in the

studied, selected dress of the little tripping women who were taking the

day, for important advantages, while it was tender. At any rate she

mostly brought with her from her passage through the town good humour

enough--with the penny bunch of violets she always stuck in the front of

her dress--for whatever awaited her at Madame CarrÃ©'s. She declared to

her friend that her dear mistress was terribly severe, giving her the

most difficult, the most exhausting exercises, showing a kind of rage

for breaking her in.

"So much the better," Sherringham duly answered; but he asked no

questions and was glad to let the preceptress and the pupil fight it out

together. He wanted for the moment to know as little as possible about

their ways together: he had been over-dosed with that knowledge while

attending at their second interview. He would send Madame CarrÃ© her

money--she was really most obliging--and in the meantime was certain

Miriam could take care of herself. Sometimes he remarked to her that she

needn't always talk "shop" to him: there were times when he was mortally

tired of shop--of hers. Moreover, he frankly admitted that he was tired

of his own, so that the restriction was not brutal. When she replied,

staring, "Why, I thought you considered it as such a beautiful,

interesting art!" he had no rejoinder more philosophic than "Well, I do;

but there are moments when I'm quite sick of it all the same," At other

times he put it: "Oh yes, the results, the finished thing, the dish

perfectly seasoned and served: not the mess of preparation--at least not

always--not the experiments that spoil the material."

"I supposed you to feel just these questions of study, of the artistic

education, as you've called it to me, so fascinating," the girl

persisted. She was sometimes so flatly lucid.

"Well, after all, I'm not an actor myself," he could but impatiently

sigh.

"You might be one if you were serious," she would imperturbably say. To

this her friend replied that Mr. Gabriel Nash ought to hear this; which

made her promise with a certain grimness that she would settle \_him\_ and

his theories some day. Not to seem too inconsistent--for it was cruel to

bewilder her when he had taken her up to enlighten--Peter repeated over

that for a man like himself the interest of the whole thing depended on

its being considered in a large, liberal way and with an intelligence

that lifted it out of the question of the little tricks of the trade,

gave it beauty and elevation. But she hereupon let him know that Madame

CarrÃ© held there were no \_little\_ tricks, that everything had its

importance as a means to a great end, and that if you were not willing

to try to \_approfondir\_ the reason why, in a given situation, you should

scratch your nose with your left hand rather than with your right, you

were not worthy to tread any stage that respected itself.

"That's very well, but if I must go into details read me a little

Shelley," groaned the young man in the spirit of a high \_raffinÃ©\_.

"You're worse than Madame CarrÃ©; you don't know what to invent; between

you you'll kill me!" the girl declared. "I think there's a secret league

between you to spoil my voice, or at least to weaken my \_souffle\_,

before I get it. But \_Ã  la guerre comme Ã  la guerre\_! How can I read

Shelley, however, when I don't understand him?"

"That's just what I want to make you do. It's a part of your general

training. You may do without that of course--without culture and taste

and perception; but in that case you'll be nothing but a vulgar

\_cabotine\_, and nothing will be of any consequence." He had a theory

that the great lyric poets--he induced her to read, and recite as well,

long passages of Wordsworth and Swinburne--would teach her many of the

secrets of the large utterance, the mysteries of rhythm, the

communicableness of style, the latent music of the language and the art

of "composing" copious speeches and of retaining her stores of free

breath. He held in perfect sincerity that there was a general sense of

things, things of the mind, which would be of the highest importance to

her and to which it was by good fortune just in his power to contribute.

She would do better in proportion as she had more knowledge--even

knowledge that might superficially show but a remote connexion with her

business. The actor's talent was essentially a gift, a thing by itself,

implanted, instinctive, accidental, equally unconnected with intellect

and with virtue--Sherringham was completely of that opinion; but it

struck him as no \_bÃªtise\_ to believe at the same time that

intellect--leaving virtue for the moment out of the question--might be

brought into fruitful relation with it. It would be a bigger thing if a

better mind were projected upon it--projected without sacrificing the

mind. So he lent his young friend books she never read--she was on

almost irreconcilable terms with the printed page save for spouting

it--and in the long summer days, when he had leisure, took her to the

Louvre to admire the great works of painting and sculpture. Here, as on

all occasions, he was struck with the queer jumble of her taste, her

mixture of intelligence and puerility. He saw she never read what he

gave her, though she sometimes would shamelessly have liked him to

suppose so; but in the presence of famous pictures and statues she had

remarkable flashes of perception. She felt these things, she liked them,

though it was always because she had an idea she could use them. The

belief was often presumptuous, but it showed what an eye she had to her

business. "I could look just like that if I tried." "That's the dress I

mean to wear when I do Portia." Such were the observations apt to drop

from her under the suggestion of antique marbles or when she stood

before a Titian or a Bronzino.

When she uttered them, and many others besides, the effect was sometimes

irritating to her adviser, who had to bethink himself a little that she

was no more egotistical than the histrionic conscience required. He

wondered if there were necessarily something vulgar in the histrionic

conscience--something condemned only to feel the tricky, personal

question. Wasn't it better to be perfectly stupid than to have only one

eye open and wear for ever in the great face of the world the expression

of a knowing wink? At the theatre, on the numerous July evenings when

the ComÃ©die FranÃ§aise exhibited the repertory by the aid of exponents

determined the more sparse and provincial audience should have a taste

of the tradition, her appreciation was tremendously technical and showed

it was not for nothing she was now in and out of Madame CarrÃ©'s

innermost counsels. But there were moments when even her very acuteness

seemed to him to drag the matter down, to see it in a small and

superficial sense. What he flattered himself he was trying to do for

her--and through her for the stage of his time, since she was the

instrument, and incontestably a fine one, that had come to his hand--was

precisely to lift it up, make it rare, keep it in the region of

distinction and breadth. However, she was doubtless right and he was

wrong, he eventually reasoned: you could afford to be vague only if you

hadn't a responsibility. He had fine ideas, but she was to act them out,

that is to apply them, and not he; and application was of necessity a

vulgarisation, a smaller thing than theory. If she should some day put

forth the great art it wasn't purely fanciful to forecast for her, the

matter would doubtless be by that fact sufficiently transfigured and it

wouldn't signify that some of the onward steps should have been lame.

This was clear to him on several occasions when she recited or motioned

or even merely looked something for him better than usual; then she

quite carried him away, making him wish to ask no more questions, but

only let her disembroil herself in her own strong fashion. In these

hours she gave him forcibly if fitfully that impression of beauty which

was to be her justification. It was too soon for any general estimate of

her progress; Madame CarrÃ© had at last given her a fine understanding as

well as a sore, personal, an almost physical, sense of how bad she was.

She had therefore begun on a new basis, had returned to the alphabet and

the drill. It was a phase of awkwardness, the splashing of a young

swimmer, but buoyancy would certainly come out of it. For the present

there was mainly no great alteration of the fact that when she did

things according to her own idea they were not, as yet and seriously

judged, worth the devil, as Madame CarrÃ© said, and when she did them

according to that of her instructress were too apt to be a gross parody

of that lady's intention. None the less she gave glimpses, and her

glimpses made him feel not only that she was not a fool--this was small

relief--but that he himself was not.

He made her stick to her English and read Shakespeare aloud to him. Mrs.

Rooth had recognised the importance of apartments in which they should

be able to receive so beneficent a visitor, and was now mistress of a

small salon with a balcony and a rickety flower-stand--to say nothing of

a view of many roofs and chimneys--a very uneven waxed floor, an empire

clock, an \_armoire Ã  glace\_, highly convenient for Miriam's posturings,

and several cupboard doors covered over, allowing for treacherous gaps,

with the faded magenta paper of the wall. The thing had been easily

done, for Sherringham had said: "Oh we must have a sitting-room for our

studies, you know, and I'll settle it with the landlady," Mrs. Rooth had

liked his "we"--indeed she liked everything about him--and he saw in

this way that she heaved with no violence under pecuniary obligations so

long as they were distinctly understood to be temporary. That he should

have his money back with interest as soon as Miriam was launched was a

comfort so deeply implied that it only added to intimacy. The window

stood open on the little balcony, and when the sun had left it Peter and

Miriam could linger there, leaning on the rail and talking above the

great hum of Paris, with nothing but the neighbouring tiles and tall

tubes to take account of. Mrs. Rooth, in limp garments much ungirdled,

was on the sofa with a novel, making good her frequent assertion that

she could put up with any life that would yield her these two

conveniences. There were romantic works Peter had never read and as to

which he had vaguely wondered to what class they were addressed--the

earlier productions of M. EugÃ¨ne Sue, the once-fashionable compositions

of Madame Sophie Gay--with which Mrs. Rooth was familiar and which she

was ready to enjoy once more if she could get nothing fresher. She had

always a greasy volume tucked under her while her nose was bent upon the

pages in hand. She scarcely looked up even when Miriam lifted her voice

to show their benefactor what she could do. These tragic or pathetic

notes all went out of the window and mingled with the undecipherable

concert of Paris, so that no neighbour was disturbed by them. The girl

shrieked and wailed when the occasion required it, and Mrs. Rooth only

turned her page, showing in this way a great esthetic as well as a great

personal trust.

She rather annoyed their visitor by the serenity of her confidence--for

a reason he fully understood only later--save when Miriam caught an

effect or a tone so well that she made him in the pleasure of it forget

her parent's contiguity. He continued to object to the girl's English,

with its foreign patches that might pass in prose but were offensive in

the recitation of verse, and he wanted to know why she couldn't speak

like her mother. He had justly to acknowledge the charm of Mrs. Rooth's

voice and tone, which gave a richness even to the foolish things she

said. They were of an excellent insular tradition, full both of natural

and of cultivated sweetness, and they puzzled him when other indications

seemed to betray her--to refer her to more common air. They were like

the reverberation of some far-off tutored circle.

The connexion between the development of Miriam's genius and the

necessity of an occasional excursion to the country--the charming

country that lies in so many directions beyond the Parisian

\_banlieue\_--would not have been immediately apparent to a superficial

observer; but a day, and then another, at Versailles, a day at

Fontainebleau and a trip, particularly harmonious and happy, to

Rambouillet, took their places in our young man's plan as a part of the

indirect but contributive culture, an agency in the formation of taste.

Intimations of the grand manner for instance would proceed in abundance

from the symmetrical palace and gardens of Louis XIV. Peter "adored"

Versailles and wandered there more than once with the ladies of the

HÃ´tel de la Garonne. They chose quiet hours, when the fountains were

dry; and Mrs. Rooth took an armful of novels and sat on a bench in the

park, flanked by clipped hedges and old statues, while her young

companions strolled away, walked to the Trianon, explored the long,

straight vistas of the woods. Rambouillet was vague and vivid and sweet;

they felt that they found a hundred wise voices there; and indeed there

was an old white chateau which contained nothing but ghostly sounds.

They found at any rate a long luncheon, and in the landscape the very

spirit of silvery summer and of the French pictorial brush.

I have said that in these days Sherringham wondered about many things,

and by the time his leave of absence came this practice had produced a

particular speculation. He was surprised that he shouldn't be in love

with Miriam Rooth and considered at moments of leisure the causes of his

exemption. He had felt from the first that she was a "nature," and each

time she met his eyes it seemed to come to him straighter that her

beauty was rare. You had to get the good view of her face, but when

you did so it was a splendid mobile mask. And the wearer of this

high ornament had frankness and courage and variety--no end of the

unusual and the unexpected. She had qualities that seldom went

together--impulses and shynesses, audacities and lapses, something

coarse, popular, and strong all intermingled with disdains and languors

and nerves. And then above all she was \_there\_, was accessible, almost

belonged to him. He reflected ingeniously that he owed his escape to a

peculiar cause--to the fact that they had together a positive outside

object. Objective, as it were, was all their communion; not personal and

selfish, but a matter of art and business and discussion. Discussion had

saved him and would save him further, for they would always have

something to quarrel about. Sherringham, who was not a diplomatist for

nothing, who had his reasons for steering straight and wished neither to

deprive the British public of a rising star nor to exchange his actual

situation for that of a yoked \_impresario\_, blessed the beneficence, the

salubrity, the pure exorcism of art. At the same time, rather

inconsistently and feeling that he had a completer vision than before of

that oddest of animals the artist who happens to have been born a woman,

he felt warned against a serious connexion--he made a great point of the

"serious"--with so slippery and ticklish a creature. The two ladies had

only to stay in Paris, save their candle-ends and, as Madame CarrÃ© had

enjoined, practise their scales: there were apparently no autumn visits

to English country-houses in prospect for Mrs. Rooth. Peter parted with

them on the understanding that in London he would look as thoroughly as

possible into the question of an engagement. The day before he began his

holiday he went to see Madame CarrÃ©, who said to him, "\_Vous devriez

bien nous la laisser\_."

"She \_has\_ something then----?"

"She has most things. She'll go far. It's the first time in my life of

my beginning with a mistake. But don't tell her so. I don't flatter her.

She'll be too puffed up."

"Is she very conceited?" Sherringham asked.

"\_Mauvais sujet!\_" said Madame CarrÃ©.

It was on the journey to London that he indulged in some of those

questionings of his state that I have mentioned; but I must add that by

the time he reached Charing Cross--he smoked a cigar deferred till after

the Channel in a compartment by himself--it had suddenly come over him

that they were futile. Now that he had left the girl a subversive,

unpremeditated heart-beat told him--it made him hold his breath a minute

in the carriage--that he had after all not escaped. He \_was\_ in love

with her: he had been in love with her from the first hour.

BOOK THIRD

XIII

The drive from Harsh to the Place, as it was called thereabouts, could

be achieved by swift horses in less than ten minutes; and if Mrs.

Dallow's ponies were capital trotters the general high pitch of the

occasion made it all congruous they should show their speed. The

occasion was the polling-day an hour after the battle. The ponies had

kept pace with other driven forces for the week before, passing and

repassing the neat windows of the flat little town--Mrs. Dallow had the

complacent belief that there was none in the kingdom in which the

flower-stands looked more respectable between the stiff muslin

curtains--with their mistress behind them on her all but silver wheels.

Very often she was accompanied by the Liberal candidate, but even when

she was not the equipage seemed scarce less to represent his easy,

friendly confidence. It moved in a radiance of ribbons and hand-bills

and hand-shakes and smiles; of quickened commerce and sudden intimacy;

of sympathy which assumed without presuming and gratitude which promised

without soliciting. But under Julia's guidance the ponies pattered now,

with no indication of a loss of freshness, along the firm, wide avenue

which wound and curved, to make up in large effect for not undulating,

from the gates opening straight on the town to the Palladian mansion,

high, square, grey, and clean, which stood among terraces and fountains

in the centre of the park. A generous steed had been sacrificed to bring

the good news from Ghent to Aix, but no such extravagance was after all

necessary for communicating with Lady Agnes.

She had remained at the house, not going to the Wheatsheaf, the Liberal

inn, with the others; preferring to await in privacy and indeed in

solitude the momentous result of the poll. She had come down to Harsh

with the two girls in the course of the proceedings. Julia hadn't

thought they would do much good, but she was expansive and indulgent now

and had generously asked them. Lady Agnes had not a nice canvassing

manner, effective as she might have been in the character of the high,

benignant, affable mother--looking sweet participation but not

interfering--of the young and handsome, the shining, convincing,

wonderfully clever and certainly irresistible aspirant. Grace Dormer had

zeal without art, and Lady Agnes, who during her husband's lifetime had

seen their affairs follow the satisfactory principle of a tendency to

defer to supreme merit, had never really learned the lesson that voting

goes by favour. However, she could pray God if, she couldn't make love

to the cheesemonger, and Nick felt she had stayed at home to pray for

him. I must add that Julia Dallow was too happy now, flicking her whip

in the bright summer air, to say anything so ungracious even to herself

as that her companion had been returned in spite of his nearest female

relatives. Besides, Biddy \_had\_ been a rosy help: she had looked

persuasively pretty, in white and blue, on platforms and in recurrent

carriages, out of which she had tossed, blushing and making people feel

they would remember her eyes, several words that were telling for their

very simplicity.

Mrs. Dallow was really too glad for any definite reflexion, even for

personal exultation, the vanity of recognising her own large share of

the work. Nick was in and was now beside her, tired, silent, vague,

beflowered and beribboned, and he had been splendid from beginning to

end, beautifully good-humoured and at the same time beautifully

clever--still cleverer than she had supposed he could be. The sense of

her having quickened his cleverness and been repaid by it or by his

gratitude--it came to the same thing--in a way she appreciated was not

assertive and jealous: it was lost for the present in the general happy

break of the long tension. So nothing passed between them in their

progress to the house; there was no sound in the park but the pleasant

rustle of summer--it seemed an applausive murmur--and the swift roll of

the vehicle.

Lady Agnes already knew, for as soon as the result was declared Nick had

despatched a mounted man to her, carrying the figures on a scrawled

card. He himself had been far from getting away at once, having to

respond to the hubbub of acclamation, to speak yet again, to thank his

electors individually and collectively, to chaff the Tories without

cheap elation, to be carried hither and yon, and above all to pretend

that the interest of the business was now greater for him than ever. If

he had said never a word after putting himself in Julia's hands to go

home it was partly perhaps because the consciousness had begun to

glimmer within him, on the contrary, of some sudden shrinkage of that

interest. He wanted to see his mother because he knew she wanted to fold

him close in her arms. They had been open there for this purpose the

last half-hour, and her expectancy, now no longer an ache of suspense,

was the reason of Julia's round pace. Yet this very impatience in her

somehow made Nick wince a little. Meeting his mother was like being

elected over again.

The others had not yet come back, and Lady Agnes was alone in the

large, bright drawing-room. When Nick went in with Julia he saw her at

the further end; she had evidently been walking up and down the whole

length of it, and her tall, upright, black figure seemed in possession

of the fair vastness after the manner of an exclamation-point at the

bottom of a blank page. The room, rich and simple, was a place of

perfection as well as of splendour in delicate tints, with precious

specimens of French furniture of the last century ranged against walls

of pale brocade, and here and there a small, almost priceless picture.

George Dallow had made it, caring for these things and liking to talk

about them--scarce ever about anything else; so that it appeared to

represent him still, what was best in his kindly, limited nature, his

friendly, competent, tiresome insistence on harmony--on identity of

"period." Nick could hear him yet, and could see him, too fat and with a

congenital thickness in his speech, lounging there in loose clothes with

his eternal cigarette. "Now my dear fellow, \_that\_'s what I call form: I

don't know what you call it"--that was the way he used to begin. All

round were flowers in rare vases, but it looked a place of which the

beauty would have smelt sweet even without them.

Lady Agnes had taken a white rose from one of the clusters and was

holding it to her face, which was turned to the door as Nick crossed the

threshold. The expression of her figure instantly told him--he saw the

creased card he had sent her lying on one of the beautiful bare

tables--how she had been sailing up and down in a majesty of

satisfaction. The inflation of her long plain dress and the brightened

dimness of her proud face were still in the air. In a moment he had

kissed her and was being kissed, not in quick repetition, but in tender

prolongation, with which the perfume of the white rose was mixed. But

there was something else too--her sweet smothered words in his ear: "Oh

my boy, my boy--oh your father, your father!" Neither the sense of

pleasure nor that of pain, with Lady Agnes--as indeed with most of the

persons with whom this history is concerned--was a liberation of

chatter; so that for a minute all she said again was, "I think of Sir

Nicholas and wish he were here"; addressing the words to Julia, who had

wandered forward without looking at the mother and son.

"Poor Sir Nicholas!" said Mrs. Dallow vaguely.

"Did you make another speech?" Lady Agnes asked.

"I don't know. Did I?" Nick appealed.

"I don't know!"--and Julia spoke with her back turned, doing something

to her hat before the glass.

"Oh of course the confusion, the bewilderment!" said Lady Agnes in a

tone rich in political reminiscence.

"It was really immense fun," Mrs. Dallow went so far as to drop.

"Dearest Julia!" Lady Agnes deeply breathed. Then she added: "It was you

who made it sure."

"There are a lot of people coming to dinner," said Julia.

"Perhaps you'll have to speak again," Lady Agnes smiled at her son.

"Thank you; I like the way you talk about it!" cried Nick. "I'm like

Iago: 'from this time forth I never will speak word!'"

"Don't say that, Nick," said his mother gravely.

"Don't be afraid--he'll jabber like a magpie!" And Julia went out of the

room.

Nick had flung himself on a sofa with an air of weariness, though not of

completely extinct cheer; and Lady Agnes stood fingering her rose and

looking down at him. His eyes kept away from her; they seemed fixed on

something she couldn't see. "I hope you've thanked Julia handsomely,"

she presently remarked.

"Why of course, mother."

"She has done as much as if you hadn't been sure."

"I wasn't in the least sure--and she has done everything."

"She has been too good--but \_we\_'ve done something. I hope you don't

leave out your father," Lady Agnes amplified as Nick's glance appeared

for a moment to question her "we."

"Never, never!" Nick uttered these words perhaps a little mechanically,

but the next minute he added as if suddenly moved to think what he could

say that would give his mother most pleasure: "Of course his name has

worked for me. Gone as he is he's still a living force." He felt a good

deal of a hypocrite, but one didn't win such a seat every day in the

year. Probably indeed he should never win another.

"He hears you, he watches you, he rejoices in you," Lady Agnes opined.

This idea was oppressive to Nick--that of the rejoicing almost as much

as of the watching. He had made his concession, but, with a certain

impulse to divert his mother from following up her advantage, he broke

out: "Julia's a tremendously effective woman."

"Of course she is!" said Lady Agnes knowingly.

"Her charming appearance is half the battle"--Nick explained a little

coldly what he meant. But he felt his coldness an inadequate protection

to him when he heard his companion observe with something of the same

sapience:

"A woman's always effective when she likes a person so much."

It discomposed him to be described as a person liked, and so much, and

by a woman; and he simply said abruptly: "When are you going away?"

"The first moment that's civil--to-morrow morning. \_You\_'ll stay on I

hope."

"Stay on? What shall I stay on for?"

"Why you might stay to express your appreciation."

Nick considered. "I've everything to do."

"I thought everything was done," said Lady Agnes.

"Well, that's just why," her son replied, not very lucidly. "I want to

do other things--quite other things. I should like to take the next

train," And he looked at his watch.

"When there are people coming to dinner to meet you?"

"They'll meet \_you\_--that's better."

"I'm sorry any one's coming," Lady Agnes said in a tone unencouraging to

a deviation from the reality of things. "I wish we were alone--just as a

family. It would please Julia to-day to feel that we \_are\_ one. Do stay

with her to-morrow."

"How will that do--when she's alone?"

"She won't be alone, with Mrs. Gresham."

"Mrs. Gresham doesn't count."

"That's precisely why I want you to stop. And her cousin, almost her

brother: what an idea that it won't do! Haven't you stayed here before

when there has been no one?"

"I've never stayed much, and there have always been people. At any rate

it's now different."

"It's just because it's different. Besides, it isn't different and it

never was," said Lady Agnes, more incoherent in her earnestness than it

often happened to her to be. "She always liked you and she likes you now

more than ever--if you call \_that\_ different!" Nick got up at this and,

without meeting her eyes, walked to one of the windows, where he stood

with his back turned and looked out on the great greenness. She watched

him a moment and she might well have been wishing, while he appeared to

gaze with intentness, that it would come to him with the same force as

it had come to herself--very often before, but during these last days

more than ever--that the level lands of Harsh, stretching away before

the window, the French garden with its symmetry, its screens and its

statues, and a great many more things of which these were the

superficial token, were Julia's very own to do with exactly as she

liked. No word of appreciation or envy, however, dropped from the young

man's lips, and his mother presently went on: "What could be more

natural than that after your triumphant contest you and she should have

lots to settle and to talk about--no end of practical questions, no end

of urgent business? Aren't you her member, and can't her member pass a

day with her, and she a great proprietor?"

Nick turned round at this with an odd expression. "\_Her\_ member--am I

hers?"

Lady Agnes had a pause--she had need of all her tact. "Well, if the

place is hers and you represent the place--!" she began. But she went no

further, for Nick had interrupted her with a laugh.

"What a droll thing to 'represent,' when one thinks of it! And what does

\_it\_ represent, poor stupid little borough with its strong, though I

admit clean, smell of meal and its curiously fat-faced inhabitants? Did

you ever see such a collection of fat faces turned up at the hustings?

They looked like an enormous sofa, with the cheeks for the gathers and

the eyes for the buttons."

"Oh well, the next time you shall have a great town," Lady Agnes

returned, smiling and feeling that she \_was\_ tactful.

"It will only be a bigger sofa! I'm joking, of course?" Nick pursued,

"and I ought to be ashamed of myself. They've done me the honour to

elect me and I shall never say a word that's not civil about them, poor

dears. But even a new member may blaspheme to his mother."

"I wish you'd be serious to your mother"--and she went nearer him.

"The difficulty is that I'm two men; it's the strangest thing that ever

was," Nick professed with his bright face on her. "I'm two quite

distinct human beings, who have scarcely a point in common; not even the

memory, on the part of one, of the achievements or the adventures of the

other. One man wins the seat but it's the other fellow who sits in it."

"Oh Nick, don't spoil your victory by your perversity!" she cried as she

clasped her hands to him.

"I went through it with great glee--I won't deny that: it excited me,

interested me, amused me. When once I was in it I liked it. But now that

I'm out of it again----!"

"Out of it?" His mother stared. "Isn't the whole point that you're in?"

"Ah \_now\_ I'm only in the House of Commons."

For an instant she seemed not to understand and to be on the point of

laying her finger quickly to her lips with a "Hush!"--as if the late Sir

Nicholas might have heard the "only." Then while a comprehension of the

young man's words promptly superseded that impulse she replied with

force: "You'll be in the Lords the day you determine to get there."

This futile remark made Nick laugh afresh, and not only laugh, but kiss

her, which was always an intenser form of mystification for poor Lady

Agnes and apparently the one he liked best to inflict; after which he

said: "The odd thing is, you know, that Harsh has no wants. At least

it's not sharply, not articulately conscious of them. We all pretended

to talk them over together, and I promised to carry them in my heart of

hearts. But upon my honour I can't remember one of them. Julia says the

wants of Harsh are simply the national wants--rather a pretty phrase for

Julia. She means \_she\_ does everything for the place; \_she\_'s really

their member and this house in which we stand their legislative chamber.

Therefore the \_lacunae\_ I've undertaken to fill out are the national

wants. It will be rather a job to rectify some of them, won't it? I

don't represent the appetites of Harsh--Harsh is gorged. I represent the

ideas of my party. That's what Julia says."

"Oh never mind what Julia says!" Lady Agnes broke out impatiently. This

impatience made it singular that the very next word she uttered should

be: "My dearest son, I wish to heaven you'd marry her. It would be so

fitting now!" she added.

"Why now?" Nick frowned.

"She has shown you such sympathy, such devotion."

"Is it for that she has shown it?"

"Ah you might \_feel\_--I can't tell you!" said Lady Agnes reproachfully.

He blushed at this, as if what he did feel was the reproach. "Must I

marry her because you like her?"

"I? Why we're \_all\_ as fond of her as we can be."

"Dear mother, I hope that any woman I ever may marry will be a person

agreeable not only to you, but also, since you make a point of it, to

Grace and Biddy. But I must tell you this--that I shall marry no woman

I'm not unmistakably in love with."

"And why are you not in love with Julia--charming, clever, generous as

she is?" Lady Agnes laid her hands on him--she held him tight. "Dearest

Nick, if you care anything in the world to make me happy you'll stay

over here to-morrow and be nice to her."

He waited an instant. "Do you mean propose to her?"

"With a single word, with the glance of an eye, the movement of your

little finger"--and she paused, looking intensely, imploringly up into

his face--"in less time than it takes me to say what I say now, you may

have it all." As he made no answer, only meeting her eyes, she added

insistently: "You know she's a fine creature--you know she is!"

"Dearest mother, what I seem to know better than anything else in the

world is that I love my freedom. I set it far above everything."

"Your freedom? What freedom is there in being poor?" Lady Agnes fiercely

demanded. "Talk of that when Julia puts everything she possesses at your

feet!"

"I can't talk of it, mother--it's too terrible an idea. And I can't talk

of \_her\_, nor of what I think of her. You must leave that to me. I do

her perfect justice."

"You don't or you'd marry her to-morrow," she passionately argued.

"You'd feel the opportunity so beautifully rare, with everything in the

world to make it perfect. Your father would have valued it for you

beyond everything. Think a little what would have given \_him\_ pleasure.

That's what I meant when I spoke just now of us all. It wasn't of Grace

and Biddy I was thinking--fancy!--it was of him. He's with you always;

he takes with you, at your side, every step you take yourself. He'd

bless devoutly your marriage to Julia; he'd feel what it would be for

you and for us all. I ask for no sacrifice and he'd ask for none. We

only ask that you don't commit the crime----!"

Nick Dormer stopped her with another kiss; he murmured "Mother, mother,

mother!" as he bent over her. He wished her not to go on, to let him

off; but the deep deprecation in his voice didn't prevent her saying:

"You know it--you know it perfectly. All and more than all that I can

tell you you know." He drew her closer, kissed her again, held her as he

would have held a child in a paroxysm, soothing her silently till it

could abate. Her vehemence had brought with it tears; she dried them as

she disengaged herself. The next moment, however, she resumed, attacking

him again: "For a public man she'd be the perfect companion. She's made

for public life--she's made to shine, to be concerned in great things,

to occupy a high position and to help him on. She'd back you up in

everything as she has backed you in this. Together there's nothing you

couldn't do. You can have the first house in England--yes, the very

first! What freedom \_is\_ there in being poor? How can you do anything

without money, and what money can you make for yourself--what money will

ever come to you? That's the crime--to throw away such an instrument of

power, such a blessed instrument of good."

"It isn't everything to be rich, mother," said Nick, looking at the

floor with a particular patience--that is with a provisional docility

and his hands in his pockets. "And it isn't so fearful to be poor."

"It's vile--it's abject. Don't I know?"

"Are you in such acute want?" he smiled.

"Ah don't make me explain what you've only to look at to see!" his

mother returned as if with a richness of allusion to dark elements in

her fate.

"Besides," he easily went on, "there's other money in the world than

Julia's. I might come by some of that."

"Do you mean Mr. Carteret's?" The question made him laugh as her feeble

reference five minutes before to the House of Lords had done. But she

pursued, too full of her idea to take account of such a poor substitute

for an answer: "Let me tell you one thing, for I've known Charles

Carteret much longer than you and I understand him better. There's

nothing you could do that would do you more good with him than to marry

Julia. I know the way he looks at things and I know exactly how that

would strike him. It would please him, it would charm him; it would be

the thing that would most prove to him that you're in earnest. You need,

you know, to do something of that sort," she said as for plain speaking.

"Haven't I come in for Harsh?" asked Nick.

"Oh he's very canny. He likes to see people rich. \_Then\_ he believes in

them--then he's likely to believe more. He's kind to you because you're

your father's son; but I'm sure your being poor takes just so much off."

"He can remedy that so easily," said Nick, smiling still. "Is my being

kept by Julia what you call my making an effort for myself?"

Lady Agnes hesitated; then "You needn't insult Julia!" she replied.

"Moreover, if I've \_her\_ money I shan't want his," Nick unheedingly

remarked.

Again his mother waited before answering; after which she produced: "And

pray wouldn't you wish to be independent?"

"You're delightful, dear mother--you're very delightful! I particularly

like your conception of independence. Doesn't it occur to you that at a

pinch I might improve my fortune by some other means than by making a

mercenary marriage or by currying favour with a rich old gentleman?

Doesn't it occur to you that I might work?"

"Work at politics? How does that make money, honourably?"

"I don't mean at politics."

"What do you mean then?"--and she seemed to challenge him to phrase it

if he dared. This demonstration of her face and voice might have

affected him, for he remained silent and she continued: "Are you elected

or not?"

"It seems a dream," he rather flatly returned.

"If you are, act accordingly and don't mix up things that are as wide

asunder as the poles!" She spoke with sternness and his silence appeared

again to represent an admission that her sternness counted for him.

Possibly she was touched by it; after a few moments, at any rate, during

which nothing more passed between them, she appealed to him in a gentler

and more anxious key, which had this virtue to touch him that he knew it

was absolutely the first time in her life she had really begged for

anything. She had never been obliged to beg; she had got on without it

and most things had come to her. He might judge therefore in what a

light she regarded this boon for which in her bereft old age she humbled

herself to be a suitor. There was such a pride in her that he could feel

what it cost her to go on her knees even to her son. He did judge how it

was in his power to gratify her; and as he was generous and imaginative

he was stirred and shaken as it came over him in a wave of figurative

suggestion that he might make up to her for many things. He scarcely

needed to hear her ask with a pleading wail that was almost tragic:

"Don't you see how things have turned out for us? Don't you know how

unhappy I am, don't you know what a bitterness----?" She stopped with a

sob in her voice and he recognised vividly this last tribulation, the

unhealed wound of her change of life and her lapse from eminence to

flatness. "You know what Percival is and the comfort I have of him. You

know the property and what he's doing with it and what comfort I get

from \_that\_! Everything's dreary but what you can do for us.

Everything's odious, down to living in a hole with one's girls who don't

marry. Grace is impossible--I don't know what's the matter with her; no

one will look at her, and she's so conceited with it--sometimes I feel

as if I could beat her! And Biddy will never marry, and we're three

dismal women in a filthy house, and what are three dismal women, more or

less, in London?"

So with an unexpected rage of self-exposure she poured out her

disappointments and troubles, tore away the veil from her sadness and

soreness. It almost scared him to see how she hated her life, though at

another time it might have been amusing to note how she despised her

gardenless house. Of course it wasn't a country-house, and she couldn't

get used to that. Better than he could do--for it was the sort of thing

into which in any case a woman enters more than a man--she felt what a

lift into brighter air, what a regilding of his sisters' possibilities,

his marriage to Julia would effect for them. He couldn't trace the

difference, but his mother saw it all as a shining picture. She hung the

bright vision before him now--she stood there like a poor woman crying

for a kindness. What was filial in him, all the piety he owed,

especially to the revived spirit of his father, more than ever present

on a day of such public pledges, became from one moment to the other as

the very handle to the door of the chamber of concessions. He had the

impulse, so embarrassing when it is a question of consistent action, to

see in a touching, an interesting light any forcibly presented side of

the life of another: such things effected a union with something in

\_his\_ life, and in the recognition of them was no soreness of sacrifice

and no consciousness of merit.

Rapidly, at present, this change of scene took place before his

spiritual eye. He found himself believing, because his mother

communicated the belief, that it depended but on his own conduct richly

to alter the social outlook of the three women who clung to him and who

declared themselves forlorn. This was not the highest kind of motive,

but it contained a spring, it touched into life again old injunctions

and appeals. Julia's wide kingdom opened out round him and seemed

somehow to wear the face of his own possible future. His mother and

sisters floated in the rosy element as if he had breathed it about them.

"The first house in England" she had called it; but it might be the

first house in Europe, the first in the world, by the fine air and the

high humanities that should fill it. Everything beautiful in his actual,

his material view seemed to proclaim its value as never before; the

house rose over his head as a museum of exquisite rewards, and the image

of poor George Dallow hovered there obsequious, expressing that he had

only been the modest, tasteful organiser, or even upholsterer, appointed

to set it all in order and punctually retire. Lady Agnes's tone in fine

penetrated further than it had done yet when she brought out with

intensity: "Don't desert us--don't desert us."

"Don't desert you----?"

"Be great--be great. I'm old, I've lived, I've seen. Go in for a great

material position. That will simplify everything else."

"I'll do what I can for you--anything, everything I can. Trust me--leave

me alone," Nick went on.

"And you'll stay over--you'll spend the day with her?"

"I'll stay till she turns me out!"

His mother had hold of his hand again now: she raised it to her lips

and kissed it. "My dearest son, my only joy!" Then: "I don't see how you

can resist her," she added.

"No more do I!"

She looked about--there was so much to look at--with a deep exhalation.

"If you're so fond of art, what art is equal to all this? The joy of

living in the midst of it--of seeing the finest works every day! You'll

have everything the world can give."

"That's exactly what was just passing in my own mind. It's too much,"

Nick reasoned.

"Don't be selfish!"

"Selfish?" he echoed.

"Unselfish then. You'll share it with us."

"And with Julia a little, I hope," he said.

"God bless you!" cried his mother, looking up at him. Her eyes were

detained by the sudden sense of something in his own that was not clear

to her; but before she could challenge it he asked abruptly:

"Why do you talk so of poor Biddy? Why won't she marry?"

"You had better ask Peter Sherringham," said Lady Agnes.

"What has he to do with it?"

"How odd of you not to know--when it's so plain how she thinks of him

that it's a matter of common gossip."

"Yes, if you will--we've made it so, and she takes it as an angel. But

Peter likes her."

"Does he? Then it's the more shame to him to behave as he does. He had

better leave his wretched actresses alone. That's the love of art too!"

mocked Lady Agnes.

But Nick glossed it all over. "Biddy's so charming she'll easily marry

some one else."

"Never, if she loves him. However, Julia will bring it about--Julia

will help her," his mother pursued more cheerfully. "That's what you'll

do for us--that \_she'll\_ do everything!"

"Why then more than now?" he asked.

"Because we shall be yours."

"You're mine already."

"Yes, but she isn't. However, she's as good!" Lady Agnes exulted.

"She'll turn me out of the house," said Nick.

"Come and tell me when she does! But there she is--go to her!" And she

gave him a push toward one of the windows that stood open to the

terrace. Their hostess had become visible outside; she passed slowly

along the terrace with her long shadow. "Go to her," his mother

repeated--"she's waiting for you."

Nick went out with the air of a man as ready to pass that way as

another, and at the same moment his two sisters, still flushed with

participation, appeared in a different quarter.

"We go home to-morrow, but Nick will stay a day or two," Lady Agnes said

to them.

"Dear old Nick!" Grace ejaculated looking at her with intensity.

"He's going to speak," she went on. "But don't mention it."

"Don't mention it?" Biddy asked with a milder stare. "Hasn't he spoken

enough, poor fellow?"

"I mean to Julia," Lady Agnes replied.

"Don't you understand, you goose?"--and Grace turned on her sister.

XIV

The next morning brought the young man many letters and telegrams, and

his coffee was placed beside him in his room, where he remained until

noon answering these communications. When he came out he learned that

his mother and sisters had left the house. This information was given

him by Mrs. Gresham, whom he found dealing with her own voluminous

budget at one of the tables in the library. She was a lady who received

thirty letters a day, the subject-matter of which, as well as of her

punctual answers in a hand that would have been "ladylike" in a

manageress, was a puzzle to those who observed her.

She told Nick that Lady Agnes had not been willing to disturb him at his

work to say good-bye, knowing she should see him in a day or two in

town. He was amused at the way his mother had stolen off--as if she

feared further conversation might weaken the spell she believed herself

to have wrought. The place was cleared, moreover, of its other visitors,

so that, as Mrs. Gresham said, the fun was at an end. This lady

expressed the idea that the fun was after all rather a bore. At any rate

now they could rest, Mrs. Dallow and Nick and she, and she was glad Nick

was going to stay for a little quiet. She liked Harsh best when it was

not \_en fÃªte\_: then one could see what a sympathetic old place it was.

She hoped Nick was not dreadfully fagged--she feared Julia was

completely done up. Julia, however, had transported her exhaustion to

the grounds--she was wandering about somewhere. She thought more people

would be coming to the house, people from the town, people from the

country, and had gone out so as not to have to see them. She had not

gone far--Nick could easily find her. Nick intimated that he himself was

not eager for more people, whereupon Mrs. Gresham rather archly smiled.

"And of course you hate \_me\_ for being here." He made some protest and

she added: "But I'm almost part of the house, you know--I'm one of the

chairs or tables." Nick declared that he had never seen a house so well

furnished, and Mrs. Gresham said: "I believe there \_are\_ to be some

people to dinner; rather an interference, isn't it? Julia lives so in

public. But it's all for you." And after a moment she added: "It's a

wonderful constitution." Nick at first failed to seize her allusion--he

thought it a retarded political reference, a sudden tribute to the great

unwritten instrument by which they were all governed and under the happy

operation of which his fight had been so successful. He was on the point

of saying, "The British? Wonderful!" when he gathered that the intention

of his companion had been simply to praise Mrs. Dallow's fine

robustness. "The surface so delicate, the action so easy, yet the frame

of steel."

He left Mrs. Gresham to her correspondence and went out of the house;

wondering as he walked if she wanted him to do the same thing his mother

wanted, so that her words had been intended for a prick--whether even

the two ladies had talked over their desire together. Mrs. Gresham was a

married woman who was usually taken for a widow, mainly because she was

perpetually "sent for" by her friends, who in no event sent for Mr.

Gresham. She came in every case, with her air of being \_rÃ©pandue\_ at

the expense of dingier belongings. Her figure was admired--that is it

was sometimes mentioned--and she dressed as if it was expected of her to

be smart, like a young woman in a shop or a servant much in view. She

slipped in and out, accompanied at the piano, talked to the neglected

visitors, walked in the rain, and after the arrival of the post usually

had conferences with her hostess, during which she stroked her chin and

looked familiarly responsible. It was her peculiarity that people were

always saying things to her in a lowered voice. She had all sorts of

acquaintances and in small establishments sometimes wrote the \_menus\_.

Great ones, on the other hand, had no terrors for her--she had seen too

many. No one had ever discovered whether any one else paid her. People

only knew what \_they\_ did.

If Lady Agnes had in the minor key discussed with her the propriety of a

union between the mistress of Harsh and the hope of the Dormers this

last personage could take the circumstance for granted without

irritation and even with cursory indulgence; for he was got unhappy now

and his spirit was light and clear. The summer day was splendid and the

world, as he looked at it from the terrace, offered no more worrying

ambiguity than a vault of airy blue arching over a lap of solid green.

The wide, still trees in the park appeared to be waiting for some daily

inspection, and the rich fields, with their official frill of hedges, to

rejoice in the light that smiled upon them as named and numbered acres.

Nick felt himself catch the smile and all the reasons of it: they made

up a charm to which he had perhaps not hitherto done justice--something

of the impression he had received when younger from showy "views" of

fine country-seats that had pressed and patted nature, as by the fat

hands of "benches" of magistrates and landlords, into supreme

respectability and comfort. There were a couple of peacocks on the

terrace, and his eye was caught by the gleam of the swans on a distant

lake, where was also a little temple on an island; and these objects

fell in with his humour, which at another time might have been ruffled

by them as aggressive triumphs of the conventional.

It was certainly a proof of youth and health on his part that his

spirits had risen as the plot thickened and that after he had taken his

jump into the turbid waters of a contested election he had been able to

tumble and splash not only without a sense of awkwardness but with a

considerable capacity for the frolic. Tepid as we saw him in Paris he

had found his relation to his opportunity surprisingly altered by his

little journey across the Channel, had seen things in a new perspective

and breathed an air that set him and kept him in motion. There had been

something in it that went to his head--an element that his mother and

his sisters, his father from beyond the grave, Julia Dallow, the Liberal

party and a hundred friends, were both secretly and overtly occupied in

pumping into it. If he but half-believed in victory he at least liked

the wind of the onset in his ears, and he had a general sense that when

one was "stuck" there was always the nearest thing at which one must

pull. The embarrassment, that is the revival of scepticism, which might

produce an inconsistency shameful to exhibit and yet difficult to

conceal, was safe enough to come later. Indeed at the risk of presenting

our young man as too whimsical a personage I may hint that some such

sickly glow had even now begun to tinge one quarter of his inward

horizon.

I am afraid, moreover, that I have no better excuse for him than the one

he had touched on in that momentous conversation with his mother which

I have thought it useful to reproduce in full. He was conscious of a

double nature; there were two men in him, quite separate, whose leading

features had little in common and each of whom insisted on having an

independent turn at life. Meanwhile then, if he was adequately aware

that the bed of his moral existence would need a good deal of making

over if he was to lie upon it without unseemly tossing, he was also

alive to the propriety of not parading his inconsistencies, not letting

his unregulated passions become a spectacle to the vulgar. He had none

of that wish to appear deep which is at the bottom of most forms of

fatuity; he was perfectly willing to pass for decently superficial; he

only aspired to be decently continuous. When you were not suitably

shallow this presented difficulties; but he would have assented to the

proposition that you must be as subtle as you can and that a high use of

subtlety is in consuming the smoke of your inner fire. The fire was the

great thing, not the chimney. He had no view of life that counted out

the need of learning; it was teaching rather as to which he was

conscious of no particular mission. He enjoyed life, enjoyed it

immensely, and was ready to pursue it with patience through as many

channels as possible. He was on his guard, however, against making an

ass of himself, that is against not thinking out his experiments before

trying them in public. It was because, as yet, he liked life in general

better than it was clear to him he liked particular possibilities that,

on the occasion of a constituency's holding out a cordial hand to him

while it extended another in a different direction, a certain bloom of

boyhood that was on him had not paled at the idea of a match.

He had risen to the fray as he had risen to matches at school, for his

boyishness could still take a pleasure in an inconsiderate show of

agility. He could meet electors and conciliate bores and compliment

women and answer questions and roll off speeches and chaff

adversaries--he could do these things because it was amusing and

slightly dangerous, like playing football or ascending an Alp, pastimes

for which nature had conferred on him an aptitude not so very different

in kind from a due volubility on platforms. There were two voices to

admonish him that all this was not really action at all, but only a

pusillanimous imitation of it: one of them fitfully audible in the

depths of his own spirit and the other speaking, in the equivocal

accents of a very crabbed hand, from a letter of four pages by Gabriel

Nash. However, Nick carried the imitation as far as possible, and the

flood of sound floated him. What more could a working faith have done?

He had not broken with the axiom that in a case of doubt one should hold

off, for this applied to choice, and he had not at present the slightest

pretension to choosing. He knew he was lifted along, that what he was

doing was not first-rate, that nothing was settled by it and that if

there was a hard knot in his life it would only grow harder with

keeping. Doing one's sum to-morrow instead of to-day doesn't make the

sum easier, but at least makes to-day so.

Sometimes in the course of the following fortnight it seemed to him he

had gone in for Harsh because he was sure he should lose; sometimes he

foresaw that he should win precisely to punish him for having tried and

for his want of candour; and when presently he did win he was almost

scared at his success. Then it appeared to him he had done something

even worse than not choose--he had let others choose for him. The beauty

of it was that they had chosen with only their own object in their eye,

for what did they know about his strange alternative? He was rattled

about so for a fortnight--Julia taking care of this--that he had no time

to think save when he tried to remember a quotation or an American

story, and all his life became an overflow of verbiage. Thought couldn't

hear itself for the noise, which had to be pleasant and persuasive, had

to hang more or less together, without its aid. Nick was surprised at

the airs he could play, and often when, the last thing at night, he shut

the door of his room, found himself privately exclaiming that he had had

no idea he was such a mountebank.

I must add that if this reflexion didn't occupy him long, and if no

meditation, after his return from Paris, held him for many moments,

there was a reason better even than that he was tired, that he was busy,

that he appreciated the coincidence of the hit and the hurrah, the

hurrah and the hit. That reason was simply Mrs. Dallow, who had suddenly

become a still larger fact in his consciousness than his having turned

actively political. She \_was\_ indeed his being so--in the sense that if

the politics were his, how little soever, the activity was hers. She had

better ways of showing she was clever than merely saying clever

things--which in general only prove at the most that one would be clever

if one could. The accomplished fact itself was almost always the

demonstration that Mrs. Dallow could; and when Nick came to his senses

after the proclamation of the victor and the drop of the uproar her

figure was, of the whole violent dance of shadows, the only thing that

came back, that stayed. She had been there at each of the moments,

passing, repassing, returning, before him, beside him, behind him. She

had made the business infinitely prettier than it would have been

without her, added music and flowers and ices, a finer charm, converting

it into a kind of heroic "function," the form of sport most dangerous.

It had been a garden-party, say, with one's life at stake from pressure

of the crowd. The concluded affair had bequeathed him thus not only a

seat in the House of Commons, but a perception of what may come of women

in high embodiments and an abyss of intimacy with one woman in

particular.

She had wrapped him up in something, he didn't know what--a sense of

facility, an overpowering fragrance--and they had moved together in an

immense fraternity. There had been no love-making, no contact that was

only personal, no vulgarity of flirtation: the hurry of the days and the

sharpness with which they both tended to an outside object had made all

that irrelevant. It was as if she had been too near for him to see her

separate from himself; but none the less, when he now drew breath and

looked back, what had happened met his eyes as a composed picture--a

picture of which the subject was inveterately Julia and her ponies:

Julia wonderfully fair and fine, waving her whip, cleaving the crowd,

holding her head as if it had been a banner, smiling up into

second-storey windows, carrying him beside her, carrying him to his

doom. He had not reckoned at the time, in the few days, how much he had

driven about with her; but the image of it was there, in his consulted

conscience, as well as in a personal glow not yet chilled: it looked

large as it rose before him. The things his mother had said to him made

a rich enough frame for it all, and the whole impression had that night

kept him much awake.

XV

While, after leaving Mrs. Gresham, he was hesitating which way to go and

was on the point of hailing a gardener to ask if Mrs. Dallow had been

seen, he noticed, as a spot of colour in an expanse of shrubbery, a

far-away parasol moving in the direction of the lake. He took his course

toward it across the park, and as the bearer of the parasol strolled

slowly it was not five minutes before he had joined her. He went to her

soundlessly, on the grass--he had been whistling at first, but as he got

nearer stopped--and it was not till he was at hand that she looked

round. He had watched her go as if she were turning things over in her

mind, while she brushed the smooth walks and the clean turf with her

dress, slowly made her parasol revolve on her shoulder and carried in

the other hand a book which he perceived to be a monthly review.

"I came out to get away," she said when he had begun to walk with her.

"Away from me?"

"Ah that's impossible." Then she added: "The day's so very nice."

"Lovely weather," Nick dropped. "You want to get away from Mrs. Gresham,

I suppose."

She had a pause. "From everything!"

"Well, I want to get away too."

"It has been such a racket. Listen to the dear birds."

"Yes, our noise isn't so good as theirs," said Nick. "I feel as if I had

been married and had shoes and rice thrown after me," he went on. "But

not to you, Julia--nothing so good as that."

Julia made no reply; she only turned her eyes on the ornamental water

stretching away at their right. In a moment she exclaimed, "How nasty

the lake looks!" and Nick recognised in her tone a sign of that odd

shyness--a perverse stiffness at a moment when she probably but wanted

to be soft--which, taken in combination with her other qualities, was so

far from being displeasing to him that it represented her nearest

approach to extreme charm. \_He\_ was not shy now, for he considered this

morning that he saw things very straight and in a sense altogether

superior and delightful. This enabled him to be generously sorry for his

companion--if he were the reason of her being in any degree

uncomfortable, and yet left him to enjoy some of the motions, not in

themselves without grace, by which her discomfort was revealed. He

wouldn't insist on anything yet: so he observed that her standard in

lakes was too high, and then talked a little about his mother and the

girls, their having gone home, his not having seen them that morning,

Lady Agnes's deep satisfaction in his victory, and the fact that she

would be obliged to "do something" for the autumn--take a house or

something or other.

"I'll lend her a house," said Mrs. Dallow.

"Oh Julia, Julia!" Nick half groaned.

But she paid no attention to his sound; she only held up her review and

said: "See what I've brought with me to read--Mr. Hoppus's article."

"That's right; then \_I\_ shan't have to. You'll tell me about it." He

uttered this without believing she had meant or wished to read the

article, which was entitled "The Revision of the British Constitution,"

in spite of her having encumbered herself with the stiff, fresh

magazine. He was deeply aware she was not in want of such inward

occupation as periodical literature could supply. They walked along and

he added: "But is that what we're in for, reading Mr. Hoppus? Is it the

sort of thing constituents expect? Or, even worse, pretending to have

read him when one hasn't? Oh what a tangled web we weave!"

"People are talking about it. One has to know. It's the article of the

month."

Nick looked at her askance. "You say things every now and then for which

I could really kill you. 'The article of the month,' for instance: I

could kill you for that."

"Well, kill me!" Mrs. Dallow returned.

"Let me carry your book," he went on irrelevantly. The hand in which she

held it was on the side of her on which he was walking, and he put out

his own hand to take it. But for a couple of minutes she forbore to give

it up, so that they held it together, swinging it a little. Before she

surrendered it he asked where she was going.

"To the island," she answered.

"Well, I'll go with you--and I'll kill you there."

"The things I say are the right things," Julia declared.

"It's just the right things that are wrong. It's because you're so

political," Nick too lightly explained. "It's your horrible ambition.

The woman who has a salon should have read the article of the month. See

how one dreadful thing leads to another."

"There are some things that lead to nothing," said Mrs. Dallow.

"No doubt--no doubt. And how are you going to get over to your island?"

"I don't know."

"Isn't there a boat?"

"I don't know."

Nick had paused to look round for the boat, but his hostess walked on

without turning her head. "Can you row?" he then asked.

"Don't you know I can do everything?"

"Yes, to be sure. That's why I want to kill you. There's the boat."

"Shall you drown me?" she asked.

"Oh let me perish with you!" Nick answered with a sigh. The boat had

been hidden from them by the bole of a great tree which rose from the

grass at the water's edge. It was moored to a small place of embarkation

and was large enough to hold as many persons as were likely to wish to

visit at once the little temple in the middle of the lake, which Nick

liked because it was absurd and which Mrs. Dallow had never had a

particular esteem for. The lake, fed by a natural spring, was a liberal

sheet of water, measured by the scale of park scenery; and though its

principal merit was that, taken at a distance, it gave a gleam of

abstraction to the concrete verdure, doing the office of an open eye in

a dull face, it could also be approached without derision on a sweet

summer morning when it made a lapping sound and reflected candidly

various things that were probably finer than itself--the sky, the great

trees, the flight of birds. A man of taste, coming back from Rome a

hundred years before, had caused a small ornamental structure to be

raised, from artificial foundations, on its bosom, and had endeavoured

to make this architectural pleasantry as nearly as possible a

reminiscence of the small ruined rotunda which stands on the bank of the

Tiber and is pronounced by \_ciceroni\_ once sacred to Vesta. It was

circular, roofed with old tiles, surrounded by white columns and

considerably dilapidated. George Dallow had taken an interest in it--it

reminded him not in the least of Rome, but of other things he liked--and

had amused himself with restoring it. "Give me your hand--sit there and

I'll ferry you," Nick said.

Julia complied, placing herself opposite him in the boat; but as he took

up the paddles she declared that she preferred to remain on the

water--there was too much malice prepense in the temple. He asked her

what she meant by that, and she said it was ridiculous to withdraw to an

island a few feet square on purpose to meditate. She had nothing to

meditate about that required so much scenery and attitude.

"On the contrary, it would be just to change the scene and the \_pose\_.

It's what we have been doing for a week that's attitude; and to be for

half an hour where nobody's looking and one hasn't to keep it up is just

what I wanted to put in an idle irresponsible day for. I'm not keeping

it up now--I suppose you've noticed," Nick went on as they floated and

he scarcely dipped the oars.

"I don't understand you"--and Julia leaned back in the boat.

He gave no further explanation than to ask in a minute: "Have you people

to dinner to-night?"

"I believe there are three or four, but I'll put them off if you like."

"Must you \_always\_ live in public, Julia?" he continued.

She looked at him a moment and he could see how she coloured. "We'll go

home--I'll put them off."

"Ah no, don't go home; it's too jolly here. Let them come, let them

come, poor wretches!"

"How little you know me," Julia presently broke out, "when, ever so

many times, I've lived here for months without a creature!"

"Except Mrs. Gresham, I suppose."

"I have had to have the house going, I admit."

"You're perfect, you're admirable, and I don't criticise you."

"I don't understand you!" she tossed back.

"That only adds to the generosity of what you've done for me," Nick

returned, beginning to pull faster. He bent over the oars and sent the

boat forward, keeping this up for a succession of minutes during which

they both remained silent. His companion, in her place, motionless,

reclining--the seat in the stern was most comfortable--looked only at

the water, the sky, the trees. At last he headed for the little temple,

saying first, however, "Shan't we visit the ruin?"

"If you like. I don't mind seeing how they keep it."

They reached the white steps leading up to it. He held the boat and his

companion got out; then, when he had made it fast, they mounted together

to the open door. "They keep the place very well," Nick said, looking

round. "It's a capital place to give up everything in."

"It might do at least for you to explain what you mean." And Julia sat

down.

"I mean to pretend for half an hour that I don't represent the burgesses

of Harsh. It's charming--it's very delicate work. Surely it has been

retouched."

The interior of the pavilion, lighted by windows which the circle of

columns was supposed outside and at a distance to conceal, had a vaulted

ceiling and was occupied by a few pieces of last-century furniture,

spare and faded, of which the colours matched with the decoration of the

walls. These and the ceiling, tinted and not exempt from indications of

damp, were covered with fine mouldings and medallions. It all made a

very elegant little tea-house, the mistress of which sat on the edge of

a sofa rolling her parasol and remarking, "You ought to read Mr.

Hoppus's article to me."

"Why, is \_this\_ your salon?" Nick smiled.

"What makes you always talk of that? My salon's an invention of your

own."

"But isn't it the idea you're most working for?"

Suddenly, nervously, she put up her parasol and sat under it as if not

quite sensible of what she was doing. "How much you know me! I'm not

'working' for anything--that you'll ever guess."

Nick wandered about the room and looked at various things it

contained--the odd volumes on the tables, the bits of quaint china on

the shelves. "They do keep it very well. You've got charming things."

"They're supposed to come over every day and look after them."

"They must come over in force."

"Oh no one knows."

"It's spick and span. How well you have everything done!"

"I think you've some reason to say so," said Mrs. Dallow. Her parasol

was now down and she was again rolling it tight.

"But you're right about my not knowing you. Why were you so ready to do

so much for me?"

He stopped in front of her and she looked up at him. Her eyes rested

long on his own; then she broke out: "Why do you hate me so?"

"Was it because you like me personally?" Nick pursued as if he hadn't

heard her. "You may think that an odd or positively an odious question;

but isn't it natural, my wanting to know?"

"Oh if you don't know!" Julia quite desperately sighed.

"It's a question of being sure."

"Well then if you're not sure----!"

"Was it done for me as a friend, as a man?"

"You're not a man--you're a child," his hostess declared with a face

that was cold, though she had been smiling the moment before.

"After all I was a good candidate," Nick went on.

"What do I care for candidates?"

"You're the most delightful woman, Julia," he said as he sat down beside

her, "and I can't imagine what you mean by my hating you."

"If you haven't discovered that I like you, you might as well."

"Might as well discover it?"

She was grave--he had never seen her so pale and never so beautiful. She

had stopped rolling her parasol; her hands were folded in her lap and

her eyes bent on them. Nick sat looking at them as well--a trifle

awkwardly. "Might as well have hated me," she said.

"We've got on so beautifully together all these days: why shouldn't we

get on as well for ever and ever?" he brought out. She made no answer,

and suddenly he said: "Ah Julia, I don't know what you've done to me,

but you've done it. You've done it by strange ways, but it will serve.

Yes, I hate you," he added in a different tone and with his face all

nearer.

"Dear Nick, dear Nick----!" she began. But she stopped, feeling his

nearness and its intensity, a nearness now so great that his arm was

round her, that he was really in possession of her. She closed her eyes

but heard him ask again, "Why shouldn't it be for ever, for ever?" in a

voice that had for her ear a vibration none had ever had.

"You've done it, you've done it," Nick repeated.

"What do you want of me?" she appealed.

"To stay with me--this way--always."

"Ah not this way," she answered softly, but as if in pain and making an

effort, with a certain force, to detach herself.

"This way then--or this!" He took such pressing advantage of her that he

had kissed her with repetition. She rose while he insisted, but he held

her yet, and as he did so his tenderness turned to beautiful words. "If

you'll marry me, why shouldn't it be so simple, so right and good?" He

drew her closer again, too close for her to answer. But her struggle

ceased and she rested on him a minute; she buried her face in his

breast.

"You're hard, and it's cruel!" she then exclaimed, shaking herself free.

"Hard--cruel?"

"You do it with so little!" And with this, unexpectedly to Nick, Julia

burst straight into tears. Before he could stop her she was at the door

of the pavilion as if she wished to get immediately away. There,

however, he stayed her, bending over her while she sobbed, unspeakably

gentle with her.

"So little? It's with everything--with everything I have."

"I've done it, you say? What do you accuse me of doing?" Her tears were

already over.

"Of making me yours; of being so precious, Julia, so exactly what a man

wants, as it seems to me. I didn't know you could," he went on, smiling

down at her. "I didn't--no, I didn't."

"It's what I say--that you've always hated me."

"I'll make it up to you!" he laughed.

She leaned on the doorway with her forehead against the lintel. "You

don't even deny it."

"Contradict you \_now\_? I'll admit it, though it's rubbish, on purpose to

live it down."

"It doesn't matter," she said slowly; "for however much you might have

liked me you'd never have done so half as much as I've cared for you."

"Oh I'm so poor!" Nick murmured cheerfully.

With her eyes looking at him as in a new light she slowly shook her

head. Then she declared: "You never can live it down."

"I like that! Haven't I asked you to marry me? When did you ever ask

me?"

"Every day of my life! As I say, it's hard--for a proud woman."

"Yes, you're too proud even to answer me."

"We must think of it, we must talk of it."

"Think of it? I've thought of it ever so much."

"I mean together. There are many things in such a question."

"The principal thing is beautifully to give me your word."

She looked at him afresh all strangely; then she threw off: "I wish I

didn't adore you!" She went straight down the steps.

"You don't adore me at all, you know, if you leave me now. Why do you

go? It's so charming here and we're so delightfully alone."

"Untie the boat; we'll go on the water," Julia said.

Nick was at the top of the steps, looking down at her. "Ah stay a

little--\_do\_ stay!" he pleaded.

"I'll get in myself, I'll pull off," she simply answered.

At this he came down and bent a little to undo the rope. He was close to

her and as he raised his head he felt it caught; she had seized it in

her hands and she pressed her lips, as he had never felt lips pressed,

to the first place they encountered. The next instant she was in the

boat.

This time he dipped the oars very slowly indeed; and, while for a period

that was longer than it seemed to them they floated vaguely, they mainly

sat and glowed at each other as if everything had been settled. There

were reasons enough why Nick should be happy; but it is a singular fact

that the leading one was the sense of his having escaped a great and

ugly mistake. The final result of his mother's appeal to him the day

before had been the idea that he must act with unimpeachable honour. He

was capable of taking it as an assurance that Julia had placed him under

an obligation a gentleman could regard but in one way. If she herself

had understood it so, putting the vision, or at any rate the

appreciation, of a closer tie into everything she had done for him, the

case was conspicuously simple and his course unmistakably plain. That is

why he had been gay when he came out of the house to look for her: he

could be gay when his course was plain. He could be all the gayer,

naturally, I must add, that, in turning things over as he had done half

the night, what he had turned up oftenest was the recognition that Julia

now had a new personal power with him. It was not for nothing that she

had thrown herself personally into his life. She had by her act made him

live twice as intensely, and such an office, such a service, if a man

had accepted and deeply tasted it, was certainly a thing to put him on

his honour. He took it as distinct that there was nothing he could do in

preference that wouldn't be spoiled for him by any deflexion from that

point. His mother had made him uncomfortable by bringing it so heavily

up that Julia was in love with him--he didn't like in general to be told

such things; but the responsibility seemed easier to carry and he was

less shy about it when once he was away from other eyes, with only

Julia's own to express that truth and with indifferent nature all

about. Besides, what discovery had he made this morning but that he also

was in love?

"You've got to be a very great man, you know," she said to him in the

middle of the lake. "I don't know what you mean about my salon, but I

\_am\_ ambitious."

"We must look at life in a large, bold way," he concurred while he

rested his oars.

"That's what I mean. If I didn't think you could I wouldn't look at

you."

"I could what?"

"Do everything you ought--everything I imagine, I dream of. You \_are\_

clever: you can never make me believe the contrary after your speech on

Tuesday, Don't speak to me! I've seen, I've heard, and I know what's in

you. I shall hold you to it. You're everything you pretend not to be."

Nick looked at the water while she talked. "Will it always be so

amusing?" he asked.

"Will what always be?"

"Why my career."

"Shan't I make it so?"

"Then it will be yours--it won't be mine," said Nick.

"Ah don't say that--don't make me out that sort of woman! If they should

say it's me I'd drown myself."

"If they should say what's you?"

"Why your getting on. If they should say I push you and do things for

you. Things I mean that you can't do yourself."

"Well, won't you do them? It's just what I count on."

"Don't be dreadful," Julia said. "It would be loathsome if I were

thought the cleverest. That's not the sort of man I want to marry."

"Oh I shall make you work, my dear!"

"Ah \_that\_----!" she sounded in a tone that might come back to a man

after years.

"You'll do the great thing, you'll make my life the best life," Nick

brought out as if he had been touched to deep conviction. "I daresay

that will keep me in heart."

"In heart? Why shouldn't you be in heart?" And her eyes, lingering on

him, searching him, seemed to question him still more than her lips.

"Oh it will be all right!" he made answer.

"You'll like success as well as any one else. Don't tell me--you're not

so ethereal!"

"Yes, I shall like success."

"So shall I! And of course I'm glad you'll now be able to do things,"

Julia went on. "I'm glad you'll have things. I'm glad I'm not poor."

"Ah don't speak of that," Nick murmured. "Only be nice to my mother. We

shall make her supremely happy."

"It wouldn't be for your mother I'd do it--yet I'm glad I like your

people," Mrs. Dallow rectified. "Leave them to me!"

"You're generous--you're noble," he stammered.

"Your mother must live at Broadwood; she must have it for life. It's not

at all bad."

"Ah Julia," her companion replied, "it's well I love you!"

"Why shouldn't you?" she laughed; and after this no more was said

between them till the boat touched shore. When she had got out she

recalled that it was time for luncheon; but they took no action in

consequence, strolling in a direction which was not that of the house.

There was a vista that drew them on, a grassy path skirting the

foundations of scattered beeches and leading to a stile from which the

charmed wanderer might drop into another division of Mrs. Dallow's

property. She said something about their going as far as the stile, then

the next instant exclaimed: "How stupid of you--you've forgotten Mr.

Hoppus!"

Nick wondered. "We left him in the temple of Vesta. Darling, I had other

things to think of there."

"I'll send for him," said Julia.

"Lord, can you think of him now?" he asked.

"Of course I can--more than ever."

"Shall we go back for him?"--and he pulled up.

She made no direct answer, but continued to walk, saying they would go

as far as the stile. "Of course I know you're fearfully vague," she

presently resumed.

"I wasn't vague at all. But you were in such a hurry to get away."

"It doesn't signify. I've another at home."

"Another summer-house?" he more lightly suggested.

"A copy of Mr. Hoppus."

"Mercy, how you go in for him! Fancy having two!"

"He sent me the number of the magazine, and the other's the one that

comes every month."

"Every month; I see"--but his manner justified considerably her charge

of vagueness. They had reached the stile and he leaned over it, looking

at a great mild meadow and at the browsing beasts in the distance.

"Did you suppose they come every day?" Julia went on.

"Dear no, thank God!" They remained there a little; he continued to look

at the animals and before long added: "Delightful English pastoral

scene. Why do they say it won't paint?"

"Who says it won't?"

"I don't know--some of them. It will in France; but somehow it won't

here."

"What are you talking about?" Mrs. Dallow demanded.

He appeared unable to satisfy her on this point; instead of answering

her directly he at any rate said: "Is Broadwood very charming?"

"Have you never been there? It shows how you've treated me. We used to

go there in August. George had ideas about it," she added. She had never

affected not to speak of her late husband, especially with Nick, whose

kinsman he had in a manner been and who had liked him better than some

others did.

"George had ideas about a great many things."

Yet she appeared conscious it would be rather odd on such an occasion to

take this up. It was even odd in Nick to have said it. "Broadwood's just

right," she returned at last. "It's neither too small nor too big, and

it takes care of itself. There's nothing to be done: you can't spend a

penny."

"And don't you want to use it?"

"We can go and stay with \_them\_," said Julia.

"They'll think I bring them an angel." And Nick covered her white hand,

which was resting on the stile, with his own large one.

"As they regard you yourself as an angel they'll take it as natural of

you to associate with your kind."

"Oh \_my\_ kind!" he quite wailed, looking at the cows.

But his very extravagance perhaps saved it, and she turned away from him

as if starting homeward, while he began to retrace his steps with her.

Suddenly she said: "What did you mean that night in Paris?"

"That night----?"

"When you came to the hotel with me after we had all dined at that place

with Peter."

"What did I mean----?"

"About your caring so much for the fine arts. You seemed to want to

frighten me."

"Why should you have been frightened? I can't imagine what I had in my

head: not now."

"You \_are\_ vague," said Julia with a little flush.

"Not about the great thing."

"The great thing?"

"That I owe you everything an honest man has to offer. How can I care

about the fine arts now?"

She stopped with lighted eyes on him. "Is it because you think you \_owe\_

it--" and she paused, still with the heightened colour in her cheek,

then went on--"that you've spoken to me as you did there?" She tossed

her head toward the lake.

"I think I spoke to you because I couldn't help it."

"You \_are\_ vague!" And she walked on again.

"You affect me differently from any other woman."

"Oh other women----! Why shouldn't you care about the fine arts now?"

she added.

"There'll be no time. All my days and my years will be none too much for

what you expect of me."

"I don't expect you to give up anything. I only expect you to do more."

"To do more I must do less. I've no talent."

"No talent?"

"I mean for painting."

Julia pulled up again. "That's odious! You \_have\_--you must."

He burst out laughing. "You're altogether delightful. But how little you

know about it--about the honourable practice of any art!"

"What do you call practice? You'll have all our things--you'll live in

the midst of them."

"Certainly I shall enjoy looking at them, being so near them."

"Don't say I've taken you away then."

"Taken me away----?"

"From the love of art. I like them myself now, poor George's treasures.

I didn't of old so much, because it seemed to me he made too much of

them--he was always talking."

"Well, I won't always talk," said Nick.

"You may do as you like--they're yours."

"Give them to the nation," Nick went on.

"I like that! When we've done with them."

"We shall have done with them when your Vandykes and Moronis have cured

me of the delusion that I may be of \_their\_ family. Surely that won't

take long."

"You shall paint \_me\_," said Julia.

"Never, never, never!" He spoke in a tone that made his companion

stare--then seemed slightly embarrassed at this result of his emphasis.

To relieve himself he said, as they had come back to the place beside

the lake where the boat was moored, "Shan't we really go and fetch Mr.

Hoppus?"

She hesitated. "You may go; I won't, please."

"That's not what I want."

"Oblige me by going. I'll wait here." With which she sat down on the

bench attached to the little landing.

Nick, at this, got into the boat and put off; he smiled at her as she

sat there watching him. He made his short journey, disembarked and went

into the pavilion; but when he came out with the object of his errand he

saw she had quitted her station, had returned to the house without him.

He rowed back quickly, sprang ashore and followed her with long steps.

Apparently she had gone fast; she had almost reached the door when he

overtook her.

"Why did you basely desert me?" he asked, tenderly stopping her there.

"I don't know. Because I'm so happy."

"May I tell mother then?"

"You may tell her she shall have Broadwood."

XVI

He lost no time in going down to see Mr. Carteret, to whom he had

written immediately after the election and who had answered him in

twelve revised pages of historical parallel. He used often to envy Mr.

Carteret's leisure, a sense of which came to him now afresh, in the

summer evening, as he walked up the hill toward the quiet house where

enjoyment had ever been mingled for him with a vague oppression. He was

a little boy again, under Mr. Carteret's roof--a little boy on whom it

had been duly impressed that in the wide, plain, peaceful rooms he was

not to "touch." When he paid a visit to his father's old friend there

were in fact many things--many topics--from which he instinctively kept

his hands. Even Mr. Chayter, the immemorial blank butler, who was so

like his master that he might have been a twin brother, helped to remind

him that he must be good. Mr. Carteret seemed to Nick a very grave

person, but he had the sense that Chayter thought him rather frivolous.

Our young man always came on foot from the station, leaving his

portmanteau to be carried: the direct way was steep and he liked the

slow approach, which gave him a chance to look about the place and smell

the new-mown hay. At this season the air was full of it--the fields were

so near that it was in the clean, still streets. Nick would never have

thought of rattling up to Mr. Carteret's door, which had on an old

brass plate the proprietor's name, as if he had been the principal

surgeon. The house was in the high part, and the neat roofs of other

houses, lower down the hill, made an immediate prospect for it, scarcely

counting, however, since the green country was just below these,

familiar and interpenetrating, in the shape of small but thick-tufted

gardens. Free garden-growths flourished in all the intervals, but the

only disorder of the place was that there were sometimes oats on the

pavements. A crooked lane, with postern doors and cobble-stones, opened

near Mr. Carteret's house and wandered toward the old abbey; for the

abbey was the secondary fact of Beauclere--it came after Mr. Carteret.

Mr. Carteret sometimes went away and the abbey never did; yet somehow

what was most of the essence of the place was that it could boast of the

resident in the squarest of the square red houses, the one with the

finest of the arched hall-windows, in three divisions, over the widest

of the last-century doorways. You saw the great church from the

doorstep, beyond gardens of course, and in the stillness you could hear

the flutter of the birds that circled round its huge short towers. The

towers had been finished only as time finishes things, by lending

assurances to their lapses. There is something right in old monuments

that have been wrong for centuries: some such moral as that was usually

in Nick's mind as an emanation of Beauclere when he saw the grand line

of the roof ride the sky and draw out its length.

When the door with the brass plate was opened and Mr. Chayter appeared

in the middle distance--he always advanced just to the same spot, as a

prime minister receives an ambassador--Nick felt anew that he would be

wonderfully like Mr. Carteret if he had had an expression. He denied

himself this freedom, never giving a sign of recognition, often as the

young man had been at the house. He was most attentive to the visitor's

wants, but apparently feared that if he allowed a familiarity it might

go too far. There was always the same question to be asked--had Mr.

Carteret finished his nap? He usually had not finished it, and this left

Nick what he liked--time to smoke a cigarette in the garden or even to

take before dinner a turn about the place. He observed now, every time

he came, that Mr. Carteret's nap lasted a little longer. There was each

year a little more strength to be gathered for the ceremony of dinner:

this was the principal symptom--almost the only one--that the

clear-cheeked old gentleman gave of not being so fresh as of yore. He

was still wonderful for his age. To-day he was particularly careful:

Chayter went so far as to mention to Nick that four gentlemen were

expected to dinner--an exuberance perhaps partly explained by the

circumstance that Lord Bottomley was one of them.

The prospect of Lord Bottomley was somehow not stirring; it only made

the young man say to himself with a quick, thin sigh, "This time I \_am\_

in for it!" And he immediately had the unpolitical sense again that

there was nothing so pleasant as the way the quiet bachelor house had

its best rooms on the big garden, which seemed to advance into them

through their wide windows and ruralise their dulness.

"I expect it will be a lateish eight, sir," said Mr. Chayter,

superintending in the library the production of tea on a large scale.

Everything at Mr. Carteret's seemed to Nick on a larger scale than

anywhere else--the tea-cups, the knives and forks, the door-handles, the

chair-backs, the legs of mutton, the candles, and the lumps of coal:

they represented and apparently exhausted the master's sense of pleasing

effect, for the house was not otherwise decorated. Nick thought it

really hideous, but he was capable at any time of extracting a degree of

amusement from anything strongly characteristic, and Mr. Carteret's

interior expressed a whole view of life. Our young man was generous

enough to find in it a hundred instructive intimations even while it

came over him--as it always did at Beauclere--that this was the view he

himself was expected to take. Nowhere were the boiled eggs at breakfast

so big or in such big receptacles; his own shoes, arranged in his room,

looked to him vaster there than at home. He went out into the garden and

remembered what enormous strawberries they should have for dinner. In

the house was a great deal of Landseer, of oilcloth, of woodwork painted

and "grained."

Finding there would be time before the evening meal or before Mr.

Carteret was likely to see him he quitted the house and took a stroll

toward the abbey. It covered acres of ground on the summit of the hill,

and there were aspects in which its vast bulk reminded him of the ark

left high and dry upon Ararat. It was the image at least of a great

wreck, of the indestructible vessel of a faith, washed up there by a

storm centuries before. The injury of time added to this appearance--the

infirmities round which, as he knew, the battle of restoration had begun

to be fought. The cry had been raised to save the splendid pile, and the

counter-cry by the purists, the sentimentalists, whatever they were, to

save it from being saved. They were all exchanging compliments in the

morning papers.

Nick sauntered about the church--it took a good while; he leaned against

low things and looked up at it while he smoked another cigarette. It

struck him as a great pity such a pile should be touched: so much of the

past was buried there that it was like desecrating, like digging up a

grave. Since the years were letting it down so gently why jostle the

elbow of slow-fingering time? The fading afternoon was exquisitely pure;

the place was empty; he heard nothing but the cries of several children,

which sounded sweet, who were playing on the flatness of the very old

tombs. He knew this would inevitably be one of the topics at dinner, the

restoration of the abbey; it would give rise to a considerable deal of

orderly debate. Lord Bottomley, oddly enough, would probably oppose the

expensive project, but on grounds that would be characteristic of him

even if the attitude were not. Nick's nerves always knew on this spot

what it was to be soothed; but he shifted his position with a slight

impatience as the vision came over him of Lord Bottomley's treating a

question of esthetics. It was enough to make one want to take the other

side, the idea of having the same taste as his lordship: one would have

it for such different reasons.

Dear Mr. Carteret would be deliberate and fair all round and would, like

his noble friend, exhibit much more architectural knowledge than he,

Nick, possessed: which would not make it a whit less droll to our young

man that an artistic idea, so little really assimilated, should be

broached at that table and in that air. It would remain so outside of

their minds and their minds would remain so outside of it. It would be

dropped at last, however, after half an hour's gentle worrying, and the

conversation would incline itself to public affairs. Mr. Carteret would

find his natural level--the production of anecdote in regard to the

formation of early ministries. He knew more than any one else about the

personages of whom certain cabinets would have consisted if they had not

consisted of others. His favourite exercise was to illustrate how

different everything might have been from what it was, and how the

reason of the difference had always been somebody's inability to "see

his way" to accept the view of somebody else--a view usually at the time

discussed in strict confidence with Mr. Carteret, who surrounded his

actual violation of that confidence thirty years later with many

precautions against scandal. In this retrospective vein, at the head of

his table, the old gentleman enjoyed a hearing, or at any rate commanded

a silence, often intense. Every one left it to some one else to ask

another question; and when by chance some one else did so every one was

struck with admiration at any one's being able to say anything. Nick

knew the moment when he himself would take a glass of a particular port

and, surreptitiously looking at his watch, perceive it was ten o'clock.

That timepiece might as well mark 1830.

All this would be a part of the suggestion of leisure that invariably

descended upon him at Beauclere--the image of a sloping shore where the

tide of time broke with a ripple too faint to be a warning. But there

was another admonition almost equally sure to descend upon his spirit

during a stroll in a summer hour about the grand abbey; to sink into it

as the light lingered on the rough red walls and the local accent of the

children sounded soft in the churchyard. It was simply the sense of

England--a sort of apprehended revelation of his country. The dim annals

of the place were sensibly, heavily in the air--foundations bafflingly

early, a great monastic life, wars of the Roses, with battles and blood

in the streets, and then the long quietude of the respectable centuries,

all corn-fields and magistrates and vicars--and these things were

connected with an emotion that arose from the green country, the rich

land so infinitely lived in, and laid on him a hand that was too ghostly

to press and yet somehow too urgent to be light. It produced a throb he

couldn't have spoken of, it was so deep, and that was half imagination

and half responsibility. These impressions melted together and made a

general appeal, of which, with his new honours as a legislator, he was

the sentient subject. If he had a love for that particular scene of life

mightn't it have a love for him and expect something of him? What fate

could be so high as to grow old in a national affection? What a fine

sort of reciprocity, making mere soreness of all the balms of

indifference!

The great church was still open and he turned into it and wandered a

little in the twilight that had gathered earlier there. The whole

structure, with its immensity of height and distance, seemed to rest on

tremendous facts--facts of achievement and endurance--and the huge

Norman pillars to loom through the dimness like the ghosts of heroes.

Nick was more struck with its thick earthly than with its fine spiritual

reference, and he felt the oppression of his conscience as he walked

slowly about. It was in his mind that nothing in life was really clear,

all things were mingled and charged, and that patriotism might be an

uplifting passion even if it had to allow for Lord Bottomley and for Mr.

Carteret's blindness on certain sides. He presently noticed that

half-past seven was about to strike, and as he went back to his old

friend's he couldn't have said if he walked in gladness or in gloom.

"Mr. Carteret will be in the drawing-room at a quarter to eight, sir,"

Chayter mentioned, and Nick as he went to dress asked himself what was

the use of being a member of Parliament if one was still sensitive to an

intimation on the part of such a functionary that one ought already to

have begun that business. Chayter's words but meant that Mr. Carteret

would expect to have a little comfortable conversation with him before

dinner. Nick's usual rapidity in dressing was, however, quite adequate

to the occasion, so that his host had not appeared when he went down.

There were flowers in the unfeminine saloon, which contained several

paintings in addition to the engravings of pictures of animals; but

nothing could prevent its reminding Nick of a comfortable

committee-room.

Mr. Carteret presently came in with his gold-headed stick, a laugh like

a series of little warning coughs and the air of embarrassment that our

young man always perceived in him at first. He was almost eighty but was

still shy--he laughed a great deal, faintly and vaguely, at nothing, as

if to make up for the seriousness with which he took some jokes. He

always began by looking away from his interlocutor, and it was only

little by little that his eyes came round; after which their limpid and

benevolent blue made you wonder why they should ever be circumspect. He

was clean-shaven and had a long upper lip. When he had seated himself he

talked of "majorities" and showed a disposition to converse on the

general subject of the fluctuation of Liberal gains. He had an

extraordinary memory for facts of this sort, and could mention the

figures relating to the returns from innumerable places in particular

years. To many of these facts he attached great importance, in his

simple, kindly, presupposing way; correcting himself five minutes later

if he had said that in 1857 some one had had 6014 instead of 6004.

Nick always felt a great hypocrite as he listened to him, in spite of

the old man's courtesy--a thing so charming in itself that it would have

been grossness to speak of him as a bore. The difficulty was that he

took for granted all kinds of positive assent, and Nick, in such

company, found himself steeped in an element of tacit pledges which

constituted the very medium of intercourse and yet made him draw his

breath a little in pain when for a moment he measured them. There would

have been no hypocrisy at all if he could have regarded Mr. Carteret as

a mere sweet spectacle, the last or almost the last illustration of a

departing tradition of manners. But he represented something more than

manners; he represented what he believed to be morals and ideas, ideas

as regards which he took your personal deference--not discovering how

natural that was--for participation. Nick liked to think that his

father, though ten years younger, had found it congruous to make his

best friend of the owner of so nice a nature: it gave a softness to his

feeling for that memory to be reminded that Sir Nicholas had been of the

same general type--a type so pure, so disinterested, so concerned for

the public good. Just so it endeared Mr. Carteret to him to perceive

that he considered his father had done a definite work, prematurely

interrupted, which had been an absolute benefit to the people of

England. The oddity was, however, that though both Mr. Carteret's aspect

and his appreciation were still so fresh this relation of his to his

late distinguished friend made the latter appear to Nick even more

irrecoverably dead. The good old man had almost a vocabulary of his own,

made up of old-fashioned political phrases and quite untainted with the

new terms, mostly borrowed from America; indeed his language and his

tone made those of almost any one who might be talking with him sound by

contrast rather American. He was, at least nowadays, never severe nor

denunciatory; but sometimes in telling an anecdote he dropped such an

expression as "the rascal said to me" or such an epithet as "the vulgar

dog."

Nick was always struck with the rare simplicity--it came out in his

countenance--of one who had lived so long and seen so much of affairs

that draw forth the passions and perversities of men. It often made him

say to himself that Mr. Carteret must have had many odd parts to have

been able to achieve with his means so many things requiring cleverness.

It was as if experience, though coming to him in abundance, had dealt

with him so clean-handedly as to leave no stain, and had moreover never

provoked him to any general reflexion. He had never proceeded in any

ironic way from the particular to the general; certainly he had never

made a reflexion upon anything so unparliamentary as Life. He would have

questioned the taste of such an extravagance and if he had encountered

it on the part of another have regarded it as an imported foreign toy

with the uses of which he was unacquainted. Life, for him, was a purely

practical function, not a question of more or less showy phrasing. It

must be added that he had to Nick's perception his variations--his back

windows opening into grounds more private. That was visible from the way

his eye grew cold and his whole polite face rather austere when he

listened to something he didn't agree with or perhaps even understand;

as if his modesty didn't in strictness forbid the suspicion that a thing

he didn't understand would have a probability against it. At such times

there was something rather deadly in the silence in which he simply

waited with a lapse in his face, not helping his interlocutor out. Nick

would have been very sorry to attempt to communicate to him a matter he

wouldn't be likely to understand. This cut off of course a multitude of

subjects.

The evening passed exactly as he had foreseen, even to the markedly

prompt dispersal of the guests, two of whom were "local" men, earnest

and distinct, though not particularly distinguished. The third was a

young, slim, uninitiated gentleman whom Lord Bottomley brought with him

and concerning whom Nick was informed beforehand that he was engaged to

be married to the Honourable Jane, his lordship's second daughter. There

were recurrent allusions to Nick's victory, as to which he had the fear

that he might appear to exhibit less interest in it than the company

did. He took energetic precautions against this and felt repeatedly a

little spent with them, for the subject always came up once more. Yet it

was not as his but as theirs that they liked the triumph. Mr. Carteret

took leave of him for the night directly after the other guests had

gone, using at this moment the words he had often used before:

"You may sit up to any hour you like. I only ask that you don't read in

bed."

XVII

Nick's little visit was to terminate immediately after luncheon the

following day: much as the old man enjoyed his being there he wouldn't

have dreamed of asking for more of his time now that it had such great

public uses. He liked infinitely better that his young friend should be

occupied with parliamentary work than only occupied in talking it over

with him. Talking it over, however, was the next best thing, as on the

morrow, after breakfast, Mr. Carteret showed Nick he considered. They

sat in the garden, the morning being warm, and the old man had a table

beside him covered with the letters and newspapers the post had poured

forth. He was proud of his correspondence, which was altogether on

public affairs, and proud in a manner of the fact that he now dictated

almost everything. That had more in it of the statesman in retirement, a

character indeed not consciously assumed by Mr. Carteret, but always

tacitly attributed to him by Nick, who took it rather from the pictorial

point of view--remembering on each occasion only afterwards that though

he was in retirement he had not exactly been a statesman. A young man, a

very sharp, handy young man, came every morning at ten o'clock and wrote

for him till luncheon. The young man had a holiday to-day in honour of

Nick's visit--a fact the mention of which led Nick to make some not

particularly sincere speech about \_his\_ being ready to write anything

if Mr. Carteret were at all pressed.

"Ah but your own budget--what will become of that?" the old gentleman

objected, glancing at Nick's pockets as if rather surprised not to see

them stuffed out with documents in split envelopes. His visitor had to

confess that he had not directed his letters to meet him at Beauclere:

he should find them in town that afternoon. This led to a little homily

from Mr. Carteret which made him feel quite guilty; there was such an

implication of neglected duty in the way the old man said, "You won't do

them justice--you won't do them justice." He talked for ten minutes, in

his rich, simple, urbane way, about the fatal consequences of getting

behind. It was his favourite doctrine that one should always be a little

before, and his own eminently regular respiration seemed to illustrate

the idea. A man was certainly before who had so much in his rear.

This led to the bestowal of a good deal of general advice on the

mistakes to avoid at the beginning of a parliamentary career--as to

which Mr. Carteret spoke with the experience of one who had sat for

fifty years in the House of Commons. Nick was amused, but also mystified

and even a little irritated, by his talk: it was founded on the idea of

observation and yet our young man couldn't at all regard him as an

observer. "He doesn't observe \_me\_," he said to himself; "if he did he

would see, he wouldn't think----!" The end of this private cogitation

was a vague impatience of all the things his venerable host took for

granted. He didn't see any of the things Nick saw. Some of these latter

were the light touches the summer morning scattered through the sweet

old garden. The time passed there a good deal as if it were sitting

still with a plaid under its feet while Mr. Carteret distilled a little

more of the wisdom he had laid up in his fifty years. This immense term

had something fabulous and monstrous for Nick, who wondered whether it

were the sort of thing his companion supposed \_he\_ had gone in for. It

was not strange Mr. Carteret should be different; he might originally

have been more--well, to himself Nick was not obliged to phrase it: what

our young man meant was more of what it was perceptible to him that his

old friend was not. Should even he, Nick, be like that at the end of

fifty years? What Mr. Carteret was so good as to expect for him was that

he should be much more distinguished; and wouldn't this exactly mean

much more like that? Of course Nick heard some things he had heard

before; as for instance the circumstances that had originally led the

old man to settle at Beauclere. He had been returned for that

borough--it was his second seat--in years far remote, and had come to

live there because he then had a conscientious conviction, modified

indeed by later experience, that a member should be constantly resident.

He spoke of this now, smiling rosily, as he might have spoken of some

wild aberration of his youth; yet he called Nick's attention to the fact

that he still so far clung to his conviction as to hold--though of what

might be urged on the other side he was perfectly aware--that a

representative should at least be as resident as possible. This gave

Nick an opening for something that had been on and off his lips all the

morning.

"According to that I ought to take up my abode at Harsh."

"In the measure of the convenient I shouldn't be sorry to see you do

it."

"It ought to be rather convenient," Nick largely smiled. "I've got a

piece of news for you which I've kept, as one keeps that sort of

thing--for it's very good--till the last." He waited a little to see if

Mr. Carteret would guess, and at first thought nothing would come of

this. But after resting his young-looking eyes on him for a moment the

old man said:

"I should indeed be very happy to hear that you've arranged to take a

wife."

"Mrs. Dallow has been so good as to say she'll marry me," Nick returned.

"That's very suitable. I should think it would answer."

"It's very jolly," said Nick. It was well Mr. Carteret was not what his

guest called observant, or he might have found a lower pitch in the

sound of this sentence than in the sense.

"Your dear father would have liked it."

"So my mother says."

"And \_she\_ must be delighted."

"Mrs. Dallow, do you mean?" Nick asked.

"I was thinking of your mother. But I don't exclude the charming lady. I

remember her as a little girl. I must have seen her at Windrush. Now I

understand the fine spirit with which she threw herself into your

canvass."

"It was her they elected," said Nick.

"I don't know," his host went on, "that I've ever been an enthusiast for

political women, but there's no doubt that in approaching the mass of

electors a graceful, affable manner, the manner of the real English

lady, is a force not to be despised."

"Julia's a real English lady and at the same time a very political

woman," Nick remarked.

"Isn't it rather in the family? I remember once going to see her mother

in town and finding the leaders of both parties sitting with her."

"My principal friend, of the others, is her brother Peter. I don't think

he troubles himself much about that sort of thing," said Nick.

"What does he trouble himself about?" Mr. Carteret asked with a certain

gravity.

"He's in the diplomatic service; he's a secretary in Paris."

"That may be serious," said the old man.

"He takes a great interest in the theatre. I suppose you'll say that may

be serious too," Nick laughed.

"Oh!"--and Mr. Carteret looked as if he scarcely understood. Then he

continued; "Well, it can't hurt you."

"It can't hurt me?"

"If Mrs. Dallow takes an interest in your interests."

"When a man's in my situation he feels as if nothing could hurt him."

"I'm very glad you're happy," said Mr. Carteret. He rested his mild eyes

on our young man, who had a sense of seeing in them for a moment the

faint ghost of an old story, the last strange flicker, as from cold

ashes, of a flame that had become the memory of a memory. This glimmer

of wonder and envy, the revelation of a life intensely celibate, was for

an instant infinitely touching. Nick had harboured a theory, suggested

by a vague allusion from his father, who had been discreet, that their

benevolent friend had had in his youth an unhappy love-affair which had

led him to forswear for ever the commerce of woman. What remained in him

of conscious renunciation gave a throb as he looked at his bright

companion, who proposed to take the matter so much the other way. "It's

good to marry and I think it's right. I've not done right, I know that.

If she's a good woman it's the best thing," Mr. Carteret went on. "It's

what I've been hoping for you. Sometimes I've thought of speaking to

you."

"She's a very good woman," said Nick.

"And I hope she's not poor." Mr. Carteret spoke exactly with the same

blandness.

"No indeed, she's rich. Her husband, whom I knew and liked, left her a

large fortune."

"And on what terms does she enjoy it?"

"I haven't the least idea," said Nick.

Mr. Carteret considered. "I see. It doesn't concern you. It needn't

concern you," he added in a moment.

Nick thought of his mother at this, but he returned: "I daresay she can

do what she likes with her money."

"So can I, my dear young friend," said Mr. Carteret.

Nick tried not to look conscious, for he felt a significance in the old

man's face. He turned his own everywhere but toward it, thinking again

of his mother. "That must be very pleasant, if one has any."

"I wish you had a little more."

"I don't particularly care," said Nick.

"Your marriage will assist you; you can't help that," Mr. Carteret

declared. "But I should like you to be under obligations not quite so

heavy."

"Oh I'm so obliged to her for caring for me----!"

"That the rest doesn't count? Certainly it's nice of her to like you.

But why shouldn't she? Other people do."

"Some of them make me feel as if I abused it," said Nick, looking at his

host. "That is, they don't make me, but I feel it," he corrected.

"I've no son "--and Mr. Carteret spoke as if his companion mightn't have

been sure. "Shan't you be very kind to her?" he pursued. "You'll gratify

her ambition."

"Oh she thinks me cleverer than I am."

"That's because she's in love," the old gentleman hinted as if this were

very subtle. "However, you must be as clever as we think you. If you

don't prove so----!" And he paused with his folded hands.

"Well, if I don't?" asked Nick.

"Oh it won't do--it won't do," said Mr. Carteret in a tone his companion

was destined to remember afterwards. "I say I've no son," he continued;

"but if I had had one he should have risen high."

"It's well for me such a person doesn't exist. I shouldn't easily have

found a wife."

"He would have gone to the altar with a little money in his pocket."

"That would have been the least of his advantages, sir," Nick declared.

"When are you to be married?" Mr. Carteret asked.

"Ah that's the question. Julia won't yet say."

"Well," said the old man without the least flourish, "you may consider

that when it comes off I'll make you a settlement."

"I feel your kindness more than I can express," Nick replied; "but that

will probably be the moment when I shall be least conscious of wanting

anything."

"You'll appreciate it later--you'll appreciate it very soon. I shall

like you to appreciate it," Mr. Carteret went on as if he had a just

vision of the way a young man of a proper spirit should feel. Then he

added; "Your father would have liked you to appreciate it."

"Poor father!" Nick exclaimed vaguely, rather embarrassed, reflecting on

the oddity of a position in which the ground for holding up his head as

the husband of a rich woman would be that he had accepted a present of

money from another source. It was plain he was not fated to go in for

independence; the most that he could treat himself to would be

dependence that was duly grateful "How much do you expect of me?" he

inquired with a grave face.

"Well, Nicholas, only what your father did. He so often spoke of you, I

remember, at the last, just after you had been with him alone--you know

I saw him then. He was greatly moved by his interview with you, and so

was I by what he told me of it. He said he should live on in you--he

should work in you. It has always given me a special feeling, if I may

use the expression, about you."

"The feelings are indeed not usual, dear Mr. Carteret, which take so

munificent a form. But you do--oh you do--expect too much," Nick brought

himself to say.

"I expect you to repay me!" the old man returned gaily. "As for the

form, I have it in my mind."

"The form of repayment?"

"The form of repayment!"

"Ah don't talk of that now," said Nick, "for, you see, nothing else is

settled. No one has been told except my mother. She has only consented

to my telling you."

"Lady Agnes, do you mean?"

"Ah no; dear mother would like to publish it on the house-tops. She's so

glad--she wants us to have it over to-morrow. But Julia herself," Nick

explained, "wishes to wait. Therefore kindly mention it for the present

to no one."

"My dear boy, there's at this rate nothing to mention! What does Julia

want to wait for?"

"Till I like her better--that's what she says."

"It's the way to make you like her worse," Mr. Carteret knowingly

declared. "Hasn't she your affection?"

"So much so that her delay makes me exceedingly unhappy."

Mr. Carteret looked at his young friend as if he didn't strike him as

quite wretched; but he put the question: "Then what more does she want?"

Nick laughed out at this, though perceiving his host hadn't meant it as

an epigram; while the latter resumed: "I don't understand. You're

engaged or you're not engaged."

"She is, but I'm not. That's what she says about it. The trouble is she

doesn't believe in me."

Mr. Carteret shone with his candour. "Doesn't she love you then?"

"That's what I ask her. Her answer is that she loves me only too well.

She's so afraid of being a burden to me that she gives me my freedom

till I've taken another year to think."

"I like the way you talk about other years!" Mr. Carteret cried. "You

had better do it while I'm here to bless you."

"She thinks I proposed to her because she got me in for Harsh," said

Nick.

"Well, I'm sure it would be a very pretty return."

"Ah she doesn't believe in me," the young man repeated.

"Then I don't believe in \_her\_."

"Don't say that--don't say that. She's a very rare creature. But she's

proud, shy, suspicious."

"Suspicious of what?"

"Of everything. She thinks I'm not persistent."

"Oh, oh!"--Nick's host deprecated such freedom.

"She can't believe I shall arrive at true eminence."

"A good wife should believe what her husband believes," said Mr.

Carteret.

"Ah unfortunately"--and Nick took the words at a run--"I don't believe

it either."

Mr. Carteret, who might have been watching an odd physical rush, spoke

with a certain dryness. "Your dear father did."

"I think of that--I think of that," Nick replied.

"Certainly it will help me. If I say we're engaged," he went on, "it's

because I consider it so. She gives me my liberty, but I don't take it."

"Does she expect you to take back your word?"

"That's what I ask her. \_She\_ never will. Therefore we're as good as

tied."

"I don't like it," said Mr. Carteret after a moment. "I don't like

ambiguous, uncertain situations. They please me much better when they're

definite and clear." The retreat of expression had been sounded in his

face--the aspect it wore when he wished not to be encouraging. But after

an instant he added in a tone more personal: "Don't disappoint me, dear

boy."

"Ah not willingly!" his visitor protested.

"I've told you what I should like to do for you. See that the conditions

come about promptly in which I \_may\_, do it. Are you sure you do

everything to satisfy Mrs. Dallow?" Mr. Carteret continued.

"I think I'm very nice to her," Nick declared. "But she's so ambitious.

Frankly speaking, it's a pity for her that she likes me."

"She can't help that!" the old man charmingly said.

"Possibly. But isn't it a reason for taking me as I am? What she wants

to do is to take me as I may be a year hence."

"I don't understand--since you tell me that even then she won't take

back her word," said Mr. Carteret.

"If she doesn't marry me I think she'll never marry again at all."

"What then does she gain by delay?"

"Simply this, as I make it out," said Nick--"that she'll feel she has

been very magnanimous. She won't have to reproach herself with not

having given me a chance to change."

"To change? What does she think you liable to do?"

Nick had a pause. "I don't know!" he then said--not at all candidly.

"Everything has altered: young people in my day looked at these

questions more naturally," Mr. Carteret observed. "A woman in love has

no need to be magnanimous. If she plays too fair she isn't in love," he

added shrewdly.

"Oh, Julia's safe--she's safe," Nick smiled.

"If it were a question between you and another gentleman one might

comprehend. But what does it mean, between you and nothing?"

"I'm much obliged to you, sir," Nick returned. "The trouble is that she

doesn't know what she has got hold of."

"Ah, if you can't make it clear to her!"--and his friend showed the note

of impatience.

"I'm such a humbug," said the young man. And while his companion stared

he continued: "I deceive people without in the least intending it."

"What on earth do you mean? Are you deceiving me?"

"I don't know--it depends on what you think."

"I think you're flighty," said Mr. Carteret, with the nearest approach

to sternness Nick had ever observed in him. "I never thought so before."

"Forgive me; it's all right. I'm not frivolous; that I promise you I'm

not."

"You \_have\_ deceived me if you are."

"It's all right," Nick stammered with a blush.

"Remember your name--carry it high."

"I will--as high as possible."

"You've no excuse. Don't tell me, after your speeches at Harsh!" Nick

was on the point of declaring again that he was a humbug, so vivid was

his inner sense of what he thought of his factitious public utterances,

which had the cursed property of creating dreadful responsibilities and

importunate credulities for him. If \_he\_ was "clever" (ah the idiotic

"clever"!) what fools many other people were! He repressed his impulse

and Mr. Carteret pursued. "If, as you express it, Mrs. Dallow doesn't

know what she has got hold of, won't it clear the matter up a little by

informing her that the day before your marriage is definitely settled to

take place you'll come into something comfortable?"

A quick vision of what Mr. Carteret would be likely to regard as

something comfortable flitted before Nick, but it didn't prevent his

replying: "Oh I'm afraid that won't do any good. It would make her like

you better, but it wouldn't make her like me. I'm afraid she won't care

for any benefit that comes to me from another hand than hers. Her

affection's a very jealous sentiment."

"It's a very peculiar one!" sighed Mr. Carteret. "Mine's a jealous

sentiment too. However, if she takes it that way don't tell her."

"I'll let you know as soon as she comes round," said Nick.

"And you'll tell your mother," Mr. Carteret returned. "I shall like

\_her\_ to know."

"It will be delightful news to her. But she's keen enough already."

"I know that. I may mention now that she has written to me," the old man

added.

"So I suspected."

"We've--a--corresponded on the subject," Mr. Carteret continued to

confess. "My view of the advantageous character of such an alliance has

entirely coincided with hers."

"It was very good-natured of you then to leave me to speak first," said

Nick.

"I should have been disappointed if you hadn't. I don't like all you've

told me. But don't disappoint me now."

"Dear Mr. Carteret!" Nick vaguely and richly sounded.

"I won't disappoint \_you\_," that gentleman went on with a finer point

while he looked at his big old-fashioned watch.

BOOK FOURTH

XVIII

At first Peter Sherringham thought of asking to be transferred to

another post and went so far, in London, as to take what he believed

good advice on the subject. The advice, perhaps struck him as the better

for consisting of a strong recommendation to do nothing so foolish. Two

or three reasons were mentioned to him why such a request would not, in

the particular circumstances, raise him in the esteem of his superiors,

and he promptly recognised their force. He next became aware that it

might help him--not with his superiors but with himself--to apply for an

extension of leave, and then on further reflexion made out that, though

there are some dangers before which it is perfectly consistent with

honour to flee, it was better for every one concerned that he should

fight this especial battle on the spot. During his holiday his plan of

campaign gave him plenty of occupation. He refurbished his arms, rubbed

up his strategy, laid down his lines of defence.

There was only one thing in life his mind had been much made up to, but

on this question he had never wavered: he would get on, to the utmost,

in his profession. That was a point on which it was perfectly lawful to

be unamiable to others--to be vigilant, eager, suspicious, selfish. He

had not in fact been unamiable to others, for his affairs had not

required it: he had got on well enough without hardening his heart.

Fortune had been kind to him and he had passed so many competitors on

the way that he could forswear jealousy and be generous. But he had

always flattered himself his hand wouldn't falter on the day he should

find it necessary to drop bitterness into his cup. This day would be

sure to dawn, since no career could be all clear water to the end; and

then the sacrifice would find him ready. His mind was familiar with the

thought of a sacrifice: it is true that no great plainness invested

beforehand the occasion, the object or the victim. All that particularly

stood out was that the propitiatory offering would have to be some

cherished enjoyment. Very likely indeed this enjoyment would be

associated with the charms of another person--a probability pregnant

with the idea that such charms would have to be dashed out of sight. At

any rate it never had occurred to Sherringham that he himself might be

the sacrifice. You had to pay to get on, but at least you borrowed from

others to do it. When you couldn't borrow you didn't get on, for what

was the situation in life in which you met the whole requisition

yourself?

Least of all had it occurred to our friend that the wrench might come

through his interest in that branch of art on which Nick Dormer had

rallied him. The beauty of a love of the theatre was precisely in its

being a passion exercised on the easiest terms. This was not the region

of responsibility. It was sniffed at, to its discredit, by the austere;

but if it was not, as such people said, a serious field, was not the

compensation just that you couldn't be seriously entangled in it?

Sherringham's great advantage, as he regarded the matter, was that he

had always kept his taste for the drama quite in its place. His

facetious cousin was free to pretend that it sprawled through his life;

but this was nonsense, as any unprejudiced observer of that life would

unhesitatingly attest. There had not been the least sprawling, and his

interest in the art of Garrick had never, he was sure, made him in any

degree ridiculous. It had never drawn down from above anything

approaching a reprimand, a remonstrance, a remark. Sherringham was

positively proud of his discretion, for he was not a little proud of

what he did know about the stage. Trifling for trifling, there were

plenty of his fellows who had in their lives infatuations less edifying

and less confessable. Hadn't he known men who collected old

invitation-cards and were ready to commit \_bassesses\_ for those of the

eighteenth century? hadn't he known others who had a secret passion for

shuffleboard? His little weaknesses were intellectual--they were a part

of the life of the mind. All the same, on the day they showed a symptom

of interfering they should be plucked off with a turn of the wrist.

Sherringham scented interference now, and interference in rather an

invidious form. It might be a bore, from the point of view of the

profession, to find one's self, as a critic of the stage, in love with a

\_coquine\_; but it was a much greater bore to find one's self in love

with a young woman whose character remained to be estimated. Miriam

Rooth was neither fish nor flesh: one had with her neither the

guarantees of one's own class nor the immunities of hers. What \_was\_

hers if one came to that? A rare ambiguity on this point was part of the

fascination she had ended by throwing over him. Poor Peter's scheme for

getting on had contained no proviso against his falling in love, but it

had embodied an important clause on the subject of surprises. It was

always a surprise to fall in love, especially if one was looking out for

it; so this contingency had not been worth official paper. But it

became a man who respected the service he had undertaken for the State

to be on his guard against predicaments from which the only issue was

the rigour of matrimony. Ambition, in the career, was probably

consistent with marrying--but only with opening one's eyes very wide to

do it. That was the fatal surprise--to be led to the altar in a dream.

Sherringham's view of the proprieties attached to such a step was high

and strict; and if he held that a man in his position was, above all as

the position improved, essentially a representative of the greatness of

his country, he considered that the wife of such a personage would

exercise in her degree--for instance at a foreign court--a function no

less symbolic. She would in short always be a very important quantity,

and the scene was strewn with illustrations of this general truth. She

might be such a help and might be such a blight that common prudence

required some test of her in advance. Sherringham had seen women in the

career, who were stupid or vulgar, make such a mess of things as would

wring your heart. Then he had his positive idea of the perfect

ambassadress, the full-blown lily of the future; and with this idea

Miriam Rooth presented no analogy whatever.

The girl had described herself with characteristic directness as "all

right"; and so she might be, so she assuredly was: only all right for

what? He had made out she was not sentimental--that whatever capacity

she might have for responding to a devotion or for desiring it was at

any rate not in the direction of vague philandering. With him certainly

she had no disposition to philander. Sherringham almost feared to dwell

on this, lest it should beget in him a rage convertible mainly into

caring for her more. Rage or no rage it would be charming to be in love

with her if there were no complications; but the complications were

just what was clearest in the prospect. He was perhaps cold-blooded to

think of them, but it must be remembered that they were the particular

thing his training had equipped him for dealing with. He was at all

events not too cold-blooded to have, for the two months of his holiday,

very little inner vision of anything more abstract than Miriam's face.

The desire to see it again was as pressing as thirst, but he tried to

practise the endurance of the traveller in the desert. He kept the

Channel between them, but his spirit consumed every day an inch of the

interval, until--and it was not long--there were no more inches left.

The last thing he expected the future ambassadress to have been was

\_fille de thÃ©Ã¢tre\_. The answer to this objection was of course that

Miriam was not yet so much of one but that he could easily, by a

handsome "worldly" offer, arrest her development. Then came worrying

retorts to that, chief among which was the sense that to his artistic

conscience arresting her development would be a plan combining on his

part fatuity, not to say imbecility, with baseness. It was exactly to

her development the poor girl had the greatest right, and he shouldn't

really alter anything by depriving her of it. Wasn't she the artist to

the tips of her tresses--the ambassadress never in the world--and

wouldn't she take it out in something else if one were to make her

deviate? So certain was that demonic gift to insist ever on its own.

Besides, \_could\_ one make her deviate? If she had no disposition to

philander what was his warrant for supposing she could be corrupted into

respectability? How could the career--his career--speak to a nature that

had glimpses as vivid as they were crude of such a different range and

for which success meant quite another sauce to the dish? Would the

brilliancy of marrying Peter Sherringham be such a bribe to

relinquishment? How could he think so without pretensions of the sort he

pretended exactly not to flaunt?--how could he put himself forward as so

high a prize? Relinquishment of the opportunity to exercise a rare

talent was not, in the nature of things, an easy effort to a young lady

who was herself presumptuous as well as ambitious. Besides, she might

eat her cake and have it--might make her fortune both on the stage and

in the world. Successful actresses had ended by marrying dukes, and was

not that better than remaining obscure and marrying a commoner? There

were moments when he tried to pronounce the girl's "gift" not a force to

reckon with; there was so little to show for it as yet that the caprice

of believing in it would perhaps suddenly leave him. But his conviction

that it was real was too uneasy to make such an experiment peaceful, and

he came back, moreover, to his deepest impression--that of her being of

the inward mould for which the only consistency is the play of genius.

Hadn't Madame CarrÃ© declared at the last that she could "do anything"?

It was true that if Madame CarrÃ© had been mistaken in the first place

she might also be mistaken in the second. But in this latter case she

would be mistaken with him--and such an error would be too like a truth.

How, further, shall we exactly measure for him--Sherringham felt the

discomfort of the advantage Miriam had of him--the advantage of her

presenting herself in a light that rendered any passion he might

entertain an implication of duty as well as of pleasure? Why there

should have been this implication was more than he could say; sometimes

he held himself rather abject, or at least absurdly superstitious, for

seeing it. He didn't know, he could scarcely conceive, of another case

of the same general type in which he would have recognised it. In

foreign countries there were very few ladies of Miss Rooth's intended

profession who would not have regarded it as too strong an order that,

to console them for not being admitted into drawing-rooms, they should

have no offset but the exercise of a virtue in which no one would

believe. This was because in foreign countries actresses were not

admitted into drawing-rooms: that was a pure English drollery,

ministering equally little to real histrionics and to the higher tone of

these resorts. Did the oppressive sanctity which made it a burden to

have to reckon with his young friend come then from her being English?

Peter could recall cases in which that privilege operated as little as

possible as a restriction. It came a great deal from Mrs. Rooth, in whom

he apprehended depths of calculation as to what she might achieve for

her daughter by "working" the idea of a life blameless amid dire

obsessions. Her romantic turn of mind wouldn't in the least prevent her

regarding that idea as a substantial capital, to be laid out to the best

worldly advantage. Miriam's essential irreverence was capable, on a

pretext, of making mince-meat of it--that he was sure of; for the only

capital she recognised was the talent which some day managers and agents

would outbid each other in paying for. Yet as a creature easy at so many

points she was fond of her mother, would do anything to oblige--that

might work in all sorts of ways--and would probably like the loose

slippers of blamelessness quite as well as having to meet some of the

queer high standards of the opposite camp.

Sherringham, I may add, had no desire that she should indulge a

different preference: it was distasteful to him to compute the

probabilities of a young lady's misbehaving for his advantage--that

seemed to him definitely base--and he would have thought himself a

blackguard if, even when a prey to his desire, he had not wished the

thing that was best for the object of it. The thing best for Miriam

might be to become the wife of the man to whose suit she should incline

her ear. That this would be the best thing for the gentleman in question

by no means, however, equally followed, and Sherringham's final

conviction was that it would never do for him to act the part of that

hypothetic personage. He asked for no removal and no extension of leave,

and he proved to himself how well he knew what he was about by never

addressing a line, during his absence, to the HÃ´tel de la Garonne. He

would simply go straight, inflicting as little injury on Peter

Sherringham as on any one else. He remained away to the last hour of his

privilege and continued to act lucidly in having nothing to do with the

mother and daughter for several days after his return to Paris.

It was when this discipline came to an end one afternoon after a week

had passed that he felt most the force of the reference we have just

made to Mrs. Rooth's private calculations. He found her at home, alone,

writing a letter under the lamp, and as soon as he came in she cried out

that he was the very person to whom the letter was addressed. She could

bear it no longer; she had permitted herself to reproach him with his

terrible silence--to ask why he had quite forsaken them. It was an

illustration of the way in which her visitor had come to regard her that

he put rather less than more faith into this description of the crumpled

papers lying on the table. He was not even sure he quite believed Miriam

to have just gone out. He told her mother how busy he had been all the

while he was away and how much time above all he had had to give in

London to seeing on her daughter's behalf the people connected with the

theatres.

"Ah if you pity me tell me you've got her an engagement!" Mrs. Rooth

cried while she clasped her hands.

"I took a great deal of trouble; I wrote ever so many notes, sought

introductions, talked with people--such impossible people some of them.

In short I knocked at every door, I went into the question

exhaustively." And he enumerated the things he had done, reported on

some of the knowledge he had gathered. The difficulties were immense,

and even with the influence he could command, such as it was, there was

very little to be achieved in face of them. Still he had gained ground:

two or three approachable fellows, men with inferior theatres, had

listened to him better than the others, and there was one in particular

whom he had a hope he really might have interested. From him he had

extracted benevolent assurances: this person would see Miriam, would

listen to her, would do for her what he could. The trouble was that no

one would lift a finger for a girl unless she were known, and yet that

she never could become known till innumerable fingers had been lifted.

You couldn't go into the water unless you could swim, and you couldn't

swim until you had been in the water.

"But new performers appear; they get theatres, they get audiences, they

get notices in the newspapers," Mrs. Rooth objected. "I know of these

things only what Miriam tells me. It's no knowledge that I was born to."

"It's perfectly true. It's all done with money."

"And how do they come by money?" Mrs. Rooth candidly asked.

"When they're women people give it to them."

"Well, what people now?"

"People who believe in them."

"As you believe in Miriam?"

Peter had a pause. "No, rather differently. A poor man doesn't believe

in anything the same way that a rich man does."

"Ah don't call yourself poor!" groaned Mrs. Rooth.

"What good would it do me to be rich?"

"Why you could take a theatre. You could do it all yourself."

"And what good would that do me?"

"Ah don't you delight in her genius?" demanded Mrs. Rooth.

"I delight in her mother. You think me more disinterested than I am,"

Sherringham added with a certain soreness of irritation.

"I know why you didn't write!" Mrs. Rooth declared archly.

"You must go to London," Peter said without heeding this remark.

"Ah if we could only get there it would be a relief. I should draw a

long breath. There at least I know where I am and what people are. But

here one lives on hollow ground!"

"The sooner you get away the better," our young man went on.

"I know why you say that."

"It's just what I'm explaining."

"I couldn't have held out if I hadn't been so sure of Miriam," said Mrs.

Rooth.

"Well, you needn't hold out any longer."

"Don't \_you\_ trust her?" asked Sherringham's hostess.

"Trust her?"

"You don't trust yourself. That's why you were silent, why we might have

thought you were dead, why we might have perished ourselves."

"I don't think I understand you; I don't know what you're talking

about," Peter returned. "But it doesn't matter."

"Doesn't it? Let yourself go. Why should you struggle?" the old woman

agreeably inquired.

Her unexpected insistence annoyed her visitor, and he was silent again,

meeting her eyes with reserve and on the point of telling her that he

didn't like her tone. But he had his tongue under such control that he

was able presently to say instead of this--and it was a relief to him to

give audible voice to the reflexion--"It's a great mistake, either way,

for a man to be in love with an actress. Either it means nothing

serious, and what's the use of that? or it means everything, and that's

still more delusive."

"Delusive?"

"Idle, unprofitable."

"Surely a pure affection is its own beautiful reward," Mrs. Rooth

pleaded with soft reasonableness.

"In such a case how can it be pure?"

"I thought you were talking of an English gentleman," she replied.

"Call the poor fellow whatever you like: a man with his life to lead,

his way to make, his work, his duties, his career to attend to. If it

means nothing, as I say, the thing it means least of all is marriage."

"Oh my own Miriam!" Mrs. Rooth wailed.

"Fancy, on the other hand, the complication when such a man marries a

woman who's on the stage."

Mrs. Rooth looked as if she were trying to follow. "Miriam isn't on the

stage yet."

"Go to London and she soon will be."

"Yes, and then you'll have your excuse."

"My excuse?"

"For deserting us altogether."

He broke into laughter at this, the logic was so droll. Then he went on:

"Show me some good acting and I won't desert you."

"Good acting? Ah what's the best acting compared with the position of a

true English lady? If you'll take her as she is you may have her," Mrs.

Rooth suddenly added.

"As she is, with all her ambitions unassuaged?"

"To marry \_you\_--might not that be an ambition?"

"A very paltry one. Don't answer for her, don't attempt that," said

Peter. "You can do much better."

"Do you think \_you\_ can?" smiled Mrs. Rooth.

"I don't want to; I only want to let it alone. She's an artist; you must

give her her head," the young man pursued. "You must always give an

artist his head."

"But I've known great ladies who were artists. In English society

there's always a field."

"Don't talk to me of English society! Thank goodness, in the first

place, I don't live in it. Do you want her to give up her genius?" he

demanded.

"I thought you didn't care for it."

"She'd say, 'No I thank you, dear mamma.'"

"My wonderful child!" Mrs. Rooth almost comprehendingly murmured.

"Have you ever proposed it to her?"

"Proposed it?"

"That she should give up trying."

Mrs. Rooth hesitated, looking down. "Not for the reason you mean. We

don't talk about love," she simpered.

"Then it's so much less time wasted. Don't stretch out your hand to the

worse when it may some day grasp the better," Peter continued. Mrs.

Rooth raised her eyes at him as if recognising the force there might be

in that, and he added: "Let her blaze out, let her look about her. Then

you may talk to me if you like."

"It's very puzzling!" the old woman artlessly sighed.

He laughed again and then said: "Now don't tell me I'm not a good

friend."

"You are indeed--you're a very noble gentleman. That's just why a quiet

life with you----"

"It wouldn't be quiet for \_me\_!" he broke in. "And that's not what

Miriam was made for."

"\_Don't say that\_ for my precious one!" Mrs. Rooth quavered.

"Go to London--go to London," her visitor repeated.

Thoughtfully, after an instant, she extended her hand and took from the

table the letter on the composition of which he had found her engaged.

Then with a quick movement she tore it up. "That's what Mr. Dashwood

says."

"Mr. Dashwood?"

"I forgot you don't know him. He's the brother of that lady we met the

day you were so good as to receive us; the one who was so kind to

us--Mrs. Lovick."

"I never heard of him."

"Don't you remember how she spoke of him and that Mr. Lovick didn't seem

very nice about him? She told us that if he were to meet us--and she was

so good as to intimate that it would be a pleasure to him to do so--he

might give us, as she said, a tip."

Peter achieved the effort to recollect. "Yes he comes back to me. He's

an actor."

"He's a gentleman too," said Mrs. Rooth.

"And you've met him, and he \_has\_ given you a tip?"

"As I say, he wants us to go to London."

"I see, but even I can tell you that."

"Oh yes," said Mrs. Rooth; "but \_he\_ says he can help us."

"Keep hold of him then, if he's in the business," Peter was all for

that.

"He's a perfect gentleman," said Mrs. Rooth. "He's immensely struck with

Miriam."

"Better and better. Keep hold of him."

"Well, I'm glad you don't object," she grimaced.

"Why should I object?"

"You don't regard us as \_all\_ your own?"

"My own? Why, I regard you as the public's--the world's."

She gave a little shudder. "There's a sort of chill in that. It's grand,

but it's cold. However, I needn't hesitate then to tell you that it's

with Mr. Dashwood Miriam has gone out."

"Why hesitate, gracious heaven?" But in the next breath Sherringham

asked: "Where have they gone?"

"You don't like it!" his hostess laughed.

"Why should it be a thing to be enthusiastic about?"

"Well, he's charming and \_I\_ trust him."

"So do I," said Sherringham.

"They've gone to see Madame CarrÃ©."

"She has come back then?"

"She was expected back last week. Miriam wants to show her how she has

improved."

"And \_has\_ she improved?"

"How can I tell--with my mother's heart?" asked Mrs. Rooth. "I don't

judge; I only wait and pray. But Mr. Dashwood thinks she's wonderful."

"That's a blessing. And when did he turn up?"

"About a fortnight ago. We met Mrs. Lovick at the English church, and

she was so good as to recognise us and speak to us. She said she had

been away with her children--otherwise she'd have come to see us. She

had just returned to Paris."

"Yes, I've not yet seen her. I see Lovick," Peter added, "but he doesn't

talk of his brother-in-law."

"I didn't, that day, like his tone about him," Mrs. Rooth observed. "We

walked a little way with Mrs. Lovick after church and she asked Miriam

about her prospects and if she were working. Miriam said she had no

prospects."

"That wasn't very nice to me," Sherringham commented.

"But when you had left us in black darkness what \_were\_ our prospects?"

"I see. It's all right. Go on."

"Then Mrs. Lovick said her brother was to be in Paris a few days and she

would tell him to come and see us. He arrived, she told him and he came.

\_VoilÃ \_!" said Mrs. Rooth.

"So that now--so far as \_he\_ is concerned--Miss Rooth has prospects?"

"He isn't a manager unfortunately," she qualified.

"Where does he act?"

"He isn't acting just now; he has been abroad. He has been to Italy, I

believe, and is just stopping here on his way to London."

"I see; he \_is\_ a perfect gentleman," said Sherringham.

"Ah you're jealous of him!"

"No, but you're trying to make me so. The more competitors there are for

the glory of bringing her out the better for her."

"Mr. Dashwood wants to take a theatre," said Mrs. Rooth.

"Then perhaps he's our man."

"Oh if you'd help him!" she richly cried.

"Help him?"

"Help him to help us."

"We'll all work together; it will be very jolly," said Sherringham

gaily. "It's a sacred cause, the love of art, and we shall be a happy

band. Dashwood's his name?" he added in a moment. "Mrs. Lovick wasn't a

Dashwood."

"It's his \_nom de thÃ©Ã¢tre\_--Basil Dashwood. Do you like it?" Mrs. Rooth

wonderfully inquired.

"You say that as Miriam might. Her talent's catching!"

"She's always practising--always saying things over and over to seize

the tone. I've her voice in my ears. He wants \_her\_ not to have any."

"Not to have any what?"

"Any \_nom de thÃ©Ã¢tre\_. He wants her to use her own; he likes it so much.

He says it will do so well--you can't better it."

"He's a capital adviser," said Sherringham, getting up. "I'll come back

to-morrow."

"I won't ask you to wait for them--they may be so long," his hostess

returned.

"Will he come back with her?" Peter asked while he smoothed his hat.

"I hope so, at this hour. With my child in the streets I tremble. We

don't live in cabs, as you may easily suppose."

"Did they go on foot?" Sherringham continued.

"Oh yes; they started in high spirits."

"And is Mr. Basil Dashwood acquainted with Madame CarrÃ©?"

"Ah no, but he longed to be introduced to her; he persuaded Miriam to

take him. Naturally she wishes to oblige him. She's very nice to him--if

he can do anything."

"Quite right; that's the way!" Peter cheerfully rang out.

"And she also wanted him to see what she can do for the great critic,"

Mrs. Rooth added--"that terrible old woman in the red wig."

"That's what I should like to see too," Peter permitted himself to

acknowledge.

"Oh she has gone ahead; she's pleased with herself. 'Work, work, work,'

said Madame CarrÃ©. Well, she has worked, worked, worked. That's what

Mr. Dashwood is pleased with even more than with other things."

"What do you mean by other things?"

"Oh her genius and her fine appearance."

"He approves of her fine appearance? I ask because you think he knows

what will take."

"I know why you ask!" Mrs. Rooth bravely mocked. "He says it will be

worth hundreds of thousands to her."

"That's the sort of thing I like to hear," Peter returned. "I'll come in

to-morrow," he repeated.

"And shall you mind if Mr. Dash wood's here?"

"Does he come every day?"

"Oh they're always at it."

"At it----?" He was vague.

"Why she acts to him--every sort of thing--and he says if it will do."

"How many days has he been here then?"

Mrs. Rooth reflected. "Oh I don't know! Since he turned up they've

passed so quickly."

"So far from 'minding' it I'm eager to see him," Sherringham declared;

"and I can imagine nothing better than what you describe--if he isn't an

awful ass."

"Dear me, if he isn't clever you must tell us: we can't afford to be

deceived!" Mrs. Rooth innocently wailed. "What do we know--how can we

judge?" she appealed.

He had a pause, his hand on the latch. "Oh, I'll tell you frankly what I

think of him!"

XIX

When he got into the street he looked about him for a cab, but was

obliged to walk some distance before encountering one. In this little

interval he saw no reason to modify the determination he had formed in

descending the steep staircase of the HÃ´tel de la Garonne; indeed the

desire prompting it only quickened his pace. He had an hour to spare and

would also go to see Madame CarrÃ©. If Miriam and her companion had

proceeded to the Rue de Constantinople on foot he would probably reach

the house as soon as they. It was all quite logical: he was eager to see

Miriam--that was natural enough; and he had admitted to Mrs. Rooth that

he was keen on the subject of Mrs. Lovick's theatrical brother, in whom

such effective aid might perhaps reside. To catch Miriam really

revealing herself to the old actress after the jump she believed herself

to have taken--since that was her errand--would be a very happy stroke,

the thought of which made her benefactor impatient. He presently found

his cab and, as he bounded in, bade the coachman drive fast. He learned

from Madame CarrÃ©'s portress that her illustrious \_locataire\_ was at

home and that a lady and a gentleman had gone up some time before.

In the little antechamber, after his admission, he heard a high voice

come from the salon and, stopping a moment to listen, noted that Miriam

was already launched in a recitation. He was able to make out the

words, all the more that before he could prevent the movement the

maid-servant who had led him in had already opened the door of the

room--one of the leaves of it, there being, as in most French doors, two

of these--before which, within, a heavy curtain was suspended. Miriam

was in the act of rolling out some speech from the English poetic

drama--

"For I am sick and capable of fears,

Oppressed with wrongs and therefore full of fears."

He recognised one of the great tirades of Shakespeare's Constance and

saw she had just begun the magnificent scene at the beginning of the

third act of \_King John\_, in which the passionate, injured mother and

widow sweeps in wild organ-tones the entire scale of her irony and

wrath. The curtain concealed him and he lurked three minutes after he

had motioned to the \_femme de chambre\_ to retire on tiptoe. The trio in

the salon, absorbed in the performance, had apparently not heard his

entrance or the opening of the door, which was covered by the girl's

splendid declamation. Peter listened intently, arrested by the spirit

with which she attacked her formidable verses. He had needed to hear her

set afloat but a dozen of them to measure the long stride she had taken

in his absence; they assured him she had leaped into possession of her

means. He remained where he was till she arrived at

"Then speak again; not all thy former tale,

But this one word, whether thy tale be true."

This apostrophe, briefly responded to in another voice, gave him time

quickly to raise the curtain and show himself, passing into the room

with a "Go on, go on!" and a gesture earnestly deprecating a stop.

Miriam, in the full swing of her part, paused but for an instant and let

herself ring out again, while Peter sank into the nearest chair and she

fixed him with her illumined eyes, that is, with those of the raving

Constance. Madame CarrÃ©, buried in a chair, kissed her hand to him, and

a young man who, near the girl, stood giving the cue, stared at him over

the top of a little book. "Admirable, magnificent, go on," Sherringham

repeated--"go on to the end of the scene, do it all!" Miriam's colour

rose, yet he as quickly felt that she had no personal emotion in seeing

him again; the cold passion of art had perched on her banner and she

listened to herself with an ear as vigilant as if she had been a

Paganini drawing a fiddle-bow. This effect deepened as she went on,

rising and rising to the great occasion, moving with extraordinary ease

and in the largest, clearest style at the dizzy height of her idea. That

she had an idea was visible enough, and that the whole thing was very

different from all Sherringham had hitherto heard her attempt. It

belonged quite to another class of effort; she was now the finished

statue lifted from the ground to its pedestal. It was as if the sun of

her talent had risen above the hills and she knew she was moving and

would always move in its guiding light. This conviction was the one

artless thing that glimmered like a young joy through the tragic mask of

Constance, and Sherringham's heart beat faster as he caught it in her

face. It only showed her as more intelligent, and yet there had been a

time when he thought her stupid! Masterful the whole spirit in which she

carried the scene, making him cry to himself from point to point, "How

she feels it, sees it and really 'renders' it!"

He looked now and again at Madame CarrÃ© and saw she had in her lap an

open book, apparently a French prose version, brought by her visitors,

of the play; but she never either glanced at him or at the volume: she

only sat screwing into the girl her hard, bright eyes, polished by

experience like fine old brasses. The young man uttering the lines of

the other speakers was attentive in another degree; he followed Miriam,

in his own copy, to keep sure of the cue; but he was elated and

expressive, was evidently even surprised; he coloured and smiled, and

when he extended his hand to assist Constance to rise, after the

performer, acting out her text, had seated herself grandly on "the huge

firm earth," he bowed over her as obsequiously as if she had been his

veritable sovereign. He was a good-looking young man, tall,

well-proportioned, straight-featured and fair, of whom manifestly the

first thing to be said on any occasion was that he had remarkably the

stamp of a gentleman. He earned this appearance, which proved inveterate

and importunate, to a point that was almost a denial of its spirit: so

prompt the question of whether it could be in good taste to wear any

character, even that particular one, so much on one's sleeve. It was

literally on his sleeve that this young man partly wore his own; for it

resided considerably in his garments, and in especial in a certain

close-fitting dark blue frock-coat, a miracle of a fit, which moulded

his juvenility just enough and not too much, and constituted, as

Sherringham was destined to perceive later, his perpetual uniform or

badge. It was not till afterwards that Peter began to feel exasperated

by Basil Dashwood's "type"--the young stranger was of course Basil

Dashwood--and even by his blue frock-coat, the recurrent, unvarying,

imperturbable good form of his aspect. This unprofessional air ended by

striking the observer as the very profession he had adopted, and was

indeed, so far as had as yet been indicated, his mimetic capital, his

main qualification for the stage.

The ample and powerful manner in which Miriam handled her scene produced

its full impression, the art with which she surmounted its difficulties,

the liberality with which she met its great demand upon the voice, and

the variety of expression that she threw into a torrent of objurgation.

It was a real composition, studded with passages that called a

suppressed tribute to the lips and seeming to show that a talent capable

of such an exhibition was capable of anything.

"But thou art fair, and at thy birth, dear boy,

Nature and Fortune join'd to make thee great:

Of Nature's gifts thou mayst with lilies boast,

And with the half-blown rose."

As the girl turned to her imagined child with this exquisite

apostrophe--she addressed Mr. Dashwood as if he were playing Arthur, and

he lowered his book, dropped his head and his eyes and looked handsome

and ingenuous--she opened at a stroke to Sherringham's vision a prospect

that they would yet see her express tenderness better even than anything

else. Her voice was enchanting in these lines, and the beauty of her

performance was that though she uttered the full fury of the part she

missed none of its poetry.

"Where did she get hold of that--where did she get hold of that?" Peter

wondered while his whole sense vibrated. "She hadn't got hold of it when

I went away." And the assurance flowed over him again that she had found

the key to her box of treasures. In the summer, during their weeks of

frequent meeting, she had only fumbled with the lock. One October day,

while he was away, the key had slipped in, had fitted, or her finger at

last had touched the right spring and the capricious casket had flown

open.

It was during the present solemnity that, excited by the way she came

out and with a hundred stirred ideas about her wheeling through his

mind, he was for the first time and most vividly visited by a perception

that ended by becoming frequent with him--that of the perfect presence

of mind, unconfused, unhurried by emotion, that any artistic performance

requires and that all, whatever the instrument, require in exactly the

same degree: the application, in other words, clear and calculated,

crystal-firm as it were, of the idea conceived in the glow of

experience, of suffering, of joy. He was afterwards often to talk of

this with Miriam, who, however, was never to be able to present him with

a neat theory of the subject. She had no knowledge that it was publicly

discussed; she only ranged herself in practice on the side of those who

hold that at the moment of production the artist can't too much have his

wits about him. When Peter named to her the opinion of those maintaining

that at such a crisis the office of attention ceases to be filled she

stared with surprise and then broke out: "Ah the poor idiots!" She

eventually became, in her judgements, in impatience and the expression

of contempt, very free and absolutely irreverent.

"What a splendid scolding!" the new visitor exclaimed when, on the

entrance of the Pope's legate, her companion closed the book on the

scene. Peter pressed his lips to Madame CarrÃ©'s finger-tips; the old

actress got up and held out her arms to Miriam. The girl never took her

eyes off Sherringham while she passed into that lady's embrace and

remained there. They were full of their usual sombre fire, and it was

always the case that they expressed too much anything they could express

at all; but they were not defiant nor even triumphant now--they were

only deeply explicative. They seemed to say, "That's the sort of thing

I meant; that's what I had in mind when I asked you to try to do

something for me." Madame CarrÃ© folded her pupil to her bosom, holding

her there as the old marquise in a \_comÃ©die de moeurs\_ might in the last

scene have held her god-daughter the \_ingÃ©nue\_.

"Have you got me an engagement?"--the young woman then appealed eagerly

to her friend. "Yes, he has done something splendid for me," she went on

to Madame CarrÃ©, resting her hand caressingly on one of the actress's

while the old woman discoursed with Mr. Dashwood, who was telling her in

very pretty French that he was tremendously excited about Miss Rooth.

Madame CarrÃ© looked at him as if she wondered how he appeared when he

was calm and how, as a dramatic artist, he expressed that condition.

"Yes, yes, something splendid, for a beginning," Peter answered

radiantly, recklessly; feeling now only that he would say anything and

do anything to please her. He spent on the spot, in imagination, his

last penny.

"It's such a pity you couldn't follow it; you'd have liked it so much

better," Mr. Dashwood observed to their hostess.

"Couldn't follow it? Do you take me for \_une sotte\_?" the celebrated

artist cried. "I suspect I followed it \_de plus prÃ¨s que vous,

monsieur\_!"

"Ah you see the language is so awfully fine," Basil Dashwood replied,

looking at his shoes.

"The language? Why she rails like a fish-wife. Is that what you call

language? Ours is another business."

"If you understood, if you understood, you'd see all the greatness of

it," Miriam declared. And then in another tone: "Such delicious

expressions!"

"\_On dit que c'est trÃ¨s-fort\_. But who can tell if you really say it?"

Madame CarrÃ© demanded.

"Ah, \_par exemple\_, I can!" Sherringham answered.

"Oh you--you're a Frenchman."

"Couldn't he make it out if he weren't?" asked Basil Dashwood.

The old woman shrugged her shoulders. "He wouldn't know."

"That's flattering to me."

"Oh you--don't you pretend to complain," Madame CarrÃ© said. "I prefer

\_our\_ imprecations--those of Camille," she went on. "They have the

beauty \_des plus belles choses\_."

"I can say them too," Miriam broke in.

"\_Insolente\_!" smiled Madame CarrÃ©. "Camille doesn't squat down on the

floor in the middle of them.

"For grief is proud and makes his owner stoop.

To me and to the state of my great grief

Let kings assemble,"

Miriam quickly declaimed. "Ah if you don't feel the way she makes a

throne of it!"

"It's really tremendously fine, \_chÃ¨re madame\_," Sherringham said.

"There's nothing like it."

"\_Vous Ãªtes insupportables\_," the old woman answered. "Stay with us.

I'll teach you PhÃ¨dre."

"Ah PhÃ¦dra, PhÃ¦dra!" Basil Dashwood vaguely ejaculated, looking more

gentlemanly than ever.

"You've learned all I've taught you, but where the devil have you

learned what I haven't?" Madame CarrÃ© went on.

"I've worked--I have; you'd call it work--all through the bright, late

summer, all through the hot, dull, empty days. I've battered down the

door--I did hear it crash one day. But I'm not so very good yet. I'm

only in the right direction."

"\_Malicieuse\_!" growled Madame CarrÃ©.

"Oh I can beat that," the girl went on.

"Did you wake up one morning and find you had grown a pair of wings?"

Peter asked. "Because that's what the difference amounts to--you really

soar. Moreover, you're an angel," he added, charmed with her

unexpectedness, the good nature of her forbearance to reproach him for

not having written to her. And it seemed to him privately that she \_was\_

angelic when in answer to this she said ever so blandly:

"You know you read \_King John\_ with me before you went away. I thought

over immensely what you said. I didn't understand it much at the time--I

was so stupid. But it all came to me later."

"I wish you could see yourself," Peter returned.

"My dear fellow, I do. What sort of a dunce do you take me for? I didn't

miss a vibration of my voice, a fold of my robe."

"Well, I didn't see you troubling about it," Peter handsomely insisted.

"No one ever will. Do you think I'd ever show it?"

"\_Ars celare artem\_," Basil Dashwood jocosely dropped.

"You must first have the art to hide," said Sherringham, wondering a

little why Miriam didn't introduce her young friend to him. She was,

however, both then and later perfectly neglectful of such cares, never

thinking, never minding how other people got on together. When she found

they didn't get on she jeered at them: that was the nearest she came to

arranging for them. Our young man noted in her from the moment she felt

her strength an immense increase of this good-humoured inattention to

detail--all detail save that of her work, to which she was ready to

sacrifice holocausts of feelings when the feelings were other people's.

This conferred on her a large profanity, an absence of ceremony as to

her social relations, which was both amusing because it suggested that

she would take what she gave, and formidable because it was inconvenient

and you mightn't care to give what she would take.

"If you haven't any art it's not quite the same as if you didn't hide

it, is it?" Basil Dashwood ingeniously threw out.

"That's right--say one of your clever things!" Miriam sweetly responded.

"You're always acting," he declared in English and with a simple-minded

laugh, while Sherringham remained struck with his expressing just what

he himself had felt weeks before.

"And when you've shown them your fish-wife, to your public \_de lÃ -bas\_,

what will you do next?" asked Madame CarrÃ©.

"I'll do Juliet--I'll do Cleopatra."

"Rather a big bill, isn't it?" Mr. Dashwood volunteered to Sherringham

in a friendly but discriminating manner.

"Constance and Juliet--take care you don't mix them," said Sherringham.

"I want to be various. You once told me I had a hundred characters,"

Miriam returned.

"Ah, \_vous en Ãªtes lÃ \_?" cried the old actress. "You may have a hundred

characters, but you've only three plays. I'm told that's all there are

in English."

Miriam, admirably indifferent to this charge, appealed to Peter. "What

arrangements have you made? What do the people want?"

"The people at the theatre?"

"I'm afraid they don't want \_King John\_, and I don't believe they hunger

for \_Antony and Cleopatra\_," Basil Dashwood suggested. "Ships and sieges

and armies and pyramids, you know: we mustn't be too heavy."

"Oh I hate scenery!" the girl sighed.

"\_Elle est superbe\_," said Madame CarrÃ©. "You must put those pieces on

the stage: how will you do it?"

"Oh we know how to get up a play in London, Madame CarrÃ©"--Mr. Dashwood

was all geniality. "They put money on it, you know."

"On it? But what do they put \_in\_ it? Who'll interpret them? Who'll

manage a style like that--the style of which the rhapsodies she has just

repeated are a specimen? Whom have you got that one has ever heard of?"

"Oh you'll hear of a good deal when once she gets started," Dashwood

cheerfully contended.

Madame CarrÃ© looked at him a moment; then, "I feel that you'll become

very bad," she said to Miriam. "I'm glad I shan't see it."

"People will do things for me--I'll make them," the girl declared. "I'll

stir them up so that they'll have ideas."

"What people, pray?"

"Ah terrible woman!" Peter theatrically groaned.

"We translate your pieces--there will be plenty of parts," Basil

Dashwood said.

"Why then go out of the door to come in at the window?--especially if

you smash it! An English arrangement of a French piece is a pretty woman

with her back turned."

"Do you really want to keep her?" Sherringham asked of Madame

CarrÃ©--quite as if thinking for a moment that this after all might be

possible.

She bent her strange eyes on him. "No, you're all too queer together. We

couldn't be bothered with you and you're not worth it."

"I'm glad it's 'together' that we're queer then--we can console each

other."

"If you only would; but you don't seem to! In short I don't understand

you--I give you up. But it doesn't matter," said the old woman wearily,

"for the theatre's dead and even you, \_ma toute-belle\_, won't bring it

to life. Everything's going from bad to worse, and I don't care what

becomes of you. You wouldn't understand us here and they won't

understand you there, and everything's impossible, and no one's a whit

the wiser, and it's not of the least consequence. Only when you raise

your arms lift them just a little higher," Madame CarrÃ© added.

"My mother will be happier \_chez nous\_" said Miriam, throwing her arms

straight up and giving them a noble tragic movement.

"You won't be in the least in the right path till your mother's in

despair."

"Well, perhaps we can bring that about even in London," Sherringham

patiently laughed.

"Dear Mrs. Rooth--she's great fun," Mr. Dashwood as imperturbably

dropped.

Miriam transferred the dark weight of her gaze to him as if she were

practising. "\_You\_ won't upset her, at any rate." Then she stood with

her beautiful and fatal mask before her hostess. "I want to do the

modern too. I want to do \_le drame\_, with intense realistic effects."

"And do you want to look like the portico of the Madeleine when it's

draped for a funeral?" her instructress mocked. "Never, never. I don't

believe you're various: that's not the way I see you. You're pure

tragedy, with \_de grands Ã©clats de voix\_ in the great style, or you're

nothing."

"Be beautiful--be only that," Peter urged with high interest. "Be only

what you can be so well--something that one may turn to for a glimpse of

perfection, to lift one out of all the vulgarities of the day."

Thus apostrophised the girl broke out with one of the speeches of

Racine's PhÃ¦dra, hushing her companions on the instant. "You'll be the

English Rachel," said Basil Dashwood when she stopped.

"Acting in French!" Madame CarrÃ© amended. "I don't believe in an English

Rachel."

"I shall have to work it out, what I shall be," Miriam concluded with a

rich pensive effect.

"You're in wonderfully good form to-day," Sherringham said to her; his

appreciation revealing a personal subjection he was unable to conceal

from his companions, much as he wished it.

"I really mean to do everything."

"Very well; after all Garrick did."

"Then I shall be the Garrick of my sex."

"There's a very clever author doing something for me; I should like you

to see it," said Basil Dashwood, addressing himself equally to Miriam

and to her diplomatic friend.

"Ah if you've very clever authors----!" And Madame CarrÃ© spun the sound

to the finest satiric thread.

"I shall be very happy to see it," Peter returned.

This response was so benevolent that Basil Dashwood presently began:

"May I ask you at what theatre you've made arrangements?"

Sherringham looked at him a moment. "Come and see me at the embassy and

I'll tell you." Then he added: "I know your sister, Mrs. Lovick."

"So I supposed: that's why I took the liberty of asking such a

question."

"It's no liberty, but Mr. Sherringham doesn't appear to be able to tell

you," said Miriam.

"Well, you know, it's a very curious world, all those theatrical people

over there," Peter conceded.

"Ah don't say anything against them when I'm one of them," Basil

Dashwood laughed.

"I might plead the absence of information," Peter returned, "as Miss

Rooth has neglected to make us acquainted."

Miriam vaguely smiled. "I know you both so little." But she presented

them with a great stately air to each other, and the two men shook hands

while Madame CarrÃ© observed them.

"\_Tiens\_! you gentlemen meet here for the first time? You do right to

become friends--that's the best thing. Live together in peace and mutual

confidence. \_C'est de beaucoup le plus sage\_."

"Certainly, for yoke-fellows," said Sherringham.

He began the next moment to repeat to his new acquaintance some of the

things he had been told in London; but their hostess stopped him off,

waving the talk away with charming overdone stage horror and the young

hands of the heroines of Marivaux. "Ah wait till you go--for that! Do

you suppose I care for news of your mountebanks' booths?"

XX

As many people know, there are not, in the famous ThÃ©Ã¢tre FranÃ§ais, more

than a dozen good seats accessible to ladies.[\*] The stalls are

forbidden them, the boxes are a quarter of a mile from the stage and the

balcony is a delusion save for a few chairs at either end of its vast

horseshoe. But there are two excellent \_baignoires d'avant-scÃ¨ne\_, which

indeed are by no means always to be had. It was, however, into one of

them that, immediately after his return to Paris, Sherringham ushered

Mrs. Rooth and her daughter, with the further escort of Basil Dashwood.

He had chosen the evening of the reappearance of the celebrated

Mademoiselle Voisin--she had been enjoying a \_congÃ©\_ of three months--an

actress whom Miriam had seen several times before and for whose method

she professed a high though somewhat critical esteem. It was only for

the return of this charming performer that Peter had been waiting to

respond to Miriam's most ardent wish--that of spending an hour in the

\_foyer des artistes\_ of the great theatre. She was the person whom he

knew best in the house of MoliÃ¨re; he could count on her to do them the

honours some night when she was in the "bill," and to make the occasion

sociable. Miriam had been impatient for it--she was so convinced that

her eyes would be opened in the holy of holies; but wishing as

particularly as he did to participate in her impression he had made her

promise she wouldn't taste of this experience without him--not let

Madame CarrÃ©, for instance, take her in his absence. There were

questions the girl wished to put to Mademoiselle Voisin--questions

which, having admired her from the balcony, she felt she was exactly the

person to answer. She was more "in it" now, after all, than Madame

CarrÃ©, in spite of her slenderer talent: she was younger, fresher, more

modern and--Miriam found the word--less academic. She was in fine less

"\_vieux jeu\_." Peter perfectly foresaw the day when his young friend

would make indulgent allowances for poor Madame CarrÃ©, patronising her

as an old woman of good intentions.

[\*: 1890]

The play to-night was six months old, a large, serious, successful

comedy by the most distinguished of authors, with a thesis, a chorus

embodied in one character, a \_scÃ¨ne Ã  faire\_ and a part full of

opportunities for Mademoiselle Voisin. There were things to be said

about this artist, strictures to be dropped as to the general quality of

her art, and Miriam leaned back now, making her comments as if they cost

her less, but the actress had knowledge and distinction and pathos, and

our young lady repeated several times: "How quiet she is, how

wonderfully quiet! Scarcely anything moves but her face and her voice.

\_Le geste rare\_, but really expressive when it comes. I like that

economy; it's the only way to make the gesture significant."

"I don't admire the way she holds her arms," Basil Dash wood said: "like

a \_demoiselle de magasin\_ trying on a jacket."

"Well, she holds them at any rate. I daresay it's more than you do with

yours."

"Oh yes, she holds them; there's no mistake about that. 'I hold them, I

hope, \_hein\_?' she seems to say to all the house." The young English

professional laughed good-humouredly, and Sherringham was struck with

the pleasant familiarity he had established with their brave companion.

He was knowing and ready and he said in the first \_entr'acte\_--they were

waiting for the second to go behind--amusing perceptive things. "They

teach them to be ladylike and Voisin's always trying to show that. 'See

how I walk, see how I sit, see how quiet I am and how I have \_le geste

rare\_. Now can you say I ain't a lady?' She does it all as if she had a

class."

"Well, to-night I'm her class," said Miriam.

"Oh I don't mean of actresses, but of \_femmes du monde\_. She shows them

how to act in society."

"You had better take a few lessons," Miriam retorted.

"Ah you should see Voisin in society," Peter interposed.

"Does she go into it?" Mrs. Rooth demanded with interest.

Her friend hesitated. "She receives a great many people."

"Why shouldn't they when they're nice?" Mrs. Rooth frankly wanted to

know.

"When the people are nice?" Miriam asked.

"Now don't tell me she's not what one would wish," said Mrs. Rooth to

Sherringham.

"It depends on what that is," he darkly smiled.

"What I should wish if she were my daughter," the old woman rejoined

blandly.

"Ah wish your daughter to act as well as that and you'll do the handsome

thing for her!"

"Well, she \_seems\_ to feel what she says," Mrs. Rooth piously risked.

"She has some stiff things to say. I mean about her past," Basil

Dashwood remarked. "The past--the dreadful past--on the stage!"

"Wait till the end, to see how she comes out. We must all be merciful!"

sighed Mrs. Rooth.

"We've seen it before; you know what happens," Miriam observed to her

mother.

"I've seen so many I get them mixed."

"Yes, they're all in queer predicaments. Poor old mother--what we show

you!" laughed the girl.

"Ah it will be what \_you\_ show me--something noble and wise!"

"I want to do this; it's a magnificent part," said Miriam.

"You couldn't put it on in London--they wouldn't swallow it," Basil

Dashwood declared.

"Aren't there things they do there to get over the difficulties?" the

girl inquired.

"You can't get over what \_she did\_!"--her companion had a rueful

grimace.

"Yes, we must pay, we must expiate!" Mrs. Rooth moaned as the curtain

rose again.

When the second act was over our friends passed out of their \_baignoire\_

into those corridors of tribulation where the bristling \_ouvreuse\_, like

a pawnbroker driving a roaring trade, mounts guard upon piles of

heterogeneous clothing, and, gaining the top of the fine staircase which

forms the state entrance and connects the statued vestibule of the

basement with the grand tier of boxes, opened an ambiguous door composed

of little mirrors and found themselves in the society of the initiated.

The janitors were courteous folk who greeted Sherringham as an

acquaintance, and he had no difficulty in marshalling his little troop

toward the foyer. They traversed a low, curving lobby, hung with

pictures and furnished with velvet-covered benches where several

unrecognised persons of both sexes looked at them without hostility, and

arrived at an opening, on the right, from which, by a short flight of

steps, there was a descent to one of the wings of the stage. Here

Miriam paused, in silent excitement, like a young warrior arrested by a

glimpse of the battle-field. Her vision was carried off through a lane

of light to the point of vantage from which the actor held the house;

but there was a hushed guard over the place and curiosity could only

glance and pass.

Then she came with her companions to a sort of parlour with a polished

floor, not large and rather vacant, where her attention flew delightedly

to a coat-tree, in a corner, from which three or four dresses were

suspended--dresses she immediately perceived to be costumes in that

night's play--accompanied by a saucer of something and a much-worn

powder-puff casually left on a sofa. This was a familiar note in the

general impression of high decorum which had begun at the threshold--a

sense of majesty in the place. Miriam rushed at the powder-puff--there

was no one in the room--snatched it up and gazed at it with droll

veneration, then stood rapt a moment before the charming petticoats

("That's Dunoyer's first underskirt," she said to her mother) while

Sherringham explained that in this apartment an actress traditionally

changed her gown when the transaction was simple enough to save the long

ascent to her \_loge\_. He felt himself a cicerone showing a church to a

party of provincials; and indeed there was a grave hospitality in the

air, mingled with something academic and important, the tone of an

institution, a temple, which made them all, out of respect and delicacy,

hold their breath a little and tread the shining floors with discretion.

These precautions increased--Mrs. Rooth crept about like a friendly but

undomesticated cat--after they entered the foyer itself, a square,

spacious saloon covered with pictures and relics and draped in official

green velvet, where the \_genius loci\_ holds a reception every night in

the year. The effect was freshly charming to Peter; he was fond of the

place, always saw it again with pleasure, enjoyed its honourable look

and the way, among the portraits and scrolls, the records of a splendid

history, the green velvet and the waxed floors, the \_genius loci\_ seemed

to be "at home" in the quiet lamplight. At the end of the room, in an

ample chimney, blazed a fire of logs. Miriam said nothing; they looked

about, noting that most of the portraits and pictures were

"old-fashioned," and Basil Dashwood expressed disappointment at the

absence of all the people they wanted most to see. Three or four

gentlemen in evening dress circulated slowly, looking, like themselves,

at the pictures, and another gentleman stood before a lady, with whom he

was in conversation, seated against the wall. The foyer resembled in

these conditions a ball-room, cleared for the dance, before the guests

or the music had arrived.

"Oh it's enough to see \_this\_; it makes my heart beat," said Miriam.

"It's full of the vanished past, it makes me cry. I feel them here, all,

the great artists I shall never see. Think of Rachel--look at her grand

portrait there!--and how she stood on these very boards and trailed over

them the robes of Hermione and PhÃ¨dre." The girl broke out theatrically,

as on the spot was right, not a bit afraid of her voice as soon as it

rolled through the room; appealing to her companions as they stood under

the chandelier and making the other persons present, who had already

given her some attention, turn round to stare at so unusual a specimen

of the English miss. She laughed, musically, when she noticed this, and

her mother, scandalised, begged her to lower her tone. "It's all right.

I produce an effect," said Miriam: "it shan't be said that I too haven't

had my little success in the maison de MoliÃ¨re." And Sherringham

repeated that it was all right--the place was familiar with mirth and

passion, there was often wonderful talk there, and it was only the

setting that was still and solemn. It happened that this evening--there

was no knowing in advance--the scene was not characteristically

brilliant; but to confirm his assertion, at the moment he spoke,

Mademoiselle Dunoyer, who was also in the play, came into the room

attended by a pair of gentlemen.

She was the celebrated, the perpetual, the necessary \_ingÃ©nue\_, who with

all her talent couldn't have represented a woman of her actual age. She

had the gliding, hopping movement of a small bird, the same air of

having nothing to do with time, and the clear, sure, piercing note, a

miracle of exact vocalisation. She chaffed her companions, she chaffed

the room; she might have been a very clever little girl trying to

personate a more innocent big one. She scattered her amiability

about--showing Miriam how the children of MoliÃ¨re took their ease--and

it quickly placed her in the friendliest communication with Peter

Sherringham, who already enjoyed her acquaintance and who now extended

it to his companions, and in particular to the young lady \_sur le point

d'entrer au thÃ©Ã¢tre.\_

"You deserve a happier lot," said the actress, looking up at Miriam

brightly, as if to a great height, and taking her in; upon which

Sherringham left them together a little and led Mrs. Rooth and young

Dashwood to consider further some of the pictures.

"Most delightful, most curious," the old woman murmured about

everything; while Basil Dashwood exclaimed in the presence of most of

the portraits: "But their ugliness--their ugliness: did you ever see

such a collection of hideous people? And those who were supposed to be

good-looking--the beauties of the past--they're worse than the others.

Ah you may say what you will, \_nous sommes mieux que Ã§a\_!" Sherringham

suspected him of irritation, of not liking the theatre of the great

rival nation to be thrust down his throat. They returned to Miriam and

Mademoiselle Dunoyer, and Peter asked the actress a question about one

of the portraits to which there was no name attached. She replied, like

a child who had only played about the room, that she was \_toute

honteuse\_ not to be able to tell him the original: she had forgotten,

she had never asked--"\_Vous allez me trouver bien lÃ©gÃ¨re\_!" She appealed

to the other persons present, who formed a gallery for her, and laughed

in delightful ripples at their suggestions, which she covered with

ridicule. She bestirred herself; she declared she would ascertain, she

shouldn't be happy till she did, and swam out of the room, with the

prettiest paddles, to obtain the information, leaving behind her a

perfume of delicate kindness and gaiety. She seemed above all things

obliging, and Peter pronounced her almost as natural off the stage as

on. She didn't come back.

XXI

Whether he had prearranged it is more than I can say, but Mademoiselle

Voisin delayed so long to show herself that Mrs. Rooth, who wished to

see the rest of the play, though she had sat it out on another occasion,

expressed a returning relish for her corner of the \_baignoire\_ and gave

her conductor the best pretext he could have desired for asking Basil

Dashwood to be so good as to escort her back. When the young actor, of

whose personal preference Peter was quite aware, had led Mrs. Rooth away

with an absence of moroseness which showed that his striking resemblance

to a gentleman was not kept for the footlights, the two others sat on a

divan in the part of the room furthest from the entrance, so that it

gave them a degree of privacy, and Miriam watched the coming and going

of their fellow-visitors and the indefinite people, attached to the

theatre, hanging about, while her companion gave a name to some of the

figures, Parisian celebrities.

"Fancy poor Dashwood cooped up there with mamma!" the girl exclaimed

whimsically.

"You're awfully cruel to him; but that's of course," said Sherringham.

"It seems to me I'm as kind as you; you sent him off."

"That was for your mother; she was tired."

"Oh gammon! And why, if I \_were\_ cruel, should it be of course?"

"Because you must destroy and torment and wear out--that's your nature.

But you can't help your type, can you?"

"My type?" she echoed.

"It's bad, perverse, dangerous. It's essentially insolent."

"And pray what's yours when you talk like that? Would you say such

things if you didn't know the depths of my good nature?"

"Your good nature all comes back to that," said Sherringham. "It's an

abyss of ruin--for others. You've no respect. I'm speaking of the

artistic character--in the direction and in the plentitude in which you

have it. It's unscrupulous, nervous, capricious, wanton."

"I don't know about respect. One can be good," Miriam mused and

reasoned.

"It doesn't matter so long as one's powerful," he returned. "We can't

have everything, and surely we ought to understand that we must pay for

things. A splendid organisation for a special end, like yours, is so

rare and rich and fine that we oughtn't to grudge it its conditions."

"What do you call its conditions?" Miriam asked as she turned and looked

at him.

"Oh the need to take its ease, to take up space, to make itself at home

in the world, to square its elbows and knock, others about. That's large

and free; it's the good nature you speak of. You must forage and ravage

and leave a track behind you; you must live upon the country you

traverse. And you give such delight that, after all, you're

welcome--you're infinitely welcome!"

"I don't know what you mean. I only care for the idea," the girl said.

"That's exactly what I pretend--and we must all help you to it. You use

us, you push us about, you break us up. We're your tables and chair, the

simple furniture of your life."

"Whom do you mean by 'we'?"

Peter gave an ironic laugh. "Oh don't be afraid--there will be plenty of

others!"

She made no return to this, but after a moment broke out again. "Poor

Dashwood immured with mamma--he's like a lame chair that one has put

into the corner."

"Don't break him up before he has served. I really believe something

will come out of him," her companion went on. "However, you'll break me

up first," he added, "and him probably never at all."

"And why shall I honour you so much more?"

"Because I'm a better article and you'll feel that."

"You've the superiority of modesty--I see."

"I'm better than a young mountebank--I've vanity enough to say that."

She turned on him with a flush in her cheek and a splendid dramatic

face. "How you hate us! Yes, at bottom, below your little cold taste,

you \_hate\_ us!" she repeated.

He coloured too, met her eyes, looked into them a minute, seemed to

accept the imputation and then said quickly: "Give it up: come away with

me."

"Come away with you?"

"Leave this place. Give it up."

"You brought me here, you insisted it should be only you, and now you

must stay," she declared with a head-shake and a high manner. "You

should know what you want, dear Mr. Sherringham."

"I do--I know now. Come away before you see her."

"Before----?" she seemed to wonder.

"She's success, this wonderful Voisin, she's triumph, she's full

accomplishment: the hard, brilliant realisation of what I want to avert

for you." Miriam looked at him in silence, the cold light still in her

face, and he repeated: "Give it up--give it up."

Her eyes softened after a little; she smiled and then said: "Yes, you're

better than poor Dashwood."

"Give it up and we'll live for ourselves, in ourselves, in something

that can have a sanctity."

"All the same you do hate us," the girl went on.

"I don't want to be conceited, but I mean that I'm sufficiently fine and

complicated to tempt you. I'm an expensive modern watch with a wonderful

escapement--therefore you'll smash me if you can."

"Never--never!" she said as she got up. "You tell me the hour too well."

She quitted her companion and stood looking at GÃ©rÃ´me's fine portrait of

the pale Rachel invested with the antique attributes of tragedy. The

rise of the curtain had drawn away most of the company. Peter, from his

bench, watched his friend a little, turning his eyes from her to the

vivid image of the dead actress and thinking how little she suffered by

the juxtaposition. Presently he came over and joined her again and she

resumed: "I wonder if that's what your cousin had in his mind."

"My cousin----?"

"What was his name? Mr. Dormer; that first day at Madame CarrÃ©'s. He

offered to paint my portrait."

"I remember. I put him up to it."

"Was he thinking of this?"

"I doubt if he has ever seen it. I daresay I was."

"Well, when we go to London he must do it," said Miriam.

"Oh there's no hurry," Peter was moved to reply.

"Don't you want my picture?" asked the girl with one of her successful

touches.

"I'm not sure I want it from \_him\_. I don't know quite what he'd make of

you."

"He looked so clever--I liked him. I saw him again at your party."

"He's a jolly good fellow; but what's one to say," Peter put to her, "of

a painter who goes for his inspiration to the House of Commons?"

"To the House of Commons?" she echoed.

"He has lately got himself elected."

"Dear me, what a pity! I wanted to sit for him. But perhaps he won't

have me--as I'm not a member of Parliament."

"It's my sister, rather, who has got him in."

"Your sister who was at your house that day? What has she to do with

it?" Miriam asked.

"Why she's his cousin just as I am. And in addition," Sherringham went

on, "she's to be married to him."

"Married--really?" She had a pause, but she continued. "So he paints

\_her\_, I suppose?"

"Not much, probably. His talent in that line isn't what she esteems in

him most."

"It isn't great, then?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"And in the political line?" the girl persisted.

"I scarcely can tell. He's very clever."

"He does paint decently, then?"

"I daresay."

Miriam looked once more at GÃ©rÃ´me's picture. "Fancy his going into the

House of Commons! And your sister put him there?"

"She worked, she canvassed."

"Ah you're a queer family!" she sighed, turning round at the sound of a

step.

"We're lost--here's Mademoiselle Voisin," said Sherringham.

This celebrity presented herself smiling and addressing Miriam. "I acted

for \_you\_ to-night--I did my best."

"What a pleasure to speak to you, to thank you!" the girl murmured

admiringly. She was startled and dazzled.

"I couldn't come to you before, but now I've got a rest--for half an

hour," the actress went on. Gracious and passive, as if a little spent,

she let Sherringham, without looking at him, take her hand and raise it

to his lips. "I'm sorry I make you lose the others--they're so good in

this act," she added.

"We've seen them before and there's nothing so good as you," Miriam

promptly returned.

"I like my part," said Mademoiselle Voisin gently, smiling still at our

young lady with clear, charming eyes. "One's always better in that

case."

"She's so bad sometimes, you know!" Peter jested to Miriam; leading the

actress thus to glance at him, kindly and vaguely, in a short silence

which you couldn't call on her part embarrassment, but which was still

less affectation.

"And it's so interesting to be here--so interesting!" Miriam protested.

"Ah you like our old house? Yes, we're very proud of it." And

Mademoiselle Voisin smiled again at Sherringham all good-humouredly, but

as if to say: "Well, here I am, and what do you want of me? Don't ask me

to invent it myself, but if you'll tell me I'll do it." Miriam admired

the note of discreet interrogation in her voice--the slight suggestion

of surprise at their "old house" being liked. This performer was an

astonishment from her seeming still more perfect on a nearer view--which

was not, the girl had an idea, what performers usually did. This was

very encouraging to her--it widened the programme of a young lady about

to embrace the scenic career. To have so much to show before the

footlights and yet to have so much left when you came off--that was

really wonderful. Mademoiselle Voisin's eyes, as one looked into them,

were still more agreeable than the distant spectator would have

supposed; and there was in her appearance an extreme finish which

instantly suggested to Miriam that she herself, in comparison, was big

and rough and coarse.

"You're lovely to-night--you're particularly lovely," Sherringham said

very frankly, translating Miriam's own impression and at the same time

giving her an illustration of the way that, in Paris at least, gentlemen

expressed themselves to the stars of the drama. She thought she knew her

companion very well and had been witness of the degree to which, in such

general conditions, his familiarity could increase; but his address to

the slim, distinguished, harmonious woman before them had a different

quality, the note of a special usage. If Miriam had had an apprehension

that such directness might be taken as excessive it was removed by the

manner in which Mademoiselle Voisin returned:

"Oh one's always well enough when one's made up; one's always exactly

the same." That served as an example of the good taste with which a star

of the drama could receive homage that was wanting in originality.

Miriam determined on the spot that this should be the way \_she\_ would

ever receive it. The grace of her new acquaintance was the greater as

the becoming bloom to which she alluded as artificial was the result of

a science so consummate that it had none of the grossness of a mask. The

perception of all this was exciting to our young aspirant, and her

excitement relieved itself in the inquiry, which struck her as rude as

soon as she had uttered it:

"You acted for 'me'? How did you know? What am I to you?"

"Monsieur Sherringham has told me about you. He says we're nothing

beside you--that you're to be the great star of the future. I'm proud

that you've seen me."

"That of course is what I tell every one," Peter acknowledged a trifle

awkwardly to Miriam.

"I can believe it when I see you. \_Je vous ai bien observÃ©e\_," the

actress continued in her sweet conciliatory tone.

Miriam looked from one of her interlocutors to the other as if there

were joy for her in this report of Sherringham's remarks--joy

accompanied and partly mitigated, however, by a quicker vision of what

might have passed between a secretary of embassy and a creature so

exquisite as Mademoiselle Voisin. "Ah you're wonderful people--a most

interesting impression!" she yearningly sighed.

"I was looking for you; he had prepared me. We're such old friends!"

said the actress in a tone courteously exempt from intention: upon which

Sherringham, again taking her hand, raised it to his lips with a

tenderness which her whole appearance seemed to bespeak for her, a sort

of practical consideration and carefulness of touch, as if she were an

object precious and frail, an instrument for producing rare sounds, to

be handled, like a legendary violin, with a recognition of its value.

"Your dressing-room is so pretty--show her your dressing-room," he went

on.

"Willingly, if she'll come up. \_Vous savez que c'est une montÃ©e."\_

"It's a shame to inflict it on \_you\_," Miriam objected.

"\_Comment donc?\_ If it will interest you in the least!" They exchanged

civilities, almost caresses, trying which could have the nicest manner

to the other. It was the actress's manner that struck Miriam most; it

denoted such a training, so much taste, expressed such a ripe conception

of urbanity.

"No wonder she acts well when she has that tact--feels, perceives, is so

remarkable, \_mon Dieu, mon Dieu!"\_ the girl said to herself as they

followed their conductress into another corridor and up a wide, plain

staircase. The staircase was spacious and long and this part of the

establishment sombre and still, with the gravity of a college or a

convent. They reached another passage lined with little doors, on each

of which the name of a comedian was painted, and here the aspect became

still more monastic, like that of a row of solitary cells. Mademoiselle

Voisin led the way to her own door all obligingly and as if wishing to

be hospitable; she dropped little subdued, friendly attempts at

explanation on the way. At her threshold the monasticism stopped--Miriam

found herself in a wonderfully upholstered nook, a nest of lamplight and

delicate cretonne. Save for its pair of long glasses it might have been

a tiny boudoir, with a water-colour drawing of value in each of its

panels of stretched stuff, with its crackling fire and its charming

order. It was intensely bright and extremely hot, singularly pretty and

exempt from litter. Nothing lay about, but a small draped doorway led

into an inner sanctuary. To Miriam it seemed royal; it immediately made

the art of the comedian the most distinguished thing in the world. It

was just such a place as they \_should\_ have for their intervals if they

were expected to be great artists. It was a result of the same evolution

as Mademoiselle Voisin herself--not that our young lady found this

particular term at hand to express her idea. But her mind was flooded

with an impression of style, of refinement, of the long continuity of a

tradition. The actress said, \_"VoilÃ , c'est tout!"\_ as if it were little

enough and there were even something clumsy in her having brought them

so far for nothing, and in their all sitting there waiting and looking

at each other till it was time for her to change her dress. But to

Miriam it was occupation enough to note what she did and said: these

things and her whole person and carriage struck our young woman as

exquisite in their adaptation to the particular occasion. She had had an

idea that foreign actresses were rather of the \_cabotin\_ order, but her

hostess suggested to her much more a princess than a \_cabotine\_. She

would do things as she liked and do them straight off: Miriam couldn't

fancy her in the gropings and humiliations of rehearsal. Everything in

her had been sifted and formed, her tone was perfect, her amiability

complete, and she might have been the charming young wife of a secretary

of state receiving a pair of strangers of distinction. The girl observed

all her movements. And then, as Sherringham had said, she was

particularly lovely. But she suddenly told this gentleman that she must

put him \_Ã  la porte\_--she wanted to change her dress. He retired and

returned to the foyer, where Miriam was to rejoin him after remaining

the few minutes more with Mademoiselle Voisin and coming down with her.

He waited for his companion, walking up and down and making up his mind;

and when she presently came in he said to her:

"Please don't go back for the rest of the play. Stay here." They now had

the foyer virtually to themselves.

"I want to stay here. I like it better," She moved back to the

chimney-piece, from above which the cold portrait of Rachel looked down,

and as he accompanied her he went on:

"I meant what I said just now."

"What you said to Voisin?"

"No, no; to you. Give it up and live with \_me."\_

"Give it up?" She turned her stage face on him.

"Give it up and I'll marry you to-morrow."

"This is a happy time to ask it!" she said with superior amusement. "And

this is a good place!"

"Very good indeed, and that's why I speak: it's a place to make one

choose--it puts it all before one."

"To make \_you\_ choose, you mean. I'm much obliged, but that's not my

choice," laughed Miriam.

"You shall be anything you like except this."

"Except what I most want to be? I \_am\_ much obliged."

"Don't you care for me? Haven't you any gratitude?" Sherringham

insisted.

"Gratitude for kindly removing the blest cup from my lips? I want to be

what \_she\_ is--I want it more than ever."

"Ah what she is--!" He took it impatiently.

"Do you mean I can't? Well see if I can't. Tell me more about her--tell

me everything."

"Haven't you seen for yourself and, knowing things as you do, can't you

judge?"

"She's strange, she's mysterious," Miriam allowed, looking at the fire.

"She showed us nothing--nothing of her real self."

"So much the better, all things considered."

"Are there all sorts of other things in her life? That's what I

believe," the girl went on, raising her eyes to him.

"I can't tell you what there is in the life of such a woman."

"Imagine--when she's so perfect!" she exclaimed thoughtfully. "Ah she

kept me off--she kept me off! Her charming manner is in itself a kind

of contempt. It's an abyss--it's the wall of China. She has a hard

polish, an inimitable surface, like some wonderful porcelain that costs

more than you'd think."

"Do you want to become like that?" Sherringham asked.

"If I could I should be enchanted. One can always try."

"You must act better than she," he went on.

"Better? I thought you wanted me to give it up."

"Ah I don't know what I want," he cried, "and you torment me and turn me

inside out! What I want is you yourself."

"Oh don't worry," said Miriam--now all kindly. Then she added that

Mademoiselle Voisin had invited her to "call"; to which Sherringham

replied with a certain dryness that she would probably not find that

necessary. This made the girl stare and she asked: "Do you mean it won't

do on account of mamma's prejudices?"

"Say this time on account of mine."

"Do you mean because she has lovers?"

"Her lovers are none of our business."

"None of mine, I see. So you've been one of them?"

"No such luck!"

"What a pity!" she richly wailed. "I should have liked to see that. One

must see everything--to be able to do everything." And as he pressed for

what in particular she had wished to see she replied: "The way a woman

like that receives one of the old ones."

Peter gave a groan at this, which was at the same time partly a laugh,

and, turning away to drop on a bench, ejaculated: "You'll do--you'll

do!"

He sat there some minutes with his elbows on his knees and his face in

his hands. His friend remained looking at the portrait of Rachel, after

which she put to him: "Doesn't such a woman as that receive--receive

every one?"

"Every one who goes to see her, no doubt."

"And who goes?"

"Lots of men--clever men, eminent men."

"Ah what a charming life! Then doesn't she go out?"

"Not what we Philistines mean by that--not into society, never. She

never enters a lady's drawing-room."

"How strange, when one's as distinguished as that; except that she must

escape a lot of stupidities and \_corvÃ©es\_. Then where does she learn

such manners?"

"She teaches manners, \_Ã  ses heures\_: she doesn't need to learn them."

"Oh she has given me ideas! But in London actresses go into society,"

Miriam continued.

"Oh into ours, such as it is. In London \_nous mÃªlons les genres\_."

"And shan't I go--I mean if I want?"

"You'll have every facility to bore yourself. Don't doubt it."

"And doesn't she feel excluded?" Miriam asked.

"Excluded from what? She has the fullest life."

"The fullest?"

"An intense artistic life. The cleverest men in Paris talk over her work

with her; the principal authors of plays discuss with her subjects and

characters and questions of treatment. She lives in the world of art."

"Ah the world of art--how I envy her! And you offer me Dashwood!"

Sherringham rose in his emotion. "I 'offer' you--?"

Miriam burst out laughing. "You look so droll! You offer me yourself,

then, instead of all these things."

"My dear child, I also am a very clever man," he said, trying to sink

his consciousness of having for a moment stood gaping.

"You are--you are; I delight in you. No ladies at all--no \_femmes comme

il faut?"\_ she began again.

"Ah what do \_they\_ matter? Your business is the artistic life!" he broke

out with inconsequence, irritated, moreover, at hearing her sound that

trivial note again.

"You're a dear--your charming good sense comes back to you! What do you

want of me, then?"

"I want you for myself--not for others; and now, in time, before

anything's done."

"Why, then, did you bring me here? Everything's done--I feel it

to-night."

"I know the way you should look at it--if you do look at it at all,"

Sherringham conceded.

"That's so easy! I thought you liked the stage so," Miriam artfully

added.

"Don't you want me to be a great swell?"

"And don't you want \_me\_ to be?"

"You \_will\_ be--you'll share my glory."

"So will you share mine."

"The husband of an actress? Yes, I see myself that!" Peter cried with a

frank ring of disgust.

"It's a silly position, no doubt. But if you're too good for it why talk

about it? Don't you think I'm important?" she demanded. Her companion

met her eyes and she suddenly said in a different tone: "Ah why should

we quarrel when you've been so kind, so generous? Can't we always be

friends--the truest friends?"

Her voice sank to the sweetest cadence and her eyes were grateful and

good as they rested on him. She sometimes said things with such

perfection that they seemed dishonest, but in this case he was stirred

to an expressive response. Just as he was making it, however, he was

moved to utter other words: "Take care, here's Dashwood!" Mrs. Rooth's

tried attendant was in the doorway. He had come back to say that they

really must relieve him.

BOOK FIFTH

XXII

Mrs. Dallow came up to London soon after the meeting of Parliament; she

made no secret of the fact that she was fond of "town" and that in

present conditions it would of course not have become less attractive to

her. But she prepared to retreat again for the Easter vacation, not to

go back to Harsh, but to pay a couple of country visits. She did not,

however, depart with the crowd--she never did anything with the

crowd--but waited till the Monday after Parliament rose; facing with

composure, in Great Stanhope Street, the horrors, as she had been taught

to consider them, of a Sunday out of the session. She had done what she

could to mitigate them by asking a handful of "stray men" to dine with

her that evening. Several members of this disconsolate class sought

comfort in Great Stanhope Street in the afternoon, and them for the most

part she also invited to return at eight o'clock. There were accordingly

almost too many people at dinner; there were even a couple of wives.

Nick Dormer was then present, though he had not been in the afternoon.

Each of the other persons had said on coming in, "So you've not

gone--I'm awfully glad." Mrs. Dallow had replied, "No, I've not gone,"

but she had in no case added that she was glad, nor had she offered an

explanation. She never offered explanations; she always assumed that no

one could invent them so well as those who had the florid taste to

desire them.

And in this case she was right, since it is probable that few of her

visitors failed to say to themselves that her not having gone would have

had something to do with Dormer. That could pass for an explanation with

many of Mrs. Dallow's friends, who as a general thing were not morbidly

analytic; especially with those who met Nick as a matter of course at

dinner. His figuring at this lady's entertainments, being in her house

whenever a candle was lighted, was taken as a sign that there was

something rather particular between them. Nick had said to her more than

once that people would wonder why they didn't marry; but he was wrong in

this, inasmuch as there were many of their friends to whom it wouldn't

have occurred that his position could be improved. That they were

cousins was a fact not so evident to others as to themselves, in

consequence of which they appeared remarkably intimate. The person

seeing clearest in the matter was Mrs. Gresham, who lived so much in the

world that being left now and then to one's own company had become her

idea of true sociability. She knew very well that if she had been

privately engaged to a young man as amiable as Nick Dormer she would

have managed that publicity shouldn't play such a part in their

intercourse; and she had her secret scorn for the stupidity of people

whose conception of Nick's relation to Julia rested on the fact that he

was always included in her parties. "If he never was there they might

talk," she said to herself. But Mrs. Gresham was supersubtle. To her it

would have appeared natural that her friend should celebrate the

parliamentary recess by going down to Harsh and securing the young man's

presence there for a fortnight; she recognised Mrs. Dallow's actual plan

as a comparatively poor substitute--the project of spending the

holidays in other people's houses, to which Nick had also promised to

come. Mrs. Gresham was romantic; she wondered what was the good of mere

snippets and snatches, the chances that any one might have, when large,

still days \_Ã  deux\_ were open to you--chances of which half the sanctity

was in what they excluded. However, there were more unsettled matters

between Mrs. Dallow and her queer kinsman than even Mrs. Gresham's fine

insight could embrace. She was not on the Sunday evening before Easter

among the guests in Great Stanhope Street; but if she had been Julia's

singular indifference to observation would have stopped short of

encouraging her to remain in the drawing-room, along with Nick, after

the others had gone. I may add that Mrs. Gresham's extreme curiosity

would have emboldened her as little to do so. She would have taken for

granted that the pair wished to be alone together, though she would have

regarded this only as a snippet. The company had at all events stayed

late, and it was nearly twelve o'clock when the last of them, standing

before the fire in the room they had quitted, broke out to his

companion:

"See here, Julia, how long do you really expect me to endure this kind

of thing?" Julia made him no answer; she only leaned back in her chair

with her eyes upon his. He met her gaze a moment; then he turned round

to the fire and for another moment looked into it. After this he faced

his hostess again with the exclamation: "It's so foolish--it's so

damnably foolish!"

She still said nothing, but at the end of a minute she spoke without

answering him. "I shall expect you on Tuesday, and I hope you'll come by

a decent train."

"What do you mean by a decent train?"

"I mean I hope you'll not leave it till the last thing before dinner, so

that we can have a little walk or something."

"What's a little walk or something? Why, if you make such a point of my

coming to Griffin, do you want me to come at all?"

She hesitated an instant; then she returned; "I knew you hated it!"

"You provoke me so," said Nick. "You try to, I think."

"And Severals is still worse. You'll get out of that if you can," Mrs.

Dallow went on.

"If I can? What's to prevent me?"

"You promised Lady Whiteroy. But of course that's nothing."

"I don't care a straw for Lady Whiteroy."

"And you promised me. But that's less still."

"It \_is\_ foolish--it's quite idiotic," said Nick with his hands in his

pockets and his eyes on the ceiling.

There was another silence, at the end of which Julia remarked: "You

might have answered Mr. Macgeorge when he spoke to you."

"Mr. Macgeorge--what has he to do with it?"

"He has to do with your getting on a little. If you think that's the

way--!"

Nick broke into a laugh. "I like lessons in getting on--in other words I

suppose you mean in urbanity--from you, Julia!"

"Why not from me?"

"Because you can do nothing base. You're incapable of putting on a

flattering manner to get something by it: therefore why should you

expect me to? You're unflattering--that is, you're austere--in

proportion as there may be something to be got."

She sprang from her chair, coming toward him. "There's only one thing I

want in the world--you know very well."

"Yes, you want it so much that you won't even take it when it's pressed

on you. How long do you seriously expect me to bear it?" Nick repeated.

"I never asked you to do anything base," she said as she stood in front

of him. "If I'm not clever about throwing myself into things it's all

the more reason you should be."

"If you're not clever, my dear Julia--?" Nick, close to her, placed his

hands on her shoulders and shook her with a mixture of tenderness and

passion. "You're clever enough to make me furious, sometimes!"

She opened and closed her fan looking down at it while she submitted to

his mild violence. "All I want is that when a man like Mr. Macgeorge

talks to you you shouldn't appear bored to death. You used to be so

charming under those inflictions. Now you appear to take no interest in

anything. At dinner to-night you scarcely opened your lips; you treated

them all as if you only wished they'd go."

"I did wish they'd go. Haven't I told you a hundred times what I think

of your salon?"

"How then do you want me to live?" she asked. "Am I not to have a

creature in the house?"

"As many creatures as you like. Your freedom's complete and, as far as

I'm concerned, always will be. Only when you challenge me and overhaul

me--not justly, I think--I must confess the simple truth, that there are

many of your friends I don't delight in."

"Oh \_your\_ idea of pleasant people!" Julia lamented. "I should like once

for all to know what it really is."

"I can tell you what it really isn't: it isn't Mr. Macgeorge. He's a

being almost grotesquely limited."

"He'll be where you'll never be--unless you change."

"To be where Mr. Macgeorge is not would be very much my desire.

Therefore why should I change?" Nick demanded. "However, I hadn't the

least intention of being rude to him, and I don't think I was," he went

on. "To the best of my ability I assume a virtue if I haven't it; but

apparently I'm not enough of a comedian."

"If you haven't it?" she echoed. "It's when you say things like that

that you're so dreadfully tiresome. As if there were anything that you

haven't or mightn't have!"

Nick turned away from her; he took a few impatient steps in the room,

looking at the carpet, his hands always in his pockets. Then he came

back to the fire with the observation: "It's rather hard to be found so

wanting when one has tried to play one's part so beautifully." He paused

with his eyes on her own and then went on with a vibration in his voice:

"I've imperilled my immortal soul, or at least bemuddled my

intelligence, by all the things I don't care for that I've tried to do,

and all the things I detest that I've tried to be, and all the things I

never can be that I've tried to look as if I were--all the appearances

and imitations, the pretences and hypocrisies in which I've steeped

myself to the eyes; and at the end of it (it serves me right!) my reward

is simply to learn that I'm still not half humbug enough!"

Julia looked away from him as soon as he had spoken these words; she

attached her eyes to the clock behind him and observed irrelevantly:

"I'm very sorry, but I think you had better go. I don't like you to stay

after midnight."

"Ah what you like and what you don't like, and where one begins and the

other ends--all that's an impenetrable mystery!" the young man

declared. But he took no further notice of her allusion to his

departure, adding in a different tone: "'A man like Mr. Macgeorge'! When

you say a thing of that sort in a certain, particular way I should

rather like to suffer you to perish."

Mrs. Dallow stared; it might have seemed for an instant that she was

trying to look stupid. "How can I help it if a few years hence he's

certain to be at the head of any Liberal Government?"

"We can't help it of course, but we can help talking about it," Nick

smiled. "If we don't mention it it mayn't be noticed."

"You're trying to make me angry. You're in one of your vicious moods,"

she returned, blowing out on the chimney-piece a guttering candle.

"That I'm exasperated I've already had the honour very positively to

inform you. All the same I maintain that I was irreproachable at dinner.

I don't want you to think I shall always be as good as that."

"You looked so out of it; you were as gloomy as if every earthly hope

had left you, and you didn't make a single contribution to any

discussion that took place. Don't you think I observe you?" she asked

with an irony tempered by a tenderness unsuccessfully concealed.

"Ah my darling, what you observe--!" Nick cried with a certain

bitterness of amusement. But he added the next moment more seriously, as

if his tone had been disrespectful: "You probe me to the bottom, no

doubt."

"You needn't come either to Griffin or to Severals if you don't want

to."

"Give them up yourself; stay here with me!"

She coloured quickly as he said this, and broke out: "Lord, how you hate

political houses!"

"How can you say that when from February to August I spend every blessed

night in one?"

"Yes, and hate that worst of all."

"So do half the people who are in it. You, my dear, must have so many

things, so many people, so much \_mise-en-scÃ¨ne\_ and such a perpetual

spectacle to live," Nick went on. "Perpetual motion, perpetual visits,

perpetual crowds! If you go into the country you'll see forty people

every day and be mixed up with them all day. The idea of a quiet

fortnight in town, when by a happy if idiotic superstition everybody

goes out of it, disconcerts and frightens you. It's the very time, it's

the very place, to do a little work and possess one's soul."

This vehement allocution found her evidently somewhat unprepared; but

she was sagacious enough, instead of attempting for the moment a general

rejoinder, to seize on a single phrase and say: "Work? What work can you

do in London at such a moment as this?"

Nick considered. "I might tell you I want to get up a lot of subjects,

to sit at home and read blue-books; but that wouldn't be quite what I

mean."

"Do you mean you want to paint?"

"Yes, that's it, since you gouge it out of me."

"Why do you make such a mystery about it? You're at perfect liberty,"

Julia said.

She put out her hand to rest it on the mantel-shelf, but her companion

took it on the way and held it in both his own. "You're delightful,

Julia, when you speak in that tone--then I know why it is I love you.

But I can't do anything if I go to Griffin, if I go to Severals."

"I see--I see," she answered thoughtfully and kindly.

"I've scarcely been inside of my studio for months, and I feel quite

homesick for it. The idea of putting in a few quiet days there has taken

hold of me: I rather cling to it."

"It seems so odd your having a studio!" Julia dropped, speaking so

quickly that the words were almost incomprehensible.

"Doesn't it sound absurd, for all the good it does me, or I do \_in\_ it?

Of course one can produce nothing but rubbish on such terms--without

continuity or persistence, with just a few days here and there. I ought

to be ashamed of myself, no doubt; but even my rubbish interests me.

'\_Guenille si l'on veut, ma guenille m'est chÃ¨re\_.' But I'll go down to

Harsh with you in a moment, Julia," Nick pursued: "that would do as well

if we could be quiet there, without people, without a creature; and I

should really be perfectly content. You'd beautifully sit for me; it

would be the occasion we've so often wanted and never found."

She shook her head slowly and with a smile that had a meaning for him.

"Thank you, my dear; nothing would induce me to go to Harsh with you."

He looked at her hard. "What's the matter whenever it's a question of

anything of that sort? Are you afraid of me?" She pulled her hand from

him quickly, turning away; but he went on: "Stay with me here then, when

everything's so right for it. We shall do beautifully--have the whole

place, have the whole day, to ourselves. Hang your engagements!

Telegraph you won't come. We'll live at the studio--you'll sit to me

every day. Now or never's our chance--when shall we have so good a one?

Think how charming it will be! I'll make you wish awfully that I may do

something."

"I can't get out of Griffin--it's impossible," Julia said, moving

further away and with her back presented to him.

"Then you \_are\_ afraid of me--simply!"

She turned straight round, very pale. "Of course I am. You're welcome to

know it."

He went toward her, and for a moment she seemed to make another slight

movement of retreat. This, however, was scarcely perceptible, and there

was nothing to alarm in the tone of reasonable entreaty in which he

spoke as he stood there. "Put an end, Julia, to our absurd situation--it

really can't go on. You've no right to expect a man to be happy or

comfortable in so false a position. We're spoken of odiously--of that we

may be sure; and yet what good have we of it?"

"Spoken of? Do I care for that?"

"Do you mean you're indifferent because there are no grounds? That's

just why I hate it."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" she returned with sharp

disdain.

"Be my wife to-morrow--be my wife next week. Let us have done with this

fantastic probation and be happy."

"Leave me now--come back to-morrow. I'll write to you." She had the air

of pleading with him at present, pleading as he pleaded.

"You can't resign yourself to the idea of one's looking 'out of it'!"

Nick laughed.

"Come to-morrow, before lunch," she went on.

"To be told I must wait six months more and then be sent about my

business? Ah, Julia, Julia!" the young man groaned.

Something in this simple lament--it sounded natural and perfectly

unstudied--seemed straightway to make a great impression on her. "You

shall wait no longer," she said after a short silence.

"What do you mean by no longer?"

"Give me about five weeks--say till the Whitsuntide recess."

"Five weeks are a great deal," smiled Nick.

"There are things to be done--you ought to understand."

"I only understand how I love you."

She let herself go--"Dearest Nick!"--and he caught her and kept her in

his arms.

"I've your promise then for five weeks hence to a day?" he demanded as

she at last released herself.

"We'll settle that--the exact day; there are things to consider and to

arrange. Come to luncheon to-morrow."

"I'll come early--I'll come at one," he said; and for a moment they

stood all deeply and intimately taking each other in.

"Do you think I \_want\_ to wait, any more than you?" she asked in

congruity with this.

"I don't feel so much out of it now!" he declared by way of answer.

"You'll stay of course now--you'll give up your visits?"

She had hold of the lappet of his coat; she had kept it in her hand even

while she detached herself from his embrace. There was a white flower in

his buttonhole that she looked at and played with a moment before she

said; "I've a better idea--you needn't come to Griffin. Stay in your

studio--do as you like--paint dozens of pictures."

"Dozens? Barbarian!" Nick wailed.

The epithet apparently had an endearing suggestion for her; it at any

rate led her to let him possess himself of her head and, so holding it,

kiss her--led her to say: "What on earth do I want but that you should

do absolutely as you please and be as happy as you can?"

He kissed her in another place at this; but he put it to her; "What

dreadful proposition is coming now?"

"I'll go off and do up my visits and come back."

"And leave me alone?"

"Don't be affected! You know you'll work much better without me. You'll

live in your studio--I shall be well out of the way."

"That's not what one wants of a sitter. How can I paint you?"

"You can paint me all the rest of your life. I shall be a perpetual

sitter."

"I believe I could paint you without looking at you"--and his lighted

face shone down on her. "You do excuse me then from those dreary

places?"

"How can I insist after what you said about the pleasure of keeping

these days?" she admirably--it was so all sincerely--asked.

"You're the best woman on earth--though it does seem odd you should rush

away as soon as our little business is settled."

"We shall make it up. I know what I'm about. And now go!" She ended by

almost pushing him out of the room.

XXIII

It was certainly singular, in the light of other matters, that on

sitting down in his studio after she had left town Nick should not, as

regards the effort to project plastically some beautiful form, have felt

more chilled by the absence of a friend who was such an embodiment of

beauty. She was away and he missed her and longed for her, and yet

without her the place was more filled with what he wanted to find in it.

He turned into it with confused feelings, the strongest of which was a

sense of release and recreation. It looked blighted and lonely and

dusty, and his old studies, as he rummaged them out, struck him even as

less inspired than the last time he had ventured to face them. But amid

this neglected litter, in the colourless and obstructed light of a high

north window which needed washing, he came nearer tasting the

possibility of positive happiness: it appeared to him that, as he had

said to Julia, he was more in possession of his soul. It was frivolity

and folly, it was puerility, to spend valuable hours pottering over the

vain implements of an art he had relinquished; and a certain shame that

he had felt in presenting his plea to Julia that Sunday night arose from

the sense not of what he clung to, but of what he had given up. He had

turned his back on serious work, so that pottering was now all he could

aspire to. It couldn't be fruitful, it couldn't be anything but

ridiculous, almost ignoble; but it soothed his nerves, it was in the

nature of a secret dissipation. He had never suspected he should some

day have nerves on his own part to count with; but this possibility had

been revealed to him on the day it became clear that he was letting

something precious go. He was glad he had not to justify himself to the

critical, for this might have been a delicate business. The critical

were mostly absent; and besides, shut up all day in his studio, how

should he ever meet them? It was the place in the world where he felt

furthest away from his constituents. That was a part of the

pleasure--the consciousness that for the hour the coast was clear and

his mind independent. His mother and his sister had gone to Broadwood:

Lady Agnes--the phrase sounds brutal but represents his state of

mind--was well out of the way. He had written to her as soon as Julia

left town--he had apprised her of the fact that his wedding-day was

fixed: a relief for poor Lady Agnes to a period of intolerable

mystification, of dark, dumb wondering and watching. She had said her

say the day of the poll at Harsh; she was too proud to ask and too

discreet to "nag"; so she could only wait for something that didn't

come. The unconditioned loan of Broadwood had of course been something

of a bribe to patience: she had at first felt that on the day she should

take possession of that capital house Julia would indeed seem to have

entered the family. But the gift had confirmed expectations just enough

to make disappointment more bitter; and the discomfort was greater in

proportion as she failed to discover what was the matter. Her daughter

Grace was much occupied with this question, and brought it up for

discussion in a manner irritating to her ladyship, who had a high theory

of being silent about it, but who, however, in the long run, was more

unhappy when, in consequence of a reprimand, the girl suggested no

reasons at all than when she suggested stupid ones. It eased Lady Agnes

a little to advert to the mystery when she could have the air of not

having begun.

The letter Nick received from her the first day of Passion Week in reply

to his important communication was the only one he read at that moment;

not counting of course the several notes Mrs. Dallow addressed to him

from Griffin. There were letters piled up, as he knew, in Calcutta

Gardens, which his servant had strict orders not to bring to the studio.

Nick slept now in the bedroom attached to this retreat; got things, as

he wanted them, from Calcutta Gardens; and dined at his club, where a

stray surviving friend or two, seeing him prowl about the library in the

evening, was free to impute to such eccentricity some subtly political

basis. When he thought of his neglected letters he remembered Mr.

Carteret's convictions on the subject of not "getting behind"; they made

him laugh, in the slightly sonorous painting-room, as he bent over one

of the old canvases that he had ventured to turn to the light. He was

fully determined, however, to master his correspondence before going

down, the last thing before Parliament should reassemble, to spend

another day at Beauclere. Mastering his correspondence meant, in Nick's

mind, breaking open envelopes; writing answers was scarcely involved in

the idea. But Mr. Carteret would never guess that. Nick was not moved

even to write to him that the affair with Julia was on the point of

taking the form he had been so good as to desire: he reserved the

pleasure of this announcement for a personal interview.

The day before Good Friday, in the morning, his stillness was broken by

a rat-tat-tat on the outer door of his studio, administered apparently

by the knob of a walking-stick. His servant was out and he went to the

door, wondering who his visitor could be at such a time, especially of

the rather presuming class. The class was indicated by the visitor's

failure to look for the bell--since there \_was\_ a bell, though it

required a little research. In a moment the mystery was solved: the

gentleman who stood smiling at him from the threshold could only be

Gabriel Nash. Nick had not seen this whimsical personage for several

months, and had had no news of him beyond a general intimation that he

was following his fancy in foreign parts. His old friend had

sufficiently prepared him, at the time of their reunion in Paris, for

the idea of the fitful in intercourse; and he had not been ignorant, on

his return from Paris, that he should have had an opportunity to miss

him if he had not been too busy to take advantage of it. In London,

after the episode at Harsh, Gabriel had not reappeared: he had redeemed

none of the pledges given the night they walked together to Notre Dame

and conversed on important matters. He was to have interposed in Nick's

destiny, but he had not interposed; he was to have pulled him hard and

in the opposite sense from Julia, but there had been no pulling; he was

to have saved him, as he called it, and yet Nick was lost. This

circumstance indeed formed his excuse: the member for Harsh had rushed

so wantonly to perdition. Nick had for the hour seriously wished to keep

hold of him: he valued him as a salutary influence. Yet on coming to his

senses after his election our young man had recognised that Nash might

very well have reflected on the thanklessness of such a slippery

subject--might have held himself released from his vows. Of course it

had been particularly in the event of a Liberal triumph that he had

threatened to make himself felt; the effect of a brand plucked from the

burning would be so much greater if the flames were already high. Yet

Nick had not kept him to the letter of this pledge, and had so fully

admitted the right of a thorough connoisseur, let alone a faithful

friend, to lose patience with him that he was now far from greeting his

visitor with a reproach. He felt much more thrown on his defence.

Gabriel, however, forbore at first to attack him. He brought in only

blandness and benevolence and a great content at having obeyed the

mystic voice--it was really a remarkable case of second sight--which had

whispered him that the recreant comrade of his prime was in town. He had

just come back from Sicily after a southern winter, according to a

custom frequent with him, and had been moved by a miraculous prescience,

unfavourable as the moment might seem, to go and ask for Nick in

Calcutta Gardens, where he had extracted from his friend's servant an

address not known to all the world. He showed Nick what a mistake it had

been to fear a dull arraignment, and how he habitually ignored all

lapses and kept up the standard only by taking a hundred fine things for

granted. He also abounded more than ever in his own sense, reminding his

relieved listener how no recollection of him, no evocation of him in

absence, could ever do him justice. You couldn't recall him without

seeming to exaggerate him, and then acknowledged, when you saw him, that

your exaggeration had fallen short. He emerged out of vagueness--his

Sicily might have been the Sicily of \_A Winter's Tale\_--and would

evidently be reabsorbed in it; but his presence was positive and

pervasive enough. He was duly "intense" while he lasted. His connexions

were with beauty, urbanity and conversation, as usual, but they made up

a circle you couldn't find in the Court Guide. Nick had a sense that he

knew "a lot of esthetic people," but he dealt in ideas much more than

in names and addresses. He was genial and jocose, sunburnt and

romantically allusive. It was to be gathered that he had been living for

many days in a Saracenic tower where his principal occupation was to

watch for the flushing of the west. He had retained all the serenity of

his opinions and made light, with a candour of which the only defect was

apparently that it was not quite enough a conscious virtue, of many of

the objects of common esteem. When Nick asked him what he had been doing

he replied, "Oh living, you know"; and the tone of the words offered

them as the story of a great deed. He made a long visit, staying to

luncheon and after luncheon, so that the little studio heard all at once

a greater quantity of brave talk than in the several previous years of

its history. With much of our tale left to tell it is a pity that so

little of this colloquy may be reported here; since, as affairs took

their course, it marked really--if the question be of noting the exact

point--a turn of the tide in Nick Dormer's personal situation. He was

destined to remember the accent with which Nash exclaimed, on his

drawing forth sundry specimens of amateurish earnestness:

"I say--I say--I say!"

He glanced round with a heightened colour. "They're pretty bad, eh?"

"Oh you're a deep one," Nash went on.

"What's the matter?"

"Do you call your conduct that of a man of honour?"

"Scarcely perhaps. But when no one has seen them--!"

"That's your villainy. \_C'est de l'exquis, du pur exquis\_. Come, my dear

fellow, this is very serious--it's a bad business," said Gabriel Nash.

Then he added almost with austerity: "You'll be so good as to place

before me every patch of paint, every sketch and scrap, that this room

contains."

Nick complied in great good humour. He turned out his boxes and drawers,

shovelled forth the contents of bulging portfolios, mounted on chairs to

unhook old canvases that had been severely "skied." He was modest and

docile and patient and amused, above all he was quite thrilled--thrilled

with the idea of eliciting a note of appreciation so late in the day. It

was the oddest thing how he at present in fact found himself imputing

value to his visitor--attributing to him, among attributions more

confused, the dignity of judgement, the authority of knowledge. Nash was

an ambiguous character but an excellent touchstone. The two said very

little for a while, and they had almost half an hour's silence, during

which, after our young man had hastily improvised an exhibition, there

was only a puffing of cigarettes. Gabriel walked about, looking at this

and that, taking up rough studies and laying them down, asking a

question of fact, fishing with his umbrella, on the floor, amid a pile

of unarranged sketches. Nick accepted jocosely the attitude of suspense,

but there was even more of it in his heart than in his face. So few

people had seen his young work--almost no one who really counted. He had

been ashamed of it, never showing it to bring on a conclusion, since a

conclusion was precisely what he feared. He whistled now while he let

his companion take time. He rubbed old panels with his sleeve and dabbed

wet sponges on surfaces that had sunk. It was a long time since he had

felt so gay, strange as such an assertion sounds in regard to a young

man whose bridal-day had at his urgent solicitation lately been fixed.

He had stayed in town to be alone with his imagination, and suddenly,

paradoxically, the sense of that result had arrived with poor Nash.

"Nicholas Dormer," this personage remarked at last, "for grossness of

immorality I think I've never seen your equal."

"That sounds so well," Nick returned, "that I hesitate to risk spoiling

it by wishing it explained."

"Don't you recognise in \_any\_ degree the grand idea of duty?"

"If I don't grasp it with a certain firmness I'm a deadly failure, for I

was quite brought up on it," Nick said.

"Then you're indeed the wretchedest failure I know. Life is ugly, after

all."

"Do I gather that you yourself recognise obligations of the order you

allude to?"

"Do you 'gather'?" Nash stared. "Why, aren't they the very flame of my

faith, the burden of my song?"

"My dear fellow, duty is doing, and I've inferred that you think rather

poorly of doing--that it spoils one's style."

"Doing wrong, assuredly."

"But what do you call right? What's your canon of certainty there?" Nick

asked.

"The conscience that's in us--that charming, conversible, infinite

thing, the intensest thing we know. But you must treat the oracle

civilly if you wish to make it speak. You mustn't stride into the temple

in muddy jack-boots and with your hat on your head, as the Puritan

troopers tramped into the dear old abbeys. One must do one's best to

find out the right, and your criminality appears to be that you've not

taken the commonest trouble."

"I hadn't you to ask," smiled Nick. "But duty strikes me as doing

something in particular. If you're too afraid it may be the wrong thing

you may let everything go."

"Being is doing, and if doing is duty being is duty. Do you follow?"

"At a very great distance."

"To be what one \_may\_ be, really and efficaciously," Nash went on, "to

feel it and understand it, to accept it, adopt it, embrace it--that's

conduct, that's life."

"And suppose one's a brute or an ass, where's the efficacy?"

"In one's very want of intelligence. In such cases one's out of it--the

question doesn't exist; one simply becomes a part of the duty of others.

The brute, the ass," Nick's visitor developed, "neither feels nor

understands, nor accepts nor adopts. Those fine processes in themselves

classify us. They educate, they exalt, they preserve; so that to profit

by them we must be as perceptive as we can. We must recognise our

particular form, the instrument that each of us--each of us who carries

anything--carries in his being. Mastering this instrument, learning to

play it in perfection--that's what I call duty, what I call conduct,

what I call success."

Nick listened with friendly attention and the air of general assent was

in his face as he said: "Every one has it then, this individual pipe?"

"'Every one,' my dear fellow, is too much to say, for the world's full

of the crudest \_remplissage\_. The book of life's padded, ah but

padded--a deplorable want of editing! I speak of every one who's any

one. Of course there are pipes and pipes--little quavering flutes for

the concerted movements and big \_cornets-Ã -piston\_ for the great solos."

"I see, I see. And what might your instrument be?"

Nash hesitated not a moment; his answer was radiantly there. "To speak

to people just as I'm speaking to you. To prevent for instance a great

wrong being done."

"A great wrong--?"

"Yes--to the human race. I talk--I talk; I say the things other people

don't, the things they can't the things they won't," Gabriel went on

with his inimitable candour.

"If it's a question of mastery and perfection you certainly have them,"

his companion replied.

"And you haven't, alas; that's the pity of it, that's the scandal.

That's the wrong I want to set right before it becomes too public a

shame. If I called you just now grossly immoral it's on account of the

spectacle you present--a spectacle to be hidden from the eye of

ingenuous youth: that of a man neglecting his own fiddle to blunder away

on that of one of his fellows. We can't afford such mistakes, we can't

tolerate such licence."

"You think then I \_have\_ a fiddle?"--and our young man, in spite of

himself, attached to the question a quaver of suspense finer, doubtless,

than any that had ever passed his lips.

"A regular Stradivarius! All these things you've shown me are remarkably

interesting. You've a talent of a wonderfully pure strain."

"I say--I say--I say!" Nick exclaimed, hovering there with his hands in

his pockets and a blush on his lighted face, while he repeated with a

change of accent Nash's exclamation of half an hour before.

"I like it, your talent; I measure it, I appreciate it, I insist upon

it," that critic went on between the whiffs of his cigarette. "I have to

be awfully wise and good to do so, but fortunately I am. In such a case

that's my duty. I shall make you my business for a while. Therefore," he

added piously; "don't say I'm unconscious of the moral law."

"A Stradivarius?" said Nick interrogatively and with his eyes wide open.

The thought in his mind was of how different this seemed from his having

gone to Griffin.

XXIV

His counsellor had plenty of further opportunity to develop this and

other figurative remarks, for he not only spent several of the middle

hours of the day at the studio, but came back in the evening--the pair

had dined together at a little foreign pothouse in Soho, revealed to

Nick on this occasion--and discussed the great question far into the

night. The great question was whether, on the showing of those examples

of his ability with which the scene of their discourse was now densely

bestrewn, Nick Dormer would be justified in "really going in" for the

practice of pictorial art. This may strike many readers of his history

as a limited and even trivial inquiry, with little of the heroic or the

romantic in it; but it was none the less carried to the finest point by

our impassioned young men. Nick suspected Nash of exaggerating his

encouragement in order to play a malign trick on the political world at

whose expense it was his fond fancy to divert himself--without indeed

making that organisation perceptibly totter--and reminded him that his

present accusation of immorality was strangely inconsistent with the

wanton hope expressed by him in Paris, the hope that the Liberal

candidate at Harsh would be returned. Nash replied, first, "Oh I hadn't

been in this place then!" but he defended himself later and more

effectually by saying that it was not of Nick's having got elected he

complained: it was of his visible hesitancy to throw up his seat. Nick

begged that he wouldn't mention this, and his gallantry failed to render

him incapable of saying: "The fact is I haven't the nerve for it." They

talked then for a while of what he \_could\_ do, not of what he couldn't;

of the mysteries and miracles of reproduction and representation; of the

strong, sane joys of the artistic life. Nick made afresh, with more

fulness, his great confession, that his private ideal of happiness was

the life of a great painter of portraits. He uttered his thought on that

head so copiously and lucidly that Nash's own abundance was stilled and

he listened almost as if he had been listening to something

new--difficult as it was to conceive a point of view for such a matter

with which he was unacquainted.

"There it is," said Nick at last--"there's the naked, preposterous

truth: that if I were to do exactly as I liked I should spend my years

reproducing the more or less vacuous countenances of my fellow-mortals.

I should find peace and pleasure and wisdom and worth, I should find

fascination and a measure of success in it--out of the din and the dust

and the scramble, the world of party labels, party cries, party bargains

and party treacheries: of humbuggery, hypocrisy and cant. The cleanness

and quietness of it, the independent effort to do something, to leave

something which shall give joy to man long after the howling has died

away to the last ghost of an echo--such a vision solicits me in the

watches of night with an almost irresistible force."

As he dropped these remarks he lolled on a big divan with one of his

long legs folded up, while his visitor stopped in front of him after

moving about the room vaguely and softly, almost on tiptoe, so as not to

interrupt him. "You speak," Nash said, "with the special and dreadful

eloquence that rises to a man's lips when he has practically, whatever

his theory may be, renounced the right and dropped hideously into the

wrong. Then his regret for the right, a certain exquisite appreciation

of it, puts on an accent I know well how to recognise."

Nick looked up at him a moment. "You've hit it if you mean by that that

I haven't resigned my seat and that I don't intend to."

"I thought you took it only to give it up. Don't you remember our talk

in Paris?"

"I like to be a part of the spectacle that amuses you," Nick returned,

"but I could scarcely have taken so much trouble as that for it."

"Isn't it then an absurd comedy, the life you lead?"

"Comedy or tragedy--I don't know which; whatever it is I appear to be

capable of it to please two or three people."

"Then you \_can\_ take trouble?" said Nash.

"Yes, for the woman I'm to marry."

"Oh you're to marry?"

"That's what has come on since we met in Paris," Nick explained, "and it

makes just the difference."

"Ah my poor friend," smiled Gabriel, much arrested, "no wonder you've an

eloquence, an accent!"

"It's a pity I have them in the wrong place. I'm expected to have them

in the House of Commons."

"You will when you make your farewell speech there--to announce that you

chuck it up. And may I venture to ask who's to be your wife?" the

visitor pursued.

"Mrs. Dallow has kindly consented to accept that yoke. I think you saw

her in Paris."

"Ah yes: you spoke of her to me, and I remember asking you even then if

you were in love with her."

"I wasn't then," said Nick.

Nash had a grave pause. "And are you now?"

"Oh dear, yes."

"That would be better--if it wasn't worse."

"Nothing could be better," Nick declared. "It's the best thing that can

happen to me."

"Well," his friend continued, "you must let me very respectfully

approach this lady. You must let me bring her round."

"Bring her round to what?"

"To everything. Talk her over."

"Talk her under!" Nick laughed--but making his joke a little as to gain

time. He remembered the effect this adviser had produced on Julia--an

effect that scantly ministered to the idea of another meeting. Julia had

had no occasion to allude again to Nick's imperturbable friend; he had

passed out of her life at once and for ever; but there flickered up a

quick memory of the contempt he had led her to express, together with a

sense of how odd she would think it her intended should have thrown over

two pleasant visits to cultivate such company.

"Over to a proper pride in what you may do," Nash returned--"what you

may do above all if she'll help you."

"I scarcely see how she can help me," said Nick with an air of thinking.

"She's extremely handsome as I remember her. You could do great things

with \_her\_."

"Ah, there's the rub," Nick went on. "I wanted her to sit for me this

week, but she wouldn't hear of it."

"\_Elle a bien tort\_. You should attack some fine strong type. Is Mrs.

Dallow in London?" Nash inquired.

"For what do you take her? She's paying visits."

"Then I've a model for you."

"Then \_you\_ have--?" Nick stared. "What has that to do with Mrs.

Dallow's being away?"

"Doesn't it give you more time?"

"Oh the time flies!" sighed Nick with a spontaneity that made his

companion again laugh out--a demonstration in which for a moment he

himself rather ruefully joined.

"Does she like you to paint?" that personage asked with one of his

candid intonations.

"So she says."

"Well, do something fine to show her."

"I'd rather show it to you," Nick confessed.

"My dear fellow, I see it from here--if you do your duty. Do you

remember the Tragic Muse?" Nash added for explanation.

"The Tragic Muse?"

"That girl in Paris, whom we heard at the old actress's and afterwards

met at the charming entertainment given by your cousin--isn't he?--the

secretary of embassy."

"Oh Peter's girl! Of course I remember her."

"Don't call her Peter's; call her rather mine," Nash said with easy

rectification. "I invented her. I introduced her. I revealed her."

"I thought you on the contrary ridiculed and repudiated her."

"As a fine, handsome young woman surely not--I seem to myself to have

been all the while rendering her services. I said I disliked tea-party

ranters, and so I do; but if my estimate of her powers was below the

mark she has more than punished me."

"What has she done?" Nick asked.

"She has become interesting, as I suppose you know."

"How should I know?"

"Well, you must see her, you must paint her," Nash returned. "She tells

me something was said about it that day at Madame CarrÃ©'s."

"Oh I remember--said by Peter."

"Then it will please Mr. Sherringham--you'll be glad to do that. I

suppose you know all he has done for Miriam?" Gabriel pursued.

"Not a bit, I know nothing about Peter's affairs," Nick said, "unless it

be in general that he goes in for mountebanks and mimes and that it

occurs to me I've heard one of my sisters mention--the rumour had come

to her--that he has been backing Miss Rooth."

"Miss Rooth delights to talk of his kindness; she's charming when she

speaks of it. It's to his good offices that she owes her appearance

here."

"Here?" Nick's interest rose. "Is she in London?"

"\_D'oÃ¹ tombez-vous\_? I thought you people read the papers."

"What should I read, when I sit--sometimes--through the stuff they put

into them?"

"Of course I see that--that your engagement at your own variety-show,

with its interminable 'turns,' keeps you from going to the others. Learn

then," said Gabriel Nash, "that you've a great competitor and that

you're distinctly not, much as you may suppose it, \_the\_ rising

comedian. The Tragic Muse is the great modern personage. Haven't you

heard people speak of her, haven't you been taken to see her?"

Nick bethought himself. "I daresay I've heard of her, but with a good

many other things on my mind I had forgotten it."

"Certainly I can imagine what has been on your mind. She remembers you

at any rate; she repays neglect with sympathy. She wants," said Nash,

"to come and see you."

"'See' me?" It was all for Nick now a wonder.

"To be seen by you--it comes to the same thing. She's really worth

seeing; you must let me bring her; you'll find her very suggestive. That

idea that you should paint her--she appears to consider it a sort of

bargain."

"A bargain?" Our young man entered, as he believed, into the humour of

the thing. "What will she give me?"

"A splendid model. She \_is\_ splendid."

"Oh then bring her," said Nick.

XXV

Nash brought her, the great modern personage, as he had described her,

the very next day, and it took his friend no long time to test his

assurance that Miriam Rooth was now splendid. She had made an impression

on him ten months before, but it had haunted him only a day, soon

overlaid as it had been with other images. Yet after Nash had talked of

her a while he recalled her better; some of her attitudes, some of her

looks and tones began to hover before him. He was charmed in advance

with the notion of painting her. When she stood there in fact, however,

it seemed to him he had remembered her wrong; the brave, free, rather

grand creature who instantly filled his studio with such an unexampled

presence had so shaken off her clumsiness, the rudeness and crudeness

that had made him pity her, a whole provincial and "second-rate" side.

Miss Rooth was light and bright and direct to-day--direct without being

stiff and bright without being garish. To Nick's perhaps inadequately

sophisticated mind the model, the actress were figures of a vulgar

setting; but it would have been impossible to show that taint less than

this extremely natural yet extremely distinguished aspirant to

distinction. She was more natural even than Gabriel Nash--"nature" was

still Nick's formula for his amusing old friend--and beside her he

appeared almost commonplace.

Nash recognised her superiority with a frankness honourable to both of

them--testifying in this manner to his sense that they were all three

serious beings, worthy to deal with fine realities. She attracted crowds

to her theatre, but to his appreciation of such a fact as that,

important doubtless in its way, there were the limits he had already

expressed. What he now felt bound in all integrity to register was his

perception that she had, in general and quite apart from the question of

the box-office, a remarkable, a very remarkable, artistic nature. He

allowed that she had surprised him here; knowing of her in other days

mainly that she was hungry to adopt an overrated profession he had not

imputed to her the normal measure of intelligence. Now he saw--he had

had some talks with her--that she was capable almost of a violent play

of mind; so much so that he was sorry for the embarrassment it would be

to her. Nick could imagine the discomfort of having anything in the

nature of a mind to arrange for in such conditions. "She's a woman of

the best intentions, really of the best," Nash explained kindly and

lucidly, almost paternally, "and the quite rare head you can see for

yourself."

Miriam, smiling as she sat on an old Venetian chair, held aloft, with

the noblest effect, that quarter of her person to which this patronage

was extended, remarking to her host that, strange as it might appear,

she had got quite to like poor Mr. Nash: she could make him go about

with her--it was a relief to her mother.

"When I take him she has perfect peace," the girl said; "then she can

stay at home and see the interviewers. She delights in that and I hate

it, so our friend here is a great comfort. Of course a \_femme de

thÃ©Ã¢tre\_ is supposed to be able to go out alone, but there's a kind of

'smartness,' an added \_chic\_, in having some one. People think he's my

'companion '; I'm sure they fancy I pay him. I'd pay him, if he'd take

it--and perhaps he will yet!--rather than give him up, for it doesn't

matter that he's not a lady. He \_is\_ one in tact and sympathy, as you

see. And base as he thinks the sort of thing I do he can't keep away

from the theatre. When you're celebrated people will look at you who

could never before find out for themselves why they should."

"When you're celebrated you grow handsomer; at least that's what has

happened to you, though you were pretty too of old," Gabriel placidly

argued. "I go to the theatre to look at your head; it gives me the

greatest pleasure. I take up anything of that sort as soon as I find it.

One never knows how long it may last."

"Are you attributing that uncertainty to my appearance?" Miriam

beautifully asked.

"Dear no, to my own pleasure, the first precious bloom of it," Nash went

on. "Dormer at least, let me tell you in justice to him, hasn't waited

till you were celebrated to want to see you again--he stands there

open-eyed--for the simple reason that he hadn't the least idea of your

renown. I had to announce it to him."

"Haven't you seen me act?" Miriam put, without reproach, to her host.

"I'll go to-night," he handsomely declared.

"You have your terrible House, haven't you? What do they call it--the

demands of public life?" Miriam continued: in answer to which Gabriel

explained that he had the demands of private life as well, inasmuch as

he was in love--he was on the point of being married. She listened to

this with participation; then she said: "Ah then do bring your--what do

they call her in English? I'm always afraid of saying something

improper--your \_future\_. I'll send you a box, under the circumstances;

you'll like that better." She added that if he were to paint her he

would have to see her often on the stage, wouldn't he? to profit by the

\_optique de la scÃ¨ne\_--what did they call \_that\_ in English?--studying

her and fixing his impression. But before he had time to meet this

proposition she asked him if it disgusted him to hear her speak like

that, as if she were always posing and thinking about herself, living

only to be looked at, thrusting forward her person. She already often

got sick of doing so, but \_Ã  la guerre comme Ã  la guerre\_.

"That's the fine artistic nature, you see--a sort of divine disgust

breaking out in her," Nash expounded.

"If you want to paint me 'at all at all' of course. I'm struck with the

way I'm taking that for granted," the girl decently continued. "When Mr.

Nash spoke of it to me I jumped at the idea. I remembered our meeting in

Paris and the kind things you said to me. But no doubt one oughtn't to

jump at ideas when they represent serious sacrifices on the part of

others."

"Doesn't she speak well?" Nash demanded of Nick. "Oh she'll go far!"

"It's a great privilege to me to paint you: what title in the world have

I to pretend to such a model?" Nick replied to Miriam. "The sacrifice is

yours--a sacrifice of time and good nature and credulity. You come, in

your bright beauty and your genius, to this shabby place where I've

nothing worth speaking of to show, not a guarantee to offer you; and I

wonder what I've done to deserve such a gift of the gods."

"Doesn't \_he\_ speak well?"--and Nash appealed with radiance to their

companion.

She took no notice of him, only repeating to Nick that she hadn't

forgotten his friendly attitude in Paris; and when he answered that he

surely had done very little she broke out, first resting her eyes on

him with a deep, reasonable smile and then springing up quickly; "Ah

well, if I must justify myself I liked you!"

"Fancy my appearing to challenge you!" laughed Nick in deprecation. "To

see you again is to want tremendously to try something. But you must

have an infinite patience, because I'm an awful duffer."

She looked round the walls. "I see what you've done--\_bien des choses\_."

"She understands--she understands," Gabriel dropped. And he added to

their visitor: "Imagine, when he might do something, his choosing a life

of shams! At bottom he's like you--a wonderful artistic nature."

"I'll have patience," said the girl, smiling at Nick.

"Then, my children, I leave you--the peace of the Lord be with you."

With which words Nash took his departure.

The others chose a position for the young woman's sitting after she had

placed herself in many different attitudes and different lights; but an

hour had elapsed before Nick got to work--began, on a large canvas, to

"knock her in," as he called it. He was hindered even by the fine

element of agitation, the emotion of finding himself, out of a clear

sky, confronted with such a subject and launched in such a task. What

could the situation be but incongruous just after he had formally

renounced all manner of "art"?--the renunciation taking effect not a bit

the less from the whim he had all consciously treated himself to \_as\_ a

whim (the last he should ever descend to!) the freak of a fortnight's

relapse into a fingering of old sketches for the purpose, as he might

have said, of burning them up, of clearing out his studio and

terminating his lease. There were both embarrassment and inspiration in

the strange chance of snatching back for an hour a relinquished joy: the

jump with which he found he could still rise to such an occasion took

away his breath a little, at the same time that the idea--the idea of

what one might make of such material--touched him with an irresistible

wand. On the spot, to his inner vision, Miriam became a rich result,

drawing a hundred formative forces out of their troubled sleep, defying

him where he privately felt strongest and imposing herself triumphantly

in her own strength. He had the good fortune, without striking matches,

to see her, as a subject, in a vivid light, and his quick attempt was as

exciting as a sudden gallop--he might have been astride, in a boundless

field, of a runaway horse.

She was in her way so fine that he could only think how to "do" her:

that hard calculation soon flattened out the consciousness, lively in

him at first, that she was a beautiful woman who had sought him out of

his retirement. At the end of their first sitting her having done so

appeared the most natural thing in the world: he had a perfect right to

entertain her there--explanations and complications were engulfed in the

productive mood. The business of "knocking her in" held up a lamp to her

beauty, showed him how much there was of it and that she was infinitely

interesting. He didn't want to fall in love with her--that \_would\_ be a

sell, he said to himself--and she promptly became much too interesting

for it. Nick might have reflected, for simplification's sake, as his

cousin Peter had done, but with more validity, that he was engaged with

Miss Rooth in an undertaking which didn't in the least refer to

themselves, that they were working together seriously and that decent

work quite gainsaid sensibility--the humbugging sorts alone had to help

themselves out with it. But after her first sitting--she came, poor

girl, but twice--the need of such exorcisms passed from his spirit: he

had so thoroughly, so practically taken her up. As to whether his

visitor had the same bright and still sense of co-operation to a

definite end, the sense of the distinctively technical nature of the

answer to every question to which the occasion might give birth, that

mystery would be lighted only were it open to us to regard this young

lady through some other medium than the mind of her friends. We have

chosen, as it happens, for some of the great advantages it carries with

it, the indirect vision; and it fails as yet to tell us--what Nick of

course wondered about before he ceased to care, as indeed he intimated

to her--why a budding celebrity should have dreamed of there being

something for her in so blighted a spot. She should have gone to one of

the regular people, the great people: they would have welcomed her with

open arms. When Nick asked her if some of the R.A.'s hadn't expressed a

wish for a crack at her she replied: "Oh dear no, only the tiresome

photographers; and fancy \_them\_ in the future. If mamma could only do

\_that\_ for me!" And she added with the charming fellowship for which she

was conspicuous at these hours: "You know I don't think any one yet has

been quite so much struck with me as you."

"Not even Peter Sherringham?" her host jested while he stepped back to

judge of the effect of a line.

"Oh Mr. Sherringham's different. You're an artist."

"For pity's sake don't say that!" he cried. "And as regards \_your\_ art I

thought Peter knew more than any one."

"Ah you're severe," said Miriam.

"Severe--?"

"Because that's what the poor dear thinks. But he does know a lot--he

has been a providence to me."

"Then why hasn't he come over to see you act?"

She had a pause. "How do you know he hasn't come?"

"Because I take for granted he'd have called on me if he had."

"Does he like you very much?" the girl asked.

"I don't know. I like \_him\_."

"He's a gentleman--\_pour cela\_," she said.

"Oh yes, for that!" Nick went on absently, labouring hard.

"But he's afraid of me--afraid to see me."

"Doesn't he think you good enough?"

"On the contrary--he believes I shall carry him away and he's in a

terror of my doing it."

"He ought to like that," said Nick with conscious folly.

"That's what I mean when I say he's not an artist. However, he declares

he does like it, only it appears to be not the right thing for him. Oh

the right thing--he's ravenous for that. But it's not for me to blame

him, since I am too. He's coming some night, however. Then," she added

almost grimly, "he shall have a dose."

"Poor Peter!" Nick returned with a compassion none the less real because

it was mirthful: the girl's tone was so expressive of easy unscrupulous

power.

"He's such a curious mixture," she luxuriously went on; "sometimes I

quite lose patience with him. It isn't exactly trying to serve both God

and Mammon, but it's muddling up the stage and the world. The world be

hanged! The stage, or anything of that sort--I mean one's artistic

conscience, one's true faith--comes first."

"Brava, brava! you do me good," Nick murmured, still amused, beguiled,

and at work. "But it's very kind of you, when I was in this absurd state

of ignorance, to impute to me the honour of having been more struck with

you than any one else," he continued after a moment.

"Yes, I confess I don't quite see--when the shops were full of my

photographs."

"Oh I'm so poor--I don't go into shops," he explained.

"Are you very poor?"

"I live on alms."

"And don't they pay you--the government, the ministry?"

"Dear young lady, for what?--for shutting myself up with beautiful

women?"

"Ah you've others then?" she extravagantly groaned.

"They're not so kind as you, I confess."

"I'll buy it from you--what you're doing: I'll pay you well when it's

done," said the girl. "I've got money now. I make it, you know--a good

lot of it. It's too delightful after scraping and starving. Try it and

you'll see. Give up the base, bad world."

"But isn't it supposed to be the base, bad world that pays?"

"Precisely; make it pay without mercy--knock it silly, squeeze it dry.

That's what it's meant for--to pay for art. Ah if it wasn't for that!

I'll bring you a quantity of photographs to-morrow--you must let me come

back to-morrow: it's so amusing to have them, by the hundred, all for

nothing, to give away. That's what takes mamma most: she can't get over

it. That's luxury and glory; even at Castle Nugent they didn't do that.

People used to sketch me, but not so much as mamma \_veut bien le dire\_;

and in all my life I never had but one poor little carte-de-visite, when

I was sixteen, in a plaid frock, with the banks of a river, at three

francs the dozen."

XXVI

It was success, the member for Harsh felt, that had made her finer--the

full possession of her talent and the sense of the recognition of it.

There was an intimation in her presence (if he had given his mind to it)

that for him too the same cause would produce the same effect--that is

would show him how being launched in the practice of an art makes

strange and prompt revelations. Nick felt clumsy beside a person who

manifestly, now, had such an extraordinary familiarity with the esthetic

point of view. He remembered too the clumsiness that had been in his

visitor--something silly and shabby, pert rather than proper, and of

quite another value than her actual smartness, as London people would

call it, her well-appointedness and her evident command of more than one

manner. Handsome as she had been the year before, she had suggested

sordid lodgings, bread and butter, heavy tragedy and tears; and if then

she was an ill-dressed girl with thick hair who wanted to be an actress,

she was already in these few weeks a performer who could even produce an

impression of not performing. She showed what a light hand she could

have, forbore to startle and looked as well, for unprofessional life, as

Julia: which was only the perfection of her professional character.

This function came out much in her talk, for there were many little

bursts of confidence as well as many familiar pauses as she sat there;

and she was ready to tell Nick the whole history of her \_dÃ©but\_--the

chance that had suddenly turned up and that she had caught, with a

fierce leap, as it passed. He missed some of the details in his

attention to his own task, and some of them he failed to understand,

attached as they were to the name of Mr. Basil Dashwood, which he heard

for the first time. It was through Mr. Dashwood's extraordinary

exertions that a hearing--a morning performance at a London theatre--had

been obtained for her. That had been the great step, for it had led to

the putting on at night of the play, at the same theatre, in place of a

wretched thing they were trying (it was no use) to keep on its feet, and

to her engagement for the principal part. She had made a hit in it--she

couldn't pretend not to know that; but she was already tired of it,

there were so many other things she wanted to do; and when she thought

it would probably run a month or two more she fell to cursing the odious

conditions of artistic production in such an age. The play was a more or

less idiotised version of a new French piece, a thing that had taken in

Paris at a third-rate theatre and was now proving itself in London good

enough for houses mainly made up of ten-shilling stalls. It was Dashwood

who had said it would go if they could get the rights and a fellow to

make some changes: he had discovered it at a nasty little place she had

never been to, over the Seine. They had got the rights, and the fellow

who had made the changes was practically Dashwood himself; there was

another man in London, Mr. Gushmore--Miriam didn't know if Nick had

heard of him (Nick hadn't) who had done some of it. It had been awfully

chopped down, to a mere bone, with the meat all gone; but that was what

people in London seemed to like. They were very innocent--thousands of

little dogs amusing themselves with a bone. At any rate she had made

something, she had made a figure, of the woman--a dreadful stick, with

what Dashwood had muddled her into; and Miriam added in the complacency

of her young expansion: "Oh give me fifty words any time and the ghost

of a situation, and I'll set you up somebody. Besides, I mustn't abuse

poor Yolande--she has saved us," she said.

"'Yolande'--?"

"Our ridiculous play. That's the name of the impossible woman. She has

put bread into our mouths and she's a loaf on the shelf for the future.

The rights are mine."

"You're lucky to have them," said Nick a little vaguely, troubled about

his sitter's nose, which was somehow Jewish without the convex arch.

"Indeed I am. He gave them to me. Wasn't it charming?"

"'He' gave them--Mr. Dashwood?"

"Dear me, no--where should poor Dashwood have got them? He hasn't a

penny in the world. Besides, if he had got them he'd have kept them. I

mean your blessed cousin."

"I see--they're a present from Peter."

"Like many other things. Isn't he a dear? If it hadn't been for him the

shelf would have remained bare. He bought the play for this country and

America for four hundred pounds, and on the chance: fancy! There was no

rush for it, and how could he tell? And then he gracefully pressed it on

me. So I've my little capital. Isn't he a duck? You've nice cousins."

Nick assented to the proposition, only inserting an amendment to the

effect that surely Peter had nice cousins too, and making, as he went on

with his work, a tacit, preoccupied reflexion or two; such as that it

must be pleasant to render little services like that to youth, beauty

and genius--he rather wondered how Peter could afford them--and that,

"duck" as he was, Miss Rooth's benefactor was rather taken for granted.

\_Sic vos non vobis\_ softly sounded in his brain. This community of

interests, or at least of relations, quickened the flight of time, so

that he was still fresh when the sitting came to an end. It was settled

Miriam should come back on the morrow, to enable her artist to make the

most of the few days of the parliamentary recess; and just before she

left him she asked:

"Then you \_will\_ come to-night?"

"Without fail. I hate to lose an hour of you."

"Then I'll place you. It will be my affair."

"You're very kind"--he quite rose to it. "Isn't it a simple matter for

me to take a stall? This week I suppose they're to be had."

"I'll send you a box," said Miriam. "You shall do it well. There are

plenty now."

"Why should I be lost, all alone, in the grandeur of a box?"

"Can't you bring your friend?"

"My friend?"

"The lady you're engaged to."

"Unfortunately she's out of town."

Miriam looked at him in the grand manner. "Does she leave you alone like

that?"

"She thought I should like it--I should be more free to paint. You see I

am."

"Yes, perhaps it's good for \_me\_. Have you got her portrait?" Miriam

asked.

"She doesn't like me to paint her."

"Really? Perhaps then she won't like you to paint me."

"That's why I want to be quick!" laughed Nick.

"Before she knows it?"

"Shell know it to-morrow. I shall write to her."

The girl faced him again portentously. "I see you're afraid of her." But

she added: "Mention my name; they'll give you the box at the office."

Whether or no Nick were afraid of Mrs. Dallow he still waved away this

bounty, protesting that he would rather take a stall according to his

wont and pay for it. Which led his guest to declare with a sudden

flicker of passion that if he didn't do as she wished she would never

sit to him again.

"Ah then you have me," he had to reply. "Only I \_don't\_ see why you

should give me so many things."

"What in the world have I given you?"

"Why an idea." And Nick looked at his picture rather ruefully. "I don't

mean to say though that I haven't let it fall and smashed it."

"Ah an idea--that \_is\_ a great thing for people in our line. But you'll

see me much better from the box and I'll send you Gabriel Nash." She got

into the hansom her host's servant had fetched for her, and as Nick

turned back into his studio after watching her drive away he laughed at

the conception that they were in the same "line."

He did share, in the event, his box at the theatre with Nash, who talked

during the \_entr'actes\_ not in the least about the performance or the

performer, but about the possible greatness of the art of the

portraitist--its reach, its range, its fascination, the magnificent

examples it had left us in the past: windows open into history, into

psychology, things that were among the most precious possessions of the

human race. He insisted above all on the interest, the importance of

this great peculiarity of it, that unlike most other forms it was a

revelation of two realities, the man whom it was the artist's conscious

effort to reveal and the man--the interpreter--expressed in the very

quality and temper of that effort. It offered a double vision, the

strongest dose of life that art could give, the strongest dose of art

that life could give. Nick Dormer had already become aware of having two

states of mind when listening to this philosopher; one in which he

laughed, doubted, sometimes even reprobated, failed to follow or accept,

and another in which his old friend seemed to take the words out of his

mouth, to utter for him, better and more completely, the very things he

was on the point of saying. Gabriel's saying them at such moments

appeared to make them true, to set them up in the world, and to-night he

said a good many, especially as to the happiness of cultivating one's

own garden, growing there, in stillness and freedom, certain strong,

pure flowers that would bloom for ever, bloom long after the rank weeds

of the hour were withered and blown away.

It was to keep Miriam Rooth in his eye for his current work that Nick

had come to the play; and she dwelt there all the evening, being

constantly on the stage. He was so occupied in watching her face--for he

now saw pretty clearly what he should attempt to make of it--that he was

conscious only in a secondary degree of the story she illustrated, and

had in regard to her acting a surprised sense that she was

extraordinarily quiet. He remembered her loudness, her violence in

Paris, at Peter Sherringham's, her wild wails, the first time, at Madame

CarrÃ©'s; compared with which her present manner was eminently temperate

and modern. Nick Dormer was not critical at the theatre; he believed

what he saw and had a pleasant sense of the inevitable; therefore he

wouldn't have guessed what Gabriel Nash had to tell him--that for this

young woman, with her tragic cast and her peculiar attributes, her

present performance, full of actuality, of light fine indications and at

moments of pointed touches of comedy, was a rare \_tour de force\_. It

went on altogether in a register he hadn't supposed her to possess and

in which, as he said, she didn't touch her capital, doing it all with

her wonderful little savings. It conveyed to him that she was capable of

almost anything.

In one of the intervals they went round to see her; but for Nick this

purpose was partly defeated by the extravagant transports, as they

struck him, of Mrs. Rooth, whom they found sitting with her daughter and

who attacked him with a hundred questions about his dear mother and his

charming sisters. She had volumes to say about the day in Paris when

they had shown her the kindness she should never forget. She abounded

also in admiration of the portrait he had so cleverly begun, declaring

she was so eager to see it, however little he might as yet have

accomplished, that she should do herself the honour to wait upon him in

the morning when Miriam came to sit.

"I'm acting for you to-night," the girl more effectively said before he

returned to his place.

"No, that's exactly what you're not doing," Nash interposed with one of

his happy sagacities. "You've stopped acting, you've reduced it to the

least that will do, you simply are--you're just the visible image, the

picture on the wall. It keeps you wonderfully in focus. I've never seen

you so beautiful."

Miriam stared at this; then it could be seen that she coloured. "What a

luxury in life to have everything explained! He's the great explainer,"

she herself explained to Nick.

He shook hands with her for good-night. "Well then, we must give him

lots to do."

She came to his studio in the morning, but unaccompanied by her mother,

in allusion to whom she simply said, "Mamma wished to come but I

wouldn't let her." They proceeded promptly to business. The girl

divested herself of her hat and coat, taking the position already

determined. After they had worked more than an hour with much less talk

than the day before, Nick being extremely absorbed and Miriam wearing in

silence an air of noble compunction for the burden imposed on him, at

the end of this period of patience, pervaded by a holy calm, our young

lady suddenly got up and exclaimed, "I say, I must see it!"--with which,

quickly, she stepped down from her place and came round to the canvas.

She had at Nick's request not looked at his work the day before. He fell

back, glad to rest, and put down his palette and brushes.

"\_Ah bien, c'est tapÃ©\_!" she cried as she stood before the easel. Nick

was pleased with her ejaculation, he was even pleased with what he had

done; he had had a long, happy spurt and felt excited and sanctioned.

Miriam, retreating also a little, sank into a high-backed, old-fashioned

chair that stood two or three yards from the picture and reclined in it,

her head on one side, looking at the rough resemblance. She made a

remark or two about it, to which Nick replied, standing behind her and

after a moment leaning on the top of the chair. He was away from his

work and his eyes searched it with a shy fondness of hope. They rose,

however, as he presently became conscious that the door of the large

room opposite him had opened without making a sound and that some one

stood upon the threshold. The person on the threshold was Julia Dallow.

As soon as he was aware Nick wished he had posted a letter to her the

night before. He had written only that morning. There was nevertheless

genuine joy in the words with which he bounded toward her--"Ah my dear

Julia, what a jolly surprise!"--for her unannounced descent spoke to

him above all of an irresistible desire to see him again sooner than

they had arranged. She had taken a step forward, but she had done no

more, stopping short at the sight of the strange woman, so divested of

visiting-gear that she looked half-undressed, who lounged familiarly in

the middle of the room and over whom Nick had been still more familiarly

hanging. Julia's eyes rested on this embodied unexpectedness, and as

they did so she grew pale--so pale that Nick, observing it,

instinctively looked back to see what Miriam had done to produce such an

effect. She had done nothing at all, which was precisely what was

embarrassing; she only stared at the intruder, motionless and superb.

She seemed somehow in easy possession of the place, and even at that

instant Nick noted how handsome she looked; so that he said to himself

inaudibly, in some deeper depth of consciousness, "How I should like to

paint her that way!" Mrs. Dallow's eyes moved for a single moment to her

friend's; then they turned away--away from Miriam, ranging over the

room.

"I've got a sitter, but you mustn't mind that; we're taking a rest. I'm

delighted to see you"--he was all cordiality. He closed the door of the

studio behind her; his servant was still at the outer door, which was

open and through which he saw Julia's carriage drawn up. This made her

advance a little further, but still she said nothing; she dropped no

answer even when Nick went on with a sense of awkwardness: "When did you

come back? I hope nothing has gone wrong. You come at a very interesting

moment," he continued, aware as soon as he had spoken of something in

his words that might have made her laugh. She was far from laughing,

however; she only managed to look neither at him nor at Miriam and to

say, after a little, when he had repeated his question about her

return:

"I came back this morning--I came straight here."

"And nothing's wrong, I hope?"

"Oh no--everything's all right," she returned very quickly and without

expression. She vouchsafed no explanation of her premature descent and

took no notice of the seat Nick offered her; neither did she appear to

hear him when he begged her not to look yet at the work on the easel--it

was in such a dreadful state. He was conscious, as he phrased it, that

this request gave to Miriam's position, directly in front of his canvas,

an air of privilege which her neglect to recognise in any way Mrs.

Dallow's entrance or her importance did nothing to correct. But that

mattered less if the appeal failed to reach Julia's intelligence, as he

judged, seeing presently how deeply she was agitated. Nothing mattered

in face of the sense of danger taking possession of him after she had

been in the room a few moments. He wanted to say, "What's the

difficulty? Has anything happened?" but he felt how little she would

like him to utter words so intimate in presence of the person she had

been rudely startled to find between them. He pronounced Miriam's name

to her and her own to Miriam, but Julia's recognition of the ceremony

was so slight as to be scarcely perceptible. Miriam had the air of

waiting for something more before she herself made a sign; and as

nothing more came she continued to say nothing and not to budge. Nick

added a remark to the effect that Julia would remember to have had the

pleasure of meeting her the year before--in Paris, that day at old

Peter's; to which Mrs. Dallow made answer, "Ah yes," without any

qualification, while she looked down at some rather rusty studies on

panels ranged along the floor and resting against the base of the wall.

Her discomposure was a clear pain to herself; she had had a shock of

extreme violence, and Nick saw that as Miriam showed no symptom of

offering to give up her sitting her stay would be of the briefest. He

wished that young woman would do something--say she would go, get up,

move about; as it was she had the appearance of watching from her point

of vantage the other's upset. He made a series of inquiries about

Julia's doings in the country, to two or three of which she gave answers

monosyllabic and scarcely comprehensible, only turning her eyes round

and round the room as in search of something she couldn't find--of an

escape, of something that was not Miriam. At last she said--it was at

the end of a very few minutes:

"I didn't come to stay--when you're so busy. I only looked in to see if

you were here. Good-bye."

"It's charming of you to have come. I'm so glad you've seen for yourself

how well I'm occupied," Nick replied, not unconscious of how red he was.

This made Mrs. Dallow look at him while Miriam considered them both.

Julia's eyes had a strange light he had never seen before--a flash of

fear by which he was himself frightened. "Of course I'll see you later,"

he added in awkward, in really misplaced gaiety while she reached the

door, which she opened herself, getting out with no further attention to

Miriam. "I wrote to you this morning--you've missed my letter," he

repeated behind her, having already given her this information. The door

of the studio was very near that of the house, but before she had

reached the street the visitors' bell was set ringing. The passage was

narrow and she kept in advance of Nick, anticipating his motion to open

the street-door. The bell was tinkling still when, by the action of her

own hand, a gentleman on the step stood revealed.

"Ah my dear, don't go!" Nick heard pronounced in quick, soft dissuasion

and in the now familiar accents of Gabriel Nash. The rectification

followed more quickly still, if that were a rectification which so

little improved the matter: "I beg a thousand pardons--I thought you

were Miriam."

Gabriel gave way and Julia the more sharply pursued her retreat. Her

carriage, a victoria with a pair of precious heated horses, had taken a

turn up the street, but the coachman had already seen his mistress and

was rapidly coming back. He drew near; not so fast, however, but that

Gabriel Nash had time to accompany Mrs. Dallow to the edge of the

pavement with an apology for the freedom into which he had blundered.

Nick was at her other hand, waiting to put her into the carriage and

freshly disconcerted by the encounter with Nash, who somehow, as he

stood making Julia an explanation that she didn't listen to, looked less

eminent than usual, though not more conscious of difficulties. Our young

man coloured deeper and watched the footman spring down as the victoria

drove up; he heard Nash say something about the honour of having met

Mrs. Dallow in Paris. Nick wanted him to go into the house; he damned

inwardly his lack of delicacy. He desired a word with Julia alone--as

much alone as the two annoying servants would allow. But Nash was not

too much discouraged to say: "You came for a glimpse of the great model?

Doesn't she sit? That's what I wanted too, this morning--just a look,

for a blessing on the day. Ah but you, madam--"

Julia had sprung into her corner while he was still speaking and had

flashed out to the coachman a "Home!" which of itself set the horses in

motion. The carriage went a few yards, but while Gabriel, with an

undiscouraged bow, turned away, Nick Dormer, his hand on the edge of

the hood, moved with it.

"You don't like it, but I'll explain," he tried to say for its occupant

alone.

"Explain what?" she asked, still very pale and grave, but in a voice

that showed nothing. She was thinking of the servants--she could think

of them even then.

"Oh it's all right. I'll come in at five," Nick returned, gallantly

jocular, while she was whirled away.

Gabriel had gone into the studio and Nick found him standing in

admiration before Miriam, who had resumed the position in which she was

sitting. "Lord, she's good to-day! Isn't she good to-day?" he broke out,

seizing their host by the arm to give him a particular view. Miriam

looked indeed still handsomer than before, and she had taken up her

attitude again with a splendid, sphinx-like air of being capable of

keeping it for ever. Nick said nothing, but went back to work with a

tingle of confusion, which began to act after he had resumed his palette

as a sharp, a delightful stimulus. Miriam spoke never a word, but she

was doubly grand, and for more than an hour, till Nick, exhausted,

declared he must stop, the industrious silence was broken only by the

desultory discourse of their friend.

XXVII

Nick went to Great Stanhope Street at five o'clock and learned, rather

to his surprise, that Julia was not at home--to his surprise because he

had told her he would come at that hour, and he attributed to her, with

a certain simplicity, an eager state of mind in regard to his

explanation. Apparently she was not eager; the eagerness was his own--he

was eager to explain. He recognised, not without a certain consciousness

of magnanimity in doing so, that there had been some reason for her

quick withdrawal from his studio or at any rate for her extreme

discomposure there. He had a few days before put in a plea for a snatch

of worship in that sanctuary and she had accepted and approved it; but

the worship, when the curtain happened to blow back, showed for that of

a magnificent young woman, an actress with disordered hair, who wore in

a singular degree the appearance of a person settled for many hours. The

explanation was easy: it dwelt in the simple truth that when one was

painting, even very badly and only for a moment, one had to have models.

Nick was impatient to give it with frank, affectionate lips and a full,

pleasant admission that it was natural Julia should have been startled;

and he was the more impatient that, though he would not in the least

have expected her to like finding a strange woman intimately installed

with him, she had disliked it even more than would have seemed probable

or natural. That was because, not having heard from him about the

matter, the impression was for the moment irresistible with her that a

trick had been played her. But three minutes with him alone would make

the difference.

They would indeed have a considerable difference to make, Nick

reflected, as minutes much more numerous elapsed without bringing Mrs.

Dallow home. For he had said to the butler that he would come in and

wait--though it was odd she should not have left a message for him: she

would doubtless return from one moment to the other. He had of course

full licence to wait anywhere he preferred; and he was ushered into

Julia's particular sitting-room and supplied with tea and the evening

papers. After a quarter of an hour, however, he gave little attention to

these beguilements, thanks to his feeling still more acutely that since

she definitely knew he was coming she might have taken the trouble to be

at home. He walked up and down and looked out of the window, took up her

books and dropped them again, and then, as half an hour had elapsed,

became aware he was really sore. What could she be about when, with

London a thankless void, she was of course not paying visits? A footman

came in to attend to the fire, whereupon Nick questioned him as to the

manner in which she was possibly engaged. The man disclosed the fact

that his mistress had gone out but a quarter of an hour before Nick's

arrival, and, as if appreciating the opportunity for a little decorous

conversation, gave him still more information than he invited. From this

it appeared that, as Nick knew, or could surmise, she had the evening

before, from the country, wired for the victoria to meet her in the

morning at Paddington and then gone straight from the station to the

studio, while her maid, with her luggage, proceeded in a cab to Great

Stanhope Street. On leaving the studio, however, she had not come

directly home; she had chosen this unusual season for an hour's drive in

the Park. She had finally re-entered her house, but had remained

upstairs all day, seeing no one and not coming down to luncheon. At four

o'clock she had ordered the brougham for four forty-five, and had got

into it punctually, saying, "To the Park!" as she did so.

Nick, after the footman had left him, made what he could of Julia's

sudden passion for the banks of the Serpentine, forsaken and foggy now,

inasmuch as the afternoon had come on grey and the light was waning. She

usually hated the Park and hated a closed carriage. He had a gruesome

vision of her, shrunken into a corner of her brougham and veiled as if

in consequence of tears, revolving round the solitude of the Drive. She

had of course been deeply displeased and was not herself; the motion of

the carriage soothed her, had an effect on her nerves. Nick remembered

that in the morning, at his door, she had appeared to be going home; so

she had plunged into the drearier resort on second thoughts and as she

noted herself near it. He lingered another half-hour, walked up and down

the room many times and thought of many things. Had she misunderstood

him when he said he would come at five? Couldn't she be sure, even if

she had, that he would come early rather than late, and mightn't she

have left a message for him on the chance? Going out that way a few

minutes before he was to come had even a little the air of a thing done

on purpose to offend him; as if she had been so displeased that she had

taken the nearest occasion of giving him a sign she meant to break with

him. But were these the things Julia did and was that the way she did

them--his fine, proud, delicate, generous Julia?

When six o'clock came poor Nick felt distinctly resentful; but he stayed

ten minutes longer on the possibility that she would in the morning have

understood him to mention that hour. The April dusk began to gather and

the unsociability of her behaviour, especially if she were still

rumbling round the Park, became absurd. Anecdotes came back to him,

vaguely remembered, heard he couldn't have said when or where, of poor

artists for whom life had been rendered difficult by wives who wouldn't

allow them the use of the living female model and who made scenes if

they encountered on the staircase such sources of inspiration. These

ladies struck him as vulgar and odious persons, with whom it seemed

grotesque that Julia should have anything in common. Of course she was

not his wife yet, and of course if she were he should have washed his

hands of every form of activity requiring the services of the sitter;

but even these qualifications left him with a power to wince at the way

in which the woman he was so sure he loved just escaped ranking herself

with the Philistines.

At a quarter past six he rang a bell and told the servant who answered

it that he was going and that Mrs. Dallow was to be informed as soon as

she came in that he had expected to find her and had waited an hour and

a quarter. But he had just reached the doorstep of departure when her

brougham, emerging from the evening mist, stopped in front of the house.

Nick stood there hanging back till she got out, allowing the servants

only to help her. She saw him--she was less veiled than his mental

vision of her; but this didn't prevent her pausing to give an order to

the coachman, a matter apparently requiring some discussion. When she

came to the door her visitor remarked that he had been waiting an

eternity; to which she replied that he must make no grievance of

that--she was too unwell to do him justice. He immediately professed

regret and sympathy, adding, however, that in that case she had much

better not have gone out. She made no answer to this--there were three

servants in the hall who looked as if they might understand at least

what was not said to them; only when he followed her in she asked if his

idea had been to stay longer.

"Certainly, if you're not too ill to see me."

"Come in then," Julia said, turning back after having gone to the foot

of the stairs.

This struck him immediately as a further restriction of his visit: she

wouldn't readmit him to the drawing-room or to her boudoir; she would

receive him in the impersonal apartment downstairs where she saw people

on business. What did she want to do to him? He was prepared by this

time for a scene of jealousy, since he was sure he had learned to read

her character justly in feeling that if she had the appearance of a cold

woman a forked flame in her was liable on occasion to break out. She was

very still, but from time to time she would fire off a pistol. As soon

as he had closed the door she said without sitting down:

"I daresay you saw I didn't like that at all."

"My having a sitter in that professional way? I was very much annoyed at

it myself," Nick answered.

"Why were \_you\_ annoyed? She's very handsome," Mrs. Dallow perversely

said.

"I didn't know you had looked at her!" Nick laughed.

Julia had a pause. "Was I very rude?"

"Oh it was all right; it was only awkward for me because you didn't

know," he replied.

"I did know; that's why I came."

"How do you mean? My letter couldn't have reached you."

"I don't know anything about your letter," Julia cast about her for a

chair and then seated herself on the edge of a sofa with her eyes on the

floor.

"She sat to me yesterday; she was there all the morning; but I didn't

write to tell you. I went at her with great energy and, absurd as it may

seem to you, found myself very tired afterwards. Besides, in the evening

I went to see her act."

"Does she act?" asked Mrs. Dallow.

"She's an actress: it's her profession. Don't you remember her that day

at Peter's in Paris? She's already a celebrity; she has great talent;

she's engaged at a theatre here and is making a sensation. As I tell

you, I saw her last night."

"You needn't tell me," Julia returned, looking up at him with a face of

which the intense, the tragic sadness startled him.

He had been standing before her, but at this he instantly sat down

close, taking her passive hand. "I want to, please; otherwise it must

seem so odd to you. I knew she was coming when I wrote to you the day

before yesterday. But I didn't tell you then because I didn't know how

it would turn out, and I didn't want to exult in advance over a poor

little attempt that might come to nothing. Moreover, it was no use

speaking of the matter at all unless I told you exactly how it had come

about," Nick went on, explaining kindly and copiously. "It was the

result of a visit unexpectedly paid me by Gabriel Nash."

"That man--the man who spoke to me?" Her memory of him shuddered into

life.

"He did what he thought would please you, but I daresay it didn't. You

met him in Paris and didn't like him; so I judged best to hold my tongue

about him."

"Do \_you\_ like him?"

"Very much."

"Great heaven!" Julia ejaculated, almost under her breath.

"The reason I was annoyed was because, somehow, when you came in, I

suddenly had the air of having got out of those visits and shut myself

up in town to do something that I had kept from you. And I have been

very unhappy till I could explain."

"You don't explain--you can't explain," Mrs Dallow declared, turning on

her companion eyes which, in spite of her studied stillness, expressed

deep excitement. "I knew it--I knew everything; that's why I came."

"It was a sort of second-sight--what they call a brainwave," Nick

smiled.

"I felt uneasy, I felt a kind of call; it came suddenly, yesterday. It

was irresistible; nothing could have kept me this morning."

"That's very serious, but it's still more delightful. You mustn't go

away again," said Nick. "We must stick together--forever and ever."

He put his arm round her, but she detached herself as soon as she felt

its pressure. She rose quickly, moving away, while, mystified, he sat

looking up at her as she had looked a few moments before at him. "I've

thought it all over; I've been thinking of it all day," she began.

"That's why I didn't come in."

"Don't think of it too much; it isn't worth it."

"You like it more than anything else. You do--you can't deny it," she

went on.

"My dear child, what are you talking about?" Nick asked, gently...

"That's what you like--doing what you were this morning; with women

lolling, with their things off, to be painted, and people like that

man."

Nick slowly got up, hesitating. "My dear Julia, apart from the surprise

this morning, do you object to the living model?"

"Not a bit, for you."

"What's the inconvenience then, since in my studio they're only for me?"

"You love it, you revel in it; that's what you want--the only thing you

want!" Julia broke out.

"To have models, lolling undressed women, do you mean?"

"That's what I felt, what I knew," she went on--"what came over me and

haunted me yesterday so that I couldn't throw it off. It seemed to me

that if I could see it with my eyes and have the perfect proof I should

feel better, I should be quiet. And now I \_am\_ quiet--after a struggle

of some hours, I confess. I \_have\_ seen; the whole thing's before me and

I'm satisfied."

"I'm not--to me neither the whole thing nor half of it is before me.

What exactly are you talking about?" Nick demanded.

"About what you were doing this morning. That's your innermost

preference, that's your secret passion."

"A feeble scratch at something serious? Yes, it was almost serious," he

said. "But it was an accident, this morning and yesterday: I got on less

wretchedly than I intended."

"I'm sure you've immense talent," Julia returned with a dreariness that

was almost droll.

"No, no, I might have had. I've plucked it up: it's too late for it to

flower. My dear Julia, I'm perfectly incompetent and perfectly

resigned."

"Yes, you looked so this morning, when you hung over her. Oh she'll

bring back your talent!"

"She's an obliging and even an intelligent creature, and I've no doubt

she would if she could," Nick conceded. "But I've received from you all

the help any woman's destined to give me. No one can do for me again

what you've done."

"I shouldn't try it again; I acted in ignorance. Oh I've thought it all

out!" Julia declared. And then with a strange face of anguish resting on

his own: "Before it's too late--before it's too late!"

"Too late for what?"

"For you to be free--for you to be free. And for me--for me to be free

too. You hate everything I like!" she flashed out. "Don't pretend, don't

pretend!" she went on as a sound of protest broke from him.

"I thought you so awfully \_wanted\_ me to paint," he gasped, flushed and

staring.

"I do--I do. That's why you must be free, why we must part?"

"Why we must part--?"

"Oh I've turned it well over. I've faced the hard truth. It wouldn't do

at all!" Julia rang out.

"I like the way you talk of it--as if it were a trimming for your

dress!" Nick retorted with bitterness. "Won't it do for you to be loved

and cherished as well as any woman in England?"

She turned away from him, closing her eyes as not to see something

dangerous. "You mustn't give anything up for me. I should feel it all

the while and I should hate it. I'm not afraid of the truth, but you

are."

"The truth, dear Julia? I only want to know it," Nick insisted. "It

seems to me in fact just what I've got hold of. When two persons are

united by the tenderest affection and are sane and generous and just, no

difficulties that occur in the union their life makes for them are

insurmountable, no problems are insoluble."

She appeared for a moment to reflect upon this: it was spoken in a tone

that might have touched her. Yet at the end of the moment, lifting her

eyes, she brought out: "I hate art, as you call it. I thought I did, I

knew I did; but till this morning I didn't know how much."

"Bless your dear soul, \_that\_ wasn't art," Nick pleaded. "The real thing

will be a thousand miles away from us; it will never come into the

house, \_soyez tranquille\_. It knows where to look in and where to flee

shrieking. Why then should you worry?"

"Because I want to understand, I want to know what I'm doing. You're an

artist: you are, you are!" Julia cried, accusing him passionately.

"My poor Julia, it isn't so easy as that, nor a character one can take

on from one day to the other. There are all sorts of things; one must be

caught young and put through the mill--one must see things as they are.

There are very few professions that goes with. There would be sacrifices

I never can make."

"Well then, there are sacrifices for both of us, and I can't make them

either. I daresay it's all right for you, but for me it would be a

terrible mistake. When I think I'm doing a certain thing I mustn't do

just the opposite," she kept on as for true lucidity. "There are things

I've thought of, the things I like best; and they're not what you mean.

It would be a great deception, and it's not the way I see my life, and

it would be misery if we don't understand."

He looked at her with eyes not lighted by her words. "If we don't

understand what?"

"That we're utterly different--that you're doing it all for \_me\_."

"And is that an objection to me--what I do for you?" he asked.

"You do too much. You're awfully good, you're generous, you're a dear,

oh yes--a dear. But that doesn't make me believe in it. I didn't at

bottom, from the first--that's why I made you wait, why I gave you your

freedom. Oh I've suspected you," Julia continued, "I had my ideas. It's

all right for you, but it won't do for me: I'm different altogether. Why

should it always be put upon me when I hate it? What have I done? I was

drenched with it before." These last words, as they broke forth, were

attended with a quick blush; so that Nick could as quickly discern in

them the uncalculated betrayal of an old irritation, an old shame

almost--her late husband's flat, inglorious taste for pretty things, his

indifference to every chance to play a public part. This had been the

humiliation of her youth, and it was indeed a perversity of fate that a

new alliance should contain for her even an oblique demand for the same

spirit of accommodation, impose on her the secret bitterness of the same

concessions. As Nick stood there before her, struggling sincerely with

the force that he now felt to be strong in her, the intense resolution

to break with him, a force matured in a few hours, he read a riddle that

hitherto had baffled him, saw a great mystery become simple. A personal

passion for him had all but thrown her into his arms (the sort of thing

that even a vain man--and Nick was not especially vain--might hesitate

to recognise the strength of); held in check at moments, with a strain

of the cord that he could still feel vibrate, by her deep, her rare

ambition, and arrested at the last only just in time to save her

calculations. His present glimpse of the immense extent of these

calculations didn't make him think her cold or poor; there was in fact a

positive strange heat in them and they struck him rather as grand and

high. The fact that she could drop him even while she longed for

him--drop him because it was now fixed in her mind that he wouldn't

after all serve her resolve to be associated, so far as a woman could,

with great affairs; that she could postpone, and postpone to an

uncertainty, the satisfaction of an aching tenderness and plan for the

long run--this exhibition of will and courage, of the larger scheme that

possessed her, commanded his admiration on the spot. He paid the heavy

price of the man of imagination; he was capable of far excursions of the

spirit, disloyalties to habit and even to faith, he was open to rare

communications. He ached, on his side, for the moment, to convince her

that he would achieve what he wouldn't, for the vision of his future she

had tried to entertain shone before him as a bribe and a challenge. It

struck him there was nothing he couldn't work for enough with her to be

so worked with by her. Presently he said:

"You want to be sure the man you marry will be prime minister of

England. But how can you be really sure with any one?"

"I can be really sure some men won't!" Julia returned.

"The only safe thing perhaps would be to-marry Mr. Macgeorge," he

suggested.

"Possibly not even him."

"You're a prime minister yourself," Nick made answer. "To hold fast to

you as I hold, to be determined to be of your party--isn't that

political enough, since you're the incarnation of politics?"

"Ah how you hate them!" she wailed again. "I saw that when I saw you

this morning. The whole place reeked of your aversion."

"My dear child, the greatest statesmen have had their distractions. What

do you make of my hereditary talent? That's a tremendous force."

"It wouldn't carry you far." Then she terribly added, "You must be a

great artist." He tossed his head at the involuntary contempt of this,

but she went on: "It's beautiful of you to want to give up anything, and

I like you for it. I shall always like you. We shall be friends, and I

shall always take an interest--!"

But he stopped her there, made a movement which interrupted her phrase,

and she suffered him to hold her hand as if she were not afraid of him

now. "It isn't only for you," he argued gently; "you're a great deal,

but you're not everything. Innumerable vows and pledges repose upon my

head. I'm inextricably committed and dedicated. I was brought up in the

temple like an infant Samuel; my father was a high-priest and I'm a

child of the Lord. And then the life itself--when \_you\_ speak of it I

feel stirred to my depths; it's like a herald's trumpet. Fight \_with\_

me, Julia--not against me! Be on my side and we shall do everything. It

is uplifting to be a great man before the people--to be loved by them,

to be followed by them. An artist isn't--never, never. Why \_should\_ he

be? Don't forget how clever I am."

"Oh if it wasn't for that!" she panted, pale with the effort to resist

his tone. Then she put it to him: "Do you pretend that if I were to die

to-morrow you'd stay in the House?"

"If you were to die? God knows! But you do singularly little justice to

my incentives," he pursued. "My political career's everything to my

mother."

This but made her say after a moment: "Are you afraid of your mother?"

"Yes, immensely; for she represents ever so many possibilities of

disappointment and distress. She represents all my father's as well as

all her own, and in them my father tragically lives again. On the other

hand I see him in bliss, as I see my mother, over our marriage and our

life of common aspirations--though of course that's not a consideration

that I can expect to have power with you."

She shook her head slowly, even smiling with her recovered calmness and

lucidity. "You'll never hold high office."

"But why not take me as I am?"

"Because I'm abominably keen about that sort of thing--I must recognise

my keenness. I must face the ugly truth. I've been through the worst;

it's all settled."

"The worst, I suppose, was when you found me this morning."

"Oh that was all right--for you."

"You're magnanimous, Julia; but evidently what's good enough for me

isn't good enough for you." Nick spoke with bitterness.

"I don't like you enough--that's the obstacle," she held herself in hand

to say.

"You did a year ago; you confessed to it."

"Well, a year ago was a year ago. Things are changed to-day."

"You're very fortunate--to be able to throw away a real devotion," Nick

returned.

She had her pocket-handkerchief in her hand, and at this she quickly

pressed it to her lips as to check an exclamation. Then for an instant

she appeared to be listening to some sound from outside. He interpreted

her movement as an honourable impulse to repress the "Do you mean the

devotion I was witness of this morning?" But immediately afterwards she

said something very different: "I thought I heard a ring. I've

telegraphed for Mrs. Gresham."

He wondered. "Why did you do that?"

"Oh I want her."

He walked to the window, where the curtains had not been drawn, and saw

in the dusk a cab at the door. When he turned back he went on: "Why

won't you trust me to make you like me, as you call it, better? If I

make you like me as well as I like you it will be about enough, I

think."

"Oh I like you enough for \_your\_ happiness. And I don't throw away a

devotion," Mrs. Dallow continued. "I shall be constantly kind to you. I

shall be beautiful to you."

"You'll make me lose a fortune," Nick after a moment said.

It brought a slight convulsion, instantly repressed, into her face. "Ah

you may have all the money you want!"

"I don't mean yours," he answered with plenty of expression of his own.

He had determined on the instant, since it might serve, to tell her what

he had never breathed to her before. "Mr. Carteret last year promised me

a pot of money on the day we should be man and wife. He has thoroughly

set his heart on it."

"I'm sorry to disappoint Mr. Carteret," said Julia. "I'll go and see

him. I'll make it all right," she went on. "Then your work, you know,

will bring you an income. The great men get a thousand just for a head."

"I'm only joking," Nick returned with sombre eyes that contradicted this

profession. "But what things you deserve I should do!"

"Do you mean striking likenesses?"

He watched her a moment. "You do hate it! Pushed to that point, it's

curious," he audibly mused.

"Do you mean you're joking about Mr. Carteret's promise?"

"No--the promise is real, but I don't seriously offer it as a reason."

"I shall go to Beauclere," Julia said. "You're an hour late," she added

in a different tone; for at that moment the door of the room was thrown

open and Mrs. Gresham, the butler pronouncing her name, ushered in.

"Ah don't impugn my punctuality--it's my character!" the useful lady

protested, putting a sixpence from the cabman into her purse. Nick went

off at this with a simplified farewell--went off foreseeing exactly what

he found the next day, that the useful lady would have received orders

not to budge from her hostess's side. He called on the morrow, late in

the afternoon, and Julia saw him liberally, in the spirit of her

assurance that she would be "beautiful" to him, that she had not thrown

away his devotion; but Mrs. Gresham remained, with whatever delicacies

of deprecation, a spectator of her liberality. Julia looked at him

kindly, but her companion was more benignant still; so that what Nick

did with his own eyes was not to appeal to her to see him a moment

alone, but to solicit, in the name of this luxury, the second occupant

of the drawing-room. Mrs. Gresham seemed to say, while Julia said so

little, "I understand, my poor friend, I know everything--she has told

me only \_her\_ side, but I'm so competent that I know yours too--and I

enter into the whole thing deeply. But it would be as much as my place

is worth to accommodate you." Still, she didn't go so far as to give him

an inkling of what he learned on the third day and what he had not gone

so far as to suspect--that the two ladies had made rapid arrangements

for a scheme of foreign travel. These arrangements had already been

carried out when, at the door of the house in Great Stanhope Street, the

announcement was made him that the subtle creatures had started that

morning for Paris.

XXVIII

They spent on their way to Florence several days in Paris, where Peter

Sherringham had as much free talk with his sister as it often befell one

member of their family to have with another. He enjoyed, that is, on two

different occasions, half an hour's gossip with her in her sitting-room

at the hotel. On one of these he took the liberty of asking her whether

or no, decidedly, she meant to marry Nick Dormer. Julia expressed to him

that she appreciated his curiosity, but that Nick and she were nothing

more than relations and good friends. "He tremendously wants it," Peter

none the less observed; to which she simply made answer, "Well then, he

may want!"

After this, for a while, they sat as silent as if the subject had been

quite threshed out between them. Peter felt no impulse to penetrate

further, for it was not a habit of the Sherringhams to talk with each

other of their love-affairs; and he was conscious of the particular

deterrent that he and Julia entertained in general such different

sentiments that they could never go far together in discussion. He liked

her and was sorry for her, thought her life lonely and wondered she

didn't make a "great" marriage. Moreover he pitied her for being without

the interests and consolations he himself had found substantial: those

of the intellectual, the studious order he considered these to be, not

knowing how much she supposed she reflected and studied and what an

education she had found in her political aspirations, viewed by him as

scarce more a personal part of her than the livery of her servants or

the jewels George Dallow's money had bought. Her relations with Nick

struck him as queer, but were fortunately none of his business. No

business of Julia's was sufficiently his to justify him in an attempt to

understand it. That there should have been a question of her marrying

Nick was the funny thing rather than that the question should have been

dropped. He liked his clever cousin very well as he was--enough for a

vague sense that he might be spoiled by alteration to a brother-in-law.

Moreover, though not perhaps distinctly conscious of this, Peter pressed

lightly on Julia's doings from a tacit understanding that in this case

she would let him off as easily. He couldn't have said exactly what it

was he judged it pertinent to be let off from: perhaps from irritating

inquiry as to whether he had given any more tea-parties for gross young

women connected with the theatre.

Peter's forbearance, however, brought him not quite all the security he

prefigured. After an interval he indeed went so far as to ask Julia if

Nick had been wanting in respect to her; but this was an appeal intended

for sympathy, not for other intervention. She answered: "Dear no--though

he's very provoking." Thus Peter guessed that they had had a quarrel in

which it didn't concern him to meddle: he added her epithet and her

flight from England together, and they made up to his perception one of

the little magnified embroilments which do duty for the real in

superficial lives. It was worse to provoke Julia than not, and Peter

thought Nick's doing so not particularly characteristic of his

versatility for good. He might wonder why she didn't marry the member

for Harsh if the subject had pressingly come up between them; but he

wondered still more why Nick didn't marry that gentleman's great backer.

Julia said nothing again, as if to give him a chance to address her some

challenge that would save her from gushing; but as his impulse appeared

to be to change the subject, and as he changed it only by silence, she

was reduced to resuming presently:

"I should have thought you'd have come over to see your friend the

actress."

"Which of my friends? I know so many actresses," Peter pleaded.

"The woman you inflicted on us in this place a year ago--the one who's

in London now."

"Oh Miriam Rooth? I should have liked to come over, but I've been tied

fast. Have you seen her there?"

"Yes, I've seen her."

"Do you like her?"

"Not at all."

"She has a lovely voice," Peter hazarded after a moment.

"I don't know anything about her voice--I haven't heard it."

"But she doesn't act in pantomime, does she?"

"I don't know anything about her acting. I saw her in private--at Nick

Dormer's studio."

"At Nick's--?" He was interested now.

"What was she doing there?"

"She was sprawling over the room and--rather insolently--staring at me."

If Mrs. Dallow had wished to "draw" her brother she must at this point

have suspected she succeeded, in spite of his care to divest his tone of

all emotion. "Why, does he know her so well? I didn't know."

"She's sitting to him for her portrait--at least she was then."

"Oh yes, I remember--I put him up to that. I'm greatly interested. Is

the portrait good?"

"I haven't the least idea--I didn't look at it. I daresay it's like,"

Julia threw off.

"But how in the world"--and Peter's interest grew franker--"does Nick

find time to paint?"

"I don't know. That horrid man brought her."

"Which horrid man?"--he spoke as if they had their choice.

"The one Nick thinks so clever--the vulgar little man who was at your

place that day and tried to talk to me. I remember he abused theatrical

people to me--as if I cared anything about them. But he has apparently

something to do with your girl."

"Oh I recollect him--I had a discussion with him," Peter patiently said.

"How could you? I must go and dress," his sister went on more

importantly.

"He \_was\_ clever, remarkably. Miss Rooth and her mother were old friends

of his, and he was the first person to speak of them to me."

"What a distinction! I thought him disgusting!" cried Julia, who was

pressed for time and who had now got up.

"Oh you're severe," said Peter, still bland; but when they separated she

had given him something to think of.

That Nick was painting a beautiful actress was no doubt in part at least

the reason why he was provoking and why his most intimate female friend

had come abroad. The fact didn't render him provoking to his kinsman:

Peter had on the contrary been quite sincere when he qualified it as

interesting. It became indeed on reflexion so interesting that it had

perhaps almost as much to do with Sherringham's now prompt rush over to

London as it had to do with Julia's coming away. Reflexion taught him

further that the matter was altogether a delicate one and suggested that

it was odd he should be mixed up with it in fact when, as Julia's own

affair, he had but wished to keep out of it. It might after all be his

affair a little as well--there was somehow a still more pointed

implication of that in his sister's saying to him the next day that she

wished immensely he would take a fancy to Biddy Dormer. She said more:

she said there had been a time when she believed he \_had\_ done

so--believed too that the poor child herself had believed the same.

Biddy was far away the nicest girl she knew--the dearest, sweetest,

cleverest, \_best\_, and one of the prettiest creatures in England, which

never spoiled anything. She would make as charming a wife as ever a man

had, suited to any position, however high, and--Julia didn't mind

mentioning it, since her brother would believe it whether she mentioned

it or no--was so predisposed in his favour that he would have no trouble

at all. In short she herself would see him through--she'd answer for it

that he'd have but to speak. Biddy's life at home was horrid; she was

very sorry for her--the child was worthy of a better fate. Peter

wondered what constituted the horridness of Biddy's life, and gathered

that it mainly arose from the fact of Julia's disliking Lady Agnes and

Grace and of her profiting comfortably by that freedom to do so which

was a fruit of her having given them a house she had perhaps not felt

the want of till they were in possession of it. He knew she had always

liked Biddy, but he asked himself--this was the rest of his wonder--why

she had taken to liking her so extraordinarily just now. He liked her

himself--he even liked to be talked to about her and could believe

everything Julia said: the only thing that had mystified him was her

motive for suddenly saying it. He had assured her he was perfectly

sensible of her goodness in so plotting out his future, but was also

sorry if he had put it into any one's head--most of all into the girl's

own--that he had ever looked at Biddy with a covetous eye. He wasn't in

the least sure she would make a good wife, but liked her quite too much

to wish to put any such mystery to the test. She was certainly not

offered them for cruel experiments. As it happened, really, he wasn't

thinking of marrying any one--he had ever so many grounds for neglecting

that. Of course one was never safe against accidents, but one could at

least take precautions, and he didn't mind telling her that there were

several he had taken.

"I don't know what you mean, but it seems to me quite the best

precaution would be to care for a charming, steady girl like Biddy. Then

you'd be quite in shelter, you'd know the worst that can happen to you,

and it wouldn't be bad." The objection he had made to this plea is not

important, especially as it was not quite candid; it need only be

mentioned that before the pair parted Julia said to him, still in

reference to their young friend: "Do go and see her and be nice to her;

she'll save you disappointments."

These last words reverberated for him--there was a shade of the

portentous in them and they seemed to proceed from a larger knowledge of

the subject than he himself as yet possessed. They were not absent from

his memory when, in the beginning of May, availing himself, to save

time, of the night-service, he crossed from Paris to London. He arrived

before the breakfast-hour and went to his sister's house in Great

Stanhope Street, where he always found quarters, were she in town or

not. When at home she welcomed him, and in her absence the relaxed

servants hailed him for the chance he gave them to recover their "form."

In either case his allowance of space was large and his independence

complete. He had obtained permission this year to take in scattered

snatches rather than as a single draught the quantum of holiday to which

he was entitled; and there was, moreover, a question of his being

transferred to another capital--in which event he believed he might

count on a month or two in England before proceeding to his new post.

He waited, after breakfast, but a very few minutes before jumping into a

hansom and rattling away to the north. A part of his waiting indeed

consisted of a fidgety walk up Bond Street, during which he looked at

his watch three or four times while he paused at shop windows for fear

of being a little early. In the cab, as he rolled along, after having

given an address--Balaklava Place, Saint John's Wood--the fear he might

be too early took curiously at moments the form of a fear that he should

be too late: a symbol of the inconsistencies of which his spirit at

present was full. Peter Sherringham was nervously formed, too nervously

for a diplomatist, and haunted with inclinations and indeed with designs

which contradicted each other. He wanted to be out of it and yet dreaded

not to be in it, and on this particular occasion the sense of exclusion

was an ache. At the same time he was not unconscious of the impulse to

stop his cab and make it turn round and drive due south. He saw himself

launched in the breezy fact while morally speaking he was hauled up on

the hot sand of the principle, and he could easily note how little these

two faces of the same idea had in common. However, as the consciousness

of going helped him to reflect, a principle was a poor affair if it

merely became a fact. Yet from the hour it did turn to action the action

\_had\_ to be the particular one in which he was engaged; so that he was

in the absurd position of thinking his conduct wiser for the reason

that it was directly opposed to his intentions.

He had kept away from London ever since Miriam Rooth came over;

resisting curiosity, sympathy, importunate haunting passion, and

considering that his resistance, founded, to be salutary, on a general

scheme of life, was the greatest success he had yet achieved. He was

deeply occupied with plucking up the feeling that attached him to her,

and he had already, by various little ingenuities, loosened some of its

roots. He had suffered her to make her first appearance on any stage

without the comfort of his voice or the applause of his hand; saying to

himself that the man who could do the more could do the less and that

such an act of fortitude was a proof he should keep straight. It was not

exactly keeping straight to run over to London three months later and,

the hour he arrived, scramble off to Balaklava Place; but after all he

pretended only to be human and aimed in behaviour only at the heroic,

never at the monstrous. The highest heroism was obviously three parts

tact. He had not written to his young friend that he was coming to

England and would call upon her at eleven o'clock in the morning,

because it was his secret pride that he had ceased to correspond with

her. Sherringham took his prudence where he could find it, and in doing

so was rather like a drunkard who should flatter himself he had forsworn

liquor since he didn't touch lemonade.

It is a sign of how far he was drawn in different directions at once

that when, on reaching Balaklava Place and alighting at the door of a

small detached villa of the type of the "retreat," he learned that Miss

Rooth had but a quarter of an hour before quitted the spot with her

mother--they had gone to the theatre, to rehearsal, said the maid who

answered the bell he had set tinkling behind a stuccoed garden-wall:

when at the end of his pilgrimage he was greeted by a disappointment he

suddenly found himself relieved and for the moment even saved.

Providence was after all taking care of him and he submitted to

Providence. He would still be watched over doubtless, even should he

follow the two ladies to the theatre, send in his card and obtain

admission to the scene of their experiments. All his keen taste for

these matters flamed up again, and he wondered what the girl was

studying, was rehearsing, what she was to do next. He got back into his

hansom and drove down the Edgware Road. By the time he reached the

Marble Arch he had changed his mind again, had determined to let Miriam

alone for that day. It would be over at eight in the evening--he hardly

played fair--and then he should consider himself free. Instead of

pursuing his friends he directed himself upon a shop in Bond Street to

take a place for their performance. On first coming out he had tried, at

one of those establishments strangely denominated "libraries," to get a

stall, but the people to whom he applied were unable to accommodate

him--they hadn't a single seat left. His actual attempt, at another

library, was more successful: there was no question of obtaining a

stall, but he might by a miracle still have a box. There was a

wantonness in paying for a box at a play on which he had already

expended four hundred pounds; but while he was mentally measuring this

abyss an idea came into his head which flushed the extravagance with the

hue of persuasion.

Peter came out of the shop with the voucher for the box in his pocket,

turned into Piccadilly, noted that the day was growing warm and fine,

felt glad that this time he had no other strict business than to leave a

card or two on official people, and asked himself where he should go if

he didn't go after Miriam. Then it was that he found himself attaching

a lively desire and imputing a high importance to the possible view of

Nick Dormer's portrait of her. He wondered which would be the natural

place at that hour of the day to look for the artist. The House of

Commons was perhaps the nearest one, but Nick, inconsequent and

incalculable though so many of his steps, probably didn't keep the

picture there; and, moreover, it was not generally characteristic of him

to be in the natural place. The end of Peter's debate was that he again

entered a hansom and drove to Calcutta Gardens. The hour was early for

calling, but cousins with whom one's intercourse was mainly a

conversational scuffle would accept it as a practical illustration of

that method. And if Julia wanted him to be nice to Biddy--which was

exactly, even if with a different view, what he wanted himself--how

could he better testify than by a visit to Lady Agnes--he would have in

decency to go to see her some time--at a friendly, fraternising hour

when they would all be likely to be at home?

Unfortunately, as it turned out, they were none of them at home, so that

he had to fall back on neutrality and the butler, who was, however, more

luckily, an old friend. Her ladyship and Miss Dormer were absent from

town, paying a visit; and Mr. Dormer was also away, or was on the point

of going away for the day. Miss Bridget was in London, but was out;

Peter's informant mentioned with earnest vagueness that he thought she

had gone somewhere to take a lesson. On Peter's asking what sort of

lesson he meant he replied: "Oh I think--a--the a-sculpture, you know,

sir." Peter knew, but Biddy's lesson in "a-sculpture"--it sounded on the

butler's lips like a fashionable new art--struck him a little as a

mockery of the helpful spirit in which he had come to look her up. The

man had an air of participating respectfully in his disappointment and,

to make up for it, added that he might perhaps find Mr. Dormer at his

other address. He had gone out early and had directed his servant to

come to Rosedale Road in an hour or two with a portmanteau: he was going

down to Beauclere in the course of the day, Mr. Carteret being

ill--perhaps Mr. Sherringham didn't know it. Perhaps too Mr. Sherringham

would catch him in Rosedale Road before he took his train--he was to

have been busy there for an hour. This was worth trying, and Peter

immediately drove to Rosedale Road; where in answer to his ring the door

was opened to him by Biddy Dormer.

XXIX

When that young woman saw him her cheek exhibited the prettiest,

pleased, surprised red he had ever observed there, though far from

unacquainted with its living tides, and she stood smiling at him with

the outer dazzle in her eyes, still making him no motion to enter. She

only said, "Oh Peter!" and then, "I'm all alone."

"So much the better, dear Biddy. Is that any reason I shouldn't come

in?"

"Dear no--do come in. You've just missed Nick; he has gone to the

country--half an hour ago." She had on a large apron and in her hand

carried a small stick, besmeared, as his quick eye saw, with

modelling-clay. She dropped the door and fled back before him into the

studio, where, when he followed her, she was in the act of flinging a

damp cloth over a rough head, in clay, which, in the middle of the room,

was supported on a high wooden stand. The effort to hide what she had

been doing before he caught a glimpse of it made her redder still and

led to her smiling more, to her laughing with a confusion of shyness and

gladness that charmed him. She rubbed her hands on her apron, she pulled

it off, she looked delightfully awkward, not meeting Peter's eye, and

she said: "I'm just scraping here a little--you mustn't mind me. What I

do is awful, you know. \_Please\_, Peter, don't look, I've been coming

here lately to make my little mess, because mamma doesn't particularly

like it at home. I've had a lesson or two from a lady who exhibits, but

you wouldn't suppose it to see what I do. Nick's so kind; he lets me

come here; he uses the studio so little; I do what I want, or rather

what I can. What a pity he's gone--he'd have been so glad. I'm really

alone--I hope you don't mind. Peter, \_please\_ don't look."

Peter was not bent on looking; his eyes had occupation enough in Biddy's

own agreeable aspect, which was full of a rare element of domestication

and responsibility. Though she had, stretching her bravery, taken

possession of her brother's quarters, she struck her visitor as more at

home and more herself than he had ever seen her. It was the first time

she had been, to his notice, so separate from her mother and sister. She

seemed to know this herself and to be a little frightened by it--just

enough to make him wish to be reassuring. At the same time Peter also,

on this occasion, found himself touched with diffidence, especially

after he had gone back and closed the door and settled down to a regular

call; for he became acutely conscious of what Julia had said to him in

Paris and was unable to rid himself of the suspicion that it had been

said with Biddy's knowledge. It wasn't that he supposed his sister had

told the girl she meant to do what she could to make him propose to her:

that would have been cruel to her--if she liked him enough to

consent--in Julia's perfect uncertainty. But Biddy participated by

imagination, by divination, by a clever girl's secret, tremulous

instincts, in her good friend's views about her, and this probability

constituted for Sherringham a sort of embarrassing publicity. He had

impressions, possibly gross and unjust, in regard to the way women move

constantly together amid such considerations and subtly

intercommunicate, when they don't still more subtly dissemble, the hopes

or fears of which persons of the opposite sex form the subject.

Therefore poor Biddy would know that if she failed to strike him in the

right light it wouldn't be for want of an attention definitely called to

her claims. She would have been tacitly rejected, virtually condemned.

He couldn't without an impulse of fatuity endeavour to make up for this

to her by consoling kindness; he was aware that if any one knew it a man

would be ridiculous who should take so much as that for granted. But no

one would know it: he oddly enough in this calculation of security left

Biddy herself out. It didn't occur to him that she might have a secret,

small irony to spare for his ingenious and magnanimous effort to show

her how much he liked her in reparation to her for not liking her more.

This high charity coloured at any rate the whole of his visit to

Rosedale Road, the whole of the pleasant, prolonged chat that kept him

there more than an hour. He begged the girl to go on with her work, not

to let him interrupt it; and she obliged him at last, taking the cloth

off the lump of clay and giving him a chance to be delightful by

guessing that the shapeless mass was intended, or would be intended

after a while, for Nick. He saw she was more comfortable when she began

again to smooth it and scrape it with her little stick, to manipulate it

with an ineffectual air of knowing how; for this gave her something to

do, relieved her nervousness and permitted her to turn away from him

when she talked.

He walked about the room and sat down; got up and looked at Nick's

things; watched her at moments in silence--which made her always say in

a minute that he was not to pass judgement or she could do nothing;

observed how her position before her high stand, her lifted arms, her

turns of the head, considering her work this way and that, all helped

her to be pretty. She repeated again and again that it was an immense

pity about Nick, till he was obliged to say he didn't care a straw for

Nick and was perfectly content with the company he found. This was not

the sort of tone he thought it right, given the conditions, to take; but

then even the circumstances didn't require him to pretend he liked her

less than he did. After all she was his cousin; she would cease to be so

if she should become his wife; but one advantage of her not entering

into that relation was precisely that she would remain his cousin. It

was very pleasant to find a young, bright, slim, rose-coloured kinswoman

all ready to recognise consanguinity when one came back from cousinless

foreign lands. Peter talked about family matters; he didn't know, in his

exile, where no one took an interest in them, what a fund of latent

curiosity about them he treasured. It drew him on to gossip accordingly

and to feel how he had with Biddy indefeasible properties in

common--ever so many things as to which they'd always understand each

other \_Ã  demi-mot\_. He smoked a cigarette because she begged him--people

always smoked in studios and it made her feel so much more an artist.

She apologised for the badness of her work on the ground that Nick was

so busy he could scarcely ever give her a sitting; so that she had to do

the head from photographs and occasional glimpses. They had hoped to be

able to put in an hour that morning, but news had suddenly come that Mr.

Carteret was worse, and Nick had hurried down to Beauclere. Mr. Carteret

was very ill, poor old dear, and Nick and he were immense friends. Nick

had always been charming to him. Peter and Biddy took the concerns of

the houses of Dormer and Sherringham in order, and the young man felt

after a little as if they were as wise as a French \_conseil de famille\_

and settling what was best for every one. He heard all about Lady Agnes;

he showed an interest in the detail of her existence that he had not

supposed himself to possess, though indeed Biddy threw out intimations

which excited his curiosity, presenting her mother in a light that might

call on his sympathy.

"I don't think she has been very happy or very pleased of late," the

girl said. "I think she has had some disappointments, poor dear mamma;

and Grace has made her go out of town for three or four days in the hope

of a little change. They've gone down to see an old lady, Lady St.

Dunstans, who never comes to London now and who, you know--she's

tremendously old--was papa's godmother. It's not very lively for Grace,

but Grace is such a dear she'll do anything for mamma. Mamma will go

anywhere, no matter at what risk of discomfort, to see people she can

talk with about papa."

Biddy added in reply to a further question that what her mother was

disappointed about was--well, themselves, her children and all their

affairs; and she explained that Lady Agnes wanted all kinds of things

for them that didn't come, that they didn't get or seem likely to get,

so that their life appeared altogether a failure. She wanted a great

deal, Biddy admitted; she really wanted everything, for she had thought

in her happier days that everything was to be hers. She loved them all

so much and was so proud too: she couldn't get over the thought of their

not being successful. Peter was unwilling to press at this point, for he

suspected one of the things Lady Agnes wanted; but Biddy relieved him a

little by describing her as eager above all that Grace should get

married.

"That's too unselfish of her," he pronounced, not caring at all for

Grace. "Cousin Agnes ought to keep her near her always, if Grace is so

obliging and devoted."

"Oh mamma would give up anything of that sort for our good; she wouldn't

sacrifice us that way!" Biddy protested. "Besides, I'm the one to stay

with mamma; not that I can manage and look after her and do everything

so well as Grace. But, you know, I \_want\_ to," said Biddy with a liquid

note in her voice--and giving her lump of clay a little stab for

mendacious emphasis.

"But doesn't your mother want the rest of you to get married--Percival

and Nick and you?" Peter asked.

"Oh she has given up Percy. I don't suppose she thinks it would do. Dear

Nick of course--that's just what she does want."

He had a pause. "And you, Biddy?"

"Oh I daresay. But that doesn't signify--I never shall."

Peter got up at this; the tone of it set him in motion and he took a

turn round the room. He threw off something cheap about her being too

proud; to which she replied that that was the only thing for a girl to

be to get on.

"What do you mean by getting on?"--and he stopped with his hands in his

pockets on the other side of the studio.

"I mean crying one's eyes out!" Biddy unexpectedly exclaimed; but she

drowned the effect of this pathetic paradox in a laugh of clear

irrelevance and in the quick declaration: "Of course it's about Nick

that she's really broken-hearted."

"What's the matter with Nick?" he went on with all his diplomacy.

"Oh Peter, what's the matter with Julia?" Biddy quavered softly back to

him, her eyes suddenly frank and mournful. "I daresay you know what we

all hoped, what we all supposed from what they told us. And now they

won't!" said the girl.

"Yes, Biddy, I know. I had the brightest prospect of becoming your

brother-in-law: wouldn't that have been it--or something like that? But

it's indeed visibly clouded. What's the matter with them? May I have

another cigarette?" Peter came back to the wide, cushioned bench where

he had previously lounged: this was the way they took up the subject he

wanted most to look into. "Don't they know how to love?" he speculated

as he seated himself again.

"It seems a kind of fatality!" Biddy sighed.

He said nothing for some moments, at the end of which he asked if his

companion were to be quite alone during her mother's absence. She

replied that this parent was very droll about that: would never leave

her alone and always thought something dreadful would happen to her. She

had therefore arranged that Florence Tressilian should come and stay in

Calcutta Gardens for the next few days--to look after her and see she

did no wrong. Peter inquired with fulness into Florence Tressilian's

identity: he greatly hoped that for the success of Lady Agnes's

precautions she wasn't a flighty young genius like Biddy. She was

described to him as tremendously nice and tremendously clever, but also

tremendously old and tremendously safe; with the addition that Biddy was

tremendously fond of her and that while she remained in Calcutta Gardens

they expected to enjoy themselves tremendously. She was to come that

afternoon before dinner.

"And are you to dine at home?" said Peter.

"Certainly; where else?"

"And just you two alone? Do you call that enjoying yourselves

tremendously?"

"It will do for me. No doubt I oughtn't in modesty to speak for poor

Florence."

"It isn't fair to her; you ought to invite some one to meet her."

"Do you mean you, Peter?" the girl asked, turning to him quickly and

with a look that vanished the instant he caught it.

"Try me. I'll come like a shot."

"That's kind," said Biddy, dropping her hands and now resting her eyes

on him gratefully. She remained in this position as if under a charm;

then she jerked herself back to her work with the remark: "Florence will

like that immensely."

"I'm delighted to please Florence--your description of her's so

attractive!" Sherringham laughed. And when his companion asked him if he

minded there not being a great feast, because when her mother went away

she allowed her a fixed amount for that sort of thing and, as he might

imagine, it wasn't millions--when Biddy, with the frankness of their

pleasant kinship, touched anxiously on this economic point

(illustrating, as Peter saw, the lucidity with which Lady Agnes had had

in her old age to learn to recognise the occasions when she could be

conveniently frugal) he answered that the shortest dinners were the

best, especially when one was going to the theatre. That was his case

to-night, and did Biddy think he might look to Miss Tressilian to go

with them? They'd have to dine early--he wanted not to miss a moment.

"The theatre--Miss Tressilian?" she stared, interrupted and in suspense

again.

"Would it incommode you very much to dine say at 7.15 and accept a place

in my box? The finger of Providence was in it when I took a box an hour

ago. I particularly like your being free to go--if you are free."

She began almost to rave with pleasure. "Dear Peter, how good you are!

They'll have it at any hour. Florence will be so glad."

"And has Florence seen Miss Rooth?"

"Miss Rooth?" the girl repeated, redder than before. He felt on the spot

that she had heard of the expenditure of his time and attention on that

young lady. It was as if she were conscious of how conscious he would

himself be in speaking of her, and there was a sweetness in her

allowance for him on that score. But Biddy was more confused for him

than he was for himself. He guessed in a moment how much she had thought

over what she had heard; this was indicated by her saying vaguely, "No,

no, I've not seen her." Then she knew she was answering a question he

hadn't asked her, and she went on: "We shall be too delighted. I saw

her--perhaps you remember--in your rooms in Paris. I thought her so

wonderful then! Every one's talking of her here. But we don't go to the

theatre much, you know: we don't have boxes offered us except when \_you\_

come. Poor Nick's too much taken up in the evening. I've wanted awfully

to see her. They say she's magnificent."

"I don't know," Peter was glad to be able honestly to answer. "I haven't

seen her."

"You haven't seen her?"

"Never, Biddy. I mean on the stage. In private often--yes," he

conscientiously added.

"Oh!" Biddy exclaimed, bending her face on Nick's bust again. She asked

him no question about the new star, and he offered her no further

information. There were things in his mind pulling him different ways,

so that for some minutes silence was the result of the conflict. At last

he said, after an hesitation caused by the possibility that she was

ignorant of the fact he had lately elicited from Julia, though it was

more probable she might have learned it from the same source:

"Am I perhaps indiscreet in alluding to the circumstance that Nick has

been painting Miss Rooth's portrait?"

"You're not indiscreet in alluding to it to me, because I know it."

"Then there's no secret nor mystery about it?"

Biddy just considered. "I don't think mamma knows it."

"You mean you've been keeping it from her because she wouldn't like it?"

"We're afraid she may think papa wouldn't have liked it."

This was said with an absence of humour at which Peter could but show

amusement, though he quickly recovered himself, repenting of any

apparent failure of respect to the high memory of his late celebrated

relative. He threw off rather vaguely: "Ah yes, I remember that great

man's ideas," and then went on: "May I ask if you know it, the fact

we're talking of, through Julia or through Nick?"

"I know it from both of them."

"Then if you're in their confidence may I further ask if this

undertaking of Nick's is the reason why things seem to be at an end

between them?"

"Oh I don't think she likes it," Biddy had to say.

"Isn't it good?"

"Oh I don't mean the picture--she hasn't seen it. But his having done

it."

"Does she dislike it so much that that's why she won't marry him?"

Biddy gave up her work, moving away from it to look at it. She came and

sat down on the long bench on which Sherringham had placed himself. Then

she broke out: "Oh Peter, it's a great trouble--it's a very great

trouble; and I can't tell you, for I don't understand it."

"If I ask you," he said, "it's not to pry into what doesn't concern me;

but Julia's my sister, and I can't after all help taking some interest

in her life. She tells me herself so little. She doesn't think me

worthy."

"Ah poor Julia!" Biddy wailed defensively. Her tone recalled to him that

Julia had at least thought him worthy to unite himself to Bridget

Dormer, and inevitably betrayed that the girl was thinking of that also.

While they both thought of it they sat looking into each other's eyes.

"Nick, I'm sure, doesn't treat \_you\_ that way; I'm sure he confides in

you; he talks to you about his occupations, his ambitions," Peter

continued. "And you understand him, you enter into them, you're nice to

him, you help him."

"Oh Nick's life--it's very dear to me," Biddy granted.

"That must be jolly for him."

"It makes \_me\_ very happy."

Peter uttered a low, ambiguous groan; then he cried with irritation;

"What the deuce is the matter with them then? Why can't they hit it off

together and be quiet and rational and do what every one wants them to?"

"Oh Peter, it's awfully complicated!" the girl sighed with sagacity.

"Do you mean that Nick's in love with her?"

"In love with Julia?"

"No, no, with Miriam Rooth."

She shook her head slowly, then with a smile which struck him as one of

the sweetest things he had ever seen--it conveyed, at the expense of her

own prospects, such a shy, generous little mercy of reassurance--"He

isn't, Peter," she brought out. "Julia thinks it trifling--all that

sort of thing," she added "She wants him to go in for different

honours."

"Julia's the oddest woman. I mean I thought she loved him," Peter

explained. "And when you love a person--!" He continued to make it out,

leaving his sentence impatiently unfinished, while Biddy, with lowered

eyes, sat waiting--it so interested her--to learn what you did when you

loved a person. "I can't conceive her giving him up. He has great

ability, besides being such a good fellow."

"It's for his happiness, Peter--that's the way she reasons," Biddy set

forth. "She does it for an idea; she has told me a great deal about it,

and I see the way she feels."

"You try to, Biddy, because you're such a dear good-natured girl, but I

don't believe you do in the least," he took the liberty of replying.

"It's too little the way you yourself would feel. Julia's idea, as you

call it, must be curious."

"Well, it is, Peter," Biddy mournfully admitted. "She won't risk not

coming out at the top."

"At the top of what?"

"Oh of everything." Her tone showed a trace of awe of such high views.

"Surely one's at the top of everything when one's in love."

"I don't know," said the girl.

"Do you doubt it?" Peter asked.

"I've never been in love and I never shall be."

"You're as perverse, in your way, as Julia," he returned to this. "But I

confess I don't understand Nick's attitude any better. He seems to me,

if I may say so, neither fish nor flesh."

"Oh his attitude's very noble, Peter; his state of mind's wonderfully

interesting," Biddy pleaded. "Surely \_you\_ must be in favour of art,"

she beautifully said.

It made him look at her a moment. "Dear Biddy, your little digs are as

soft as zephyrs."

She coloured, but she protested. "My little digs? What do you mean?

Aren't you in favour of art?"

"The question's delightfully simple. I don't know what you're talking

about. Everything has its place. A parliamentary life," he opined,

"scarce seems to me the situation for portrait-painting."

"That's just what Nick says."

"You talk of it together a great deal?"

"Yes, Nick's very good to me."

"Clever Nick! And what do you advise him?"

"Oh to \_do\_ something."

"That's valuable," Peter laughed. "Not to give up his sweetheart for the

sake of a paint-pot, I hope?"

"Never, never, Peter! It's not a question of his giving up," Biddy

pursued, "for Julia has herself shaken free. I think she never really

felt safe--she loved him, but was afraid of him. Now she's only

afraid--she has lost the confidence she tried to have. Nick has tried to

hold her, but she has wrested herself away. Do you know what she said to

me? She said, 'My confidence has gone for ever.'"

"I didn't know she was such a prig!" Julia's brother commented. "They're

queer people, verily, with water in their veins instead of blood. You

and I wouldn't be like that, should we?--though you \_have\_ taken up such

a discouraging position about caring for a fellow."

"I care for art," poor Biddy returned.

"You do, to some purpose"--and Peter glanced at the bust.

"To that of making you laugh at me."

But this he didn't heed. "Would you give a good man up for 'art'?"

"A good man? What man?"

"Well, say me--if I wanted to marry you."

She had the briefest of pauses. "Of course I would--in a moment. At any

rate I'd give up the House of Commons," she amended. "That's what Nick's

going to do now--only you mustn't tell any one."

Peter wondered. "He's going to chuck up his seat?"

"I think his mind is made up to it. He has talked me over--we've had

some deep discussions. Yes, I'm on the side of art!" she ardently said.

"Do you mean in order to paint--to paint that girl?" Peter went on.

"To paint every one--that's what he wants. By keeping his seat he hasn't

kept Julia, and she was the thing he cared for most in public life. When

he has got out of the whole thing his attitude, as he says, will be at

least clear. He's tremendously interesting about it, Peter," Biddy

declared; "has talked to me wonderfully--has won me over. Mamma's

heart-broken; telling \_her\_ will be the hardest part."

"If she doesn't know," he asked, "why then is she heart-broken?"

"Oh at the hitch about their marriage--she knows that. Their marriage

has been so what she wanted. She thought it perfection. She blames Nick

fearfully. She thinks he held the whole thing in his hand and that he

has thrown away a magnificent opportunity."

"And what does Nick say to her?"

"He says, 'Dear old mummy!'"

"That's good," Peter pronounced.

"I don't know what will become of her when this other blow arrives,"

Biddy went on. "Poor Nick wants to please her--he does, he does. But, as

he says, you can't please every one and you must before you die please

yourself a little."

Nick's kinsman, whose brother-in-law he was to have been, sat looking

at the floor; the colour had risen to his face while he listened. Then

he sprang up and took another turn about the room. His companion's

artless but vivid recital had set his blood in motion. He had taken

Nick's political prospects very much for granted, thought of them as

definite and almost dazzling. To learn there was something for which he

was ready to renounce such honours, and to recognise the nature of that

bribe, affected our young man powerfully and strangely. He felt as if he

had heard the sudden blare of a trumpet, yet felt at the same time as if

he had received a sudden slap in the face. Nick's bribe was "art"--the

strange temptress with whom he himself had been wrestling and over whom

he had finally ventured to believe that wisdom and training had won a

victory. There was something in the conduct of his old friend and

playfellow that made all his reasonings small. So unexpected, so

courageous a choice moved him as a reproach and a challenge. He felt

ashamed of having placed himself so unromantically on his guard, and

rapidly said to himself that if Nick could afford to allow so much for

"art" he might surely exhibit some of the same confidence. There had

never been the least avowed competition between the cousins--their lines

lay too far apart for that; but they nevertheless rode their course in

sight of each other, and Peter had now the impression of suddenly seeing

Nick Dormer give his horse the spur, bound forward and fly over a wall.

He was put on his mettle and hadn't to look long to spy an obstacle he

too might ride at. High rose his curiosity to see what warrant his

kinsman might have for such risks--how he was mounted for such exploits.

He really knew little about Nick's talent--so little as to feel no right

to exclaim "What an ass!" when Biddy mentioned the fact which the

existence of real talent alone could redeem from absurdity. All his

eagerness to see what Nick had been able to make of such a subject as

Miriam Rooth came back to him: though it was what mainly had brought him

to Rosedale Road he had forgotten it in the happy accident of his

encounter with the girl. He was conscious that if the surprise of a

revelation of power were in store for him Nick would be justified more

than he himself would feel reinstated in self-respect; since the courage

of renouncing the forum for the studio hovered before him as greater

than the courage of marrying an actress whom one was in love with: the

reward was in the latter case so much more immediate. Peter at any rate

asked Biddy what Nick had done with his portrait of Miriam. He hadn't

seen it anywhere in rummaging about the room.

"I think it's here somewhere, but I don't know," she replied, getting up

to look vaguely round her.

"Haven't you seen it? Hasn't he shown it to you?"

She rested her eyes on him strangely a moment, then turned them away

with a mechanical air of still searching. "I think it's in the room, put

away with its face to the wall."

"One of those dozen canvases with their backs to us?"

"One of those perhaps."

"Haven't you tried to see?"

"I haven't touched them"--and Biddy had a colour.

"Hasn't Nick had it out to show you?"

"He says it's in too bad a state--it isn't finished--it won't do."

"And haven't you had the curiosity to turn it round for yourself?"

The embarrassed look in her face deepened under his insistence and it

seemed to him that her eyes pleaded with him a moment almost to tears.

"I've had an idea he wouldn't like it."

Her visitor's own desire, however, had become too sharp for easy

forbearance. He laid his hand on two or three canvases which proved, as

he extricated them, to be either blank or covered with rudimentary

forms. "Dear Biddy, have you such intense delicacy?" he asked, pulling

out something else.

The inquiry was meant in familiar kindness, for Peter was struck even to

admiration with her having a sense of honour that all girls haven't. She

must in this particular case have longed for a sight of Nick's work--the

work that had brought about such a crisis in his life. But she had

passed hours in his studio alone without permitting herself a stolen

peep; she was capable of that if she believed it would please him. Peter

liked a charming girl's being capable of that--he had known charming

girls who wouldn't in the least have been--and his question was really a

form of homage. Biddy, however, apparently discovered some light mockery

in it, and she broke out incongruously:

"I haven't wanted so much to see it! I don't care for her so much as

that!"

"So much as what?" He couldn't but wonder.

"I don't care for his actress--for that vulgar creature. I don't like

her!" said Biddy almost startlingly.

Peter stared. "I thought you hadn't seen her."

"I saw her in Paris--twice. She was wonderfully clever, but she didn't

charm me."

He quickly considered, saying then all kindly: "I won't inflict the

thing on you in that case--we'll leave it alone for the present." Biddy

made no reply to this at first, but after a moment went straight over

to the row of stacked canvases and exposed several of them to the light.

"Why did you say you wished to go to the theatre to-night?" her

companion continued.

Still she was silent; after which, with her back turned to him and a

little tremor in her voice while she drew forth successively her

brother's studies, she made answer: "For the sake of your company,

Peter! Here it is, I think," she added, moving a large canvas with some

effort. "No, no, I'll hold it for you. Is that the light?"

She wouldn't let him take it; she bade him stand off and allow her to

place it in the right position. In this position she carefully presented

it, supporting it at the proper angle from behind and showing her head

and shoulders above it. From the moment his eyes rested on the picture

Peter accepted this service without protest. Unfinished, simplified and

in some portions merely suggested, it was strong, vivid and assured, it

had already the look of life and the promise of power. Peter felt all

this and was startled, was strangely affected--he had no idea Nick moved

with that stride. Miriam, seated, was represented in three-quarters,

almost to her feet. She leaned forward with one of her legs crossed over

the other, her arms extended and foreshortened, her hands locked

together round her knee. Her beautiful head was bent a little,

broodingly, and her splendid face seemed to look down at life. She had a

grand appearance of being raised aloft, with a wide regard, a survey

from a height of intelligence, for the great field of the artist, all

the figures and passions he may represent. Peter asked himself where his

kinsman had learned to paint like that. He almost gasped at the

composition of the thing and at the drawing of the difficult arms. Biddy

abstained from looking round the corner of the canvas as she held it;

she only watched, in Peter's eyes, for this gentleman's impression of

it. That she easily caught, and he measured her impression--her

impression of \_his\_ impression--when he went after a few minutes to

relieve her. She let him lift the thing out of her grasp; he moved it

and rested it, so that they could still see it, against the high back of

a chair. "It's tremendously good," he then handsomely pronounced.

"Dear, dear Nick," Biddy murmured, looking at it now.

"Poor, poor Julia!" Peter was prompted to exclaim in a different tone.

His companion made no rejoinder to this, and they stood another minute

or two side by side and in silence, gazing at the portrait. At last he

took up his hat--he had no more time, he must go. "Will you come

to-night all the same?" he asked with a laugh that was somewhat awkward

and an offer of a hand-shake.

"All the same?" Biddy seemed to wonder.

"Why you say she's a terrible creature," Peter completed with his eyes

on the painted face.

"Oh anything for art!" Biddy smiled.

"Well, at seven o'clock then." And Sherringham departed, leaving the

girl alone with the Tragic Muse and feeling with a quickened rush the

beauty of that young woman as well as, all freshly, the peculiar

possibilities of Nick.

XXX

It was not till after the noon of the next day that he was to see Miriam

Rooth. He wrote her a note that evening, to be delivered to her at the

theatre, and during the performance she sent round to him a card with

"All right, come to luncheon to-morrow" scrawled on it in pencil.

When he presented himself at Balaklava Place he learned that the two

ladies had not come in--they had gone again early to rehearsal; but they

had left word that he was to be pleased to wait, they would appear from

one moment to the other. It was further mentioned to him, as he was

ushered into the drawing-room, that Mr. Dashwood was in possession of

that ground. This circumstance, however, Peter barely noted: he had been

soaring so high for the past twelve hours that he had almost lost

consciousness of the minor differences of earthly things. He had taken

Biddy Dormer and her friend Miss Tressilian home from the play and after

leaving them had walked about the streets, had roamed back to his

sister's house, in a state of exaltation the intenser from his having

for the previous time contained himself, thinking it more decorous and

considerate, less invidious and less blatant, not to "rave." Sitting

there in the shade of the box with his companions he had watched Miriam

in attentive but inexpressive silence, glowing and vibrating inwardly,

yet for these fine, deep reasons not committing himself to the spoken

rapture. Delicacy, it appeared to him, should rule the hour; and indeed

he had never had a pleasure less alloyed than this little period of

still observation and repressed ecstasy. Miriam's art lost nothing by

it, and Biddy's mild nearness only gained. This young lady was virtually

mute as well--wonderingly, dauntedly, as if she too associated with the

performer various other questions than that of her mastery of her art.

To this mastery Biddy's attitude was a candid and liberal tribute: the

poor girl sat quenched and pale, as if in the blinding light of a

comparison by which it would be presumptuous even to be annihilated. Her

subjection, however, was a gratified, a charmed subjection: there was

beneficence in such beauty--the beauty of the figure that moved before

the footlights and spoke in music--even if it deprived one of hope.

Peter didn't say to her in vulgar elation and in reference to her

whimsical profession of dislike at the studio, "Well, do you find our

friend so disagreeable now?" and she was grateful to him for his

forbearance, for the tacit kindness of which the idea seemed to be: "My

poor child, I'd prefer you if I could; but--judge for yourself--how can

I? Expect of me only the possible. Expect that certainly, but only

that." In the same degree Peter liked Biddy's sweet, hushed air of

judging for herself, of recognising his discretion and letting him off

while she was lost in the illusion, in the convincing picture of the

stage. Miss Tressilian did most of the criticism: she broke out

cheerfully and sonorously from time to time, in reference to the

actress, "Most striking certainly," or "She \_is\_ clever, isn't she?" She

uttered a series of propositions to which her companions found it

impossible to respond. Miss Tressilian was disappointed in nothing but

their enjoyment: they didn't seem to think the exhibition as amusing as

she.

Walking away through the ordered void of Lady Agnes's quarter, with the

four acts of the play glowing again before him in the smokeless London

night, Peter found the liveliest thing in his impression the certitude

that if he had never seen Miriam before and she had had for him none of

the advantages of association, he would still have recognised in her

performance the richest interest the theatre had ever offered him. He

floated in the felicity of it, in the general encouragement of a sense

of the perfectly \_done\_, in the almost aggressive bravery of still

larger claims for an art which could so triumphantly, so exquisitely

render life. "Render it?" he said to himself. "Create it and reveal it,

rather; give us something new and large and of the first order!" He had

\_seen\_ Miriam now; he had never seen her before; he had never seen her

till he saw her in her conditions. Oh her conditions--there were many

things to be said about them; they were paltry enough as yet, inferior,

inadequate, obstructive, as compared with the right, full, finished

setting of such a talent; but the essence of them was now, irremovably,

in our young man's eyes, the vision of how the uplifted stage and the

listening house transformed her. That idea of her having no character of

her own came back to him with a force that made him laugh in the empty

street: this was a disadvantage she reduced so to nothing that obviously

he hadn't known her till to-night. Her character was simply to hold you

by the particular spell; any other--the good nature of home, the

relation to her mother, her friends, her lovers, her debts, the practice

of virtues or industries or vices--was not worth speaking of. These

things were the fictions and shadows; the representation was the deep

substance.

Peter had as he went an intense vision--he had often had it before--of

the conditions still absent, the great and complete ones, those which

would give the girl's talent a superior, a discussable stage. More than

ever he desired them, mentally invoked them, filled them out in

imagination, cheated himself with the idea that they were possible. He

saw them in a momentary illusion and confusion: a great academic,

artistic theatre, subsidised and unburdened with money-getting, rich in

its repertory, rich in the high quality and the wide array of its

servants, rich above all in the authority of an impossible

administrator--a manager personally disinterested, not an actor with an

eye to the main chance; pouring forth a continuity of tradition,

striving for perfection, laying a splendid literature under

contribution. He saw the heroine of a hundred "situations," variously

dramatic and vividly real; he saw comedy and drama and passion and

character and English life; he saw all humanity and history and poetry,

and then perpetually, in the midst of them, shining out in the high

relief of some great moment, an image as fresh as an unveiled statue. He

was not unconscious that he was taking all sorts of impossibilities and

miracles for granted; but he was under the conviction, for the time,

that the woman he had been watching three hours, the incarnation of the

serious drama, would be a new and vivifying force. The world was just

then so bright to him that even Basil Dashwood struck him at first as a

conceivable agent of his dream.

It must be added that before Miriam arrived the breeze that filled

Sherringham's sail began to sink a little. He passed out of the

eminently "let" drawing-room, where twenty large photographs of the

young actress bloomed in the desert; he went into the garden by a glass

door that stood open, and found Mr. Dashwood lolling on a bench and

smoking cigarettes. This young man's conversation was a different

music--it took him down, as he felt; showed him, very sensibly and

intelligibly, it must be confessed, the actual theatre, the one they

were all concerned with, the one they would have to make the miserable

best of. It was fortunate that he kept his intoxication mainly to

himself: the Englishman's habit of not being effusive still prevailed

with him after his years of exposure to the foreign infection. Nothing

could have been less exclamatory than the meeting of the two men, with

its question or two, its remark or two, about the new visitor's arrival

in London; its off-hand "I noticed you last night, I was glad you turned

up at last" on one side and its attenuated "Oh yes, it was the first

time; I was very much interested" on the other. Basil Dashwood played a

part in Yolande and Peter had not failed to take with some comfort the

measure of his aptitude. He judged it to be of the small order, as

indeed the part, which was neither that of the virtuous nor that of the

villainous hero, restricted him to two or three inconspicuous effects

and three or four changes of dress. He represented an ardent but

respectful young lover whom the distracted heroine found time to pity a

little and even to rail at; but it was impressed upon his critic that he

scarcely represented young love. He looked very well, but Peter had

heard him already in a hundred contemporary pieces; he never got out of

rehearsal. He uttered sentiments and breathed vows with a nice voice,

with a shy, boyish tremor, but as if he were afraid of being chaffed for

it afterwards; giving the spectator in the stalls the sense of holding

the prompt-book and listening to a recitation. He made one think of

country-houses and lawn-tennis and private theatricals; than which there

couldn't be, to Peter's mind, a range of association more disconnected

from the actor's art.

Dashwood knew all about the new thing, the piece in rehearsal; he knew

all about everything--receipts and salaries and expenses and newspaper

articles, and what old Baskerville said and what Mrs. Ruffler thought:

matters of superficial concern to his fellow-guest, who wondered, before

they had sight of Miriam, if she talked with her "walking-gentleman"

about them by the hour, deep in them and finding them not vulgar and

boring but the natural air of her life and the essence of her

profession. Of course she did--she naturally would; it was all in the

day's work and he might feel sure she wouldn't turn up her nose at the

shop. He had to remind himself that he didn't care if she didn't, that

he would really think worse of her if she should. She certainly was in

deep with her bland playmate, talking shop by the hour: he could see

this from the fellow's ease of attitude, the air of a man at home and

doing the honours. He divined a great intimacy between the two young

artists, but asked himself at the same time what he, Peter Sherringham,

had to say about it. He didn't pretend to control Miriam's intimacies,

it was to be supposed; and if he had encouraged her to adopt a

profession rich in opportunities for comradeship it was not for him to

cry out because she had taken to it kindly. He had already descried a

fund of utility in Mrs. Lovick's light brother; but it irritated him,

all the same, after a while, to hear the youth represent himself as

almost indispensable. He was practical--there was no doubt of that; and

this idea added to Peter's paradoxical sense that as regards the matters

actually in question he himself had not this virtue. Dashwood had got

Mrs. Rooth the house; it happened by a lucky chance that Laura Lumley,

to whom it belonged--Sherringham would know Laura Lumley?--wanted to get

rid, for a mere song, of the remainder of the lease. She was going to

Australia with a troupe of her own. They just stepped into it; it was

good air--the best sort of London air to live in, to sleep in, for

people of their trade. Peter came back to his wonder at what Miriam's

personal relations with this deucedly knowing gentleman might be, and

was again able to assure himself that they might be anything in the

world she liked, for any stake he, the familiar of the Foreign Office,

had in them. Dashwood told him of all the smart people who had tried to

take up the new star--the way the London world had already held out its

hand; and perhaps it was Sherringham's irritation, the crushed sentiment

I just mentioned, that gave a little heave in the exclamation, "Oh

that--that's all rubbish: the less of that the better!" At this Mr.

Dashwood sniffed a little, rather resentful; he had expected Peter to be

pleased with the names of the eager ladies who had "called"--which

proved how low a view he took of his art. Our friend explained--it is to

be hoped not pedantically--that this art was serious work and that

society was humbug and imbecility; also that of old the great comedians

wouldn't have known such people. Garrick had essentially his own circle.

"No, I suppose they didn't 'call' in the old narrow-minded time," said

Basil Dashwood.

"Your profession didn't call. They had better company--that of the

romantic gallant characters they represented. They lived with \_them\_, so

it was better all round." And Peter asked himself--for that clearly

struck the young man as a dreary period--if \_he\_ only, for Miriam, in

her new life and among the futilities of those who tried to lionise her,

expressed the artistic idea. This at least, Sherringham reflected, was

a situation that could be improved.

He learned from his companion that the new play, the thing they were

rehearsing, was an old play, a romantic drama of thirty years before,

very frequently revived and threadbare with honourable service. Dashwood

had a part in it, but there was an act in which he didn't appear, and

this was the act they were doing that morning. Yolande had done all

Yolande could do; the visitor was mistaken if he supposed Yolande such a

tremendous hit. It had done very well, it had run three months, but they

were by no means coining money with it. It wouldn't take them to the end

of the season; they had seen for a month past that they would have to

put on something else. Miss Rooth, moreover, wanted a new part; she was

above all impatient to show her big range. She had grand ideas; she

thought herself very good-natured to repeat the same stuff for three

months. The young man lighted another cigarette and described to his

listener some of Miss Rooth's ideas. He abounded in information about

her--about her character, her temper, her peculiarities, her little

ways, her manner of producing some of her effects. He spoke with

familiarity and confidence, as if knowing more about her than any one

else--as if he had invented or discovered her, were in a sense her

proprietor or guarantor. It was the talk of the shop, both with a native

sharpness and a touching young candour; the expansion of the commercial

spirit when it relaxes and generalises, is conscious of safety with

another member of the guild.

Peter at any rate couldn't help protesting against the lame old

war-horse it was proposed to bring into action, who had been ridden to

death and had saved a thousand desperate fields; and he exclaimed on

the strange passion of the good British public for sitting again and

again through expected situations, watching for speeches they had heard

and surprises that struck the hour. Dashwood defended the taste of

London, praised it as loyal, constant, faithful; to which his

interlocutor retorted with some vivacity that it was faithful to sad

trash. He justified this sally by declaring the play in rehearsal sad

trash, clumsy mediocrity with all its convenience gone, and that the

fault was the want of life in the critical sense of the public, which

was ignobly docile, opening its mouth for its dose like the pupils of

Dotheboys Hall; not insisting on something different, on a fresh brew

altogether. Dashwood asked him if he then wished their friend to go on

playing for ever a part she had repeated more than eighty nights on end:

he thought the modern "run" was just what he had heard him denounce in

Paris as the disease the theatre was dying of. This imputation Peter

quite denied, wanting to know if she couldn't change to something less

stale than the greatest staleness of all. Dashwood opined that Miss

Rooth must have a strong part and that there happened to be one for her

in the before-mentioned venerable novelty. She had to take what she

could get--she wasn't a person to cry for the moon. This was a

stop-gap--she would try other things later; she would have to look round

her; you couldn't have a new piece, one that would do, left at your door

every day with the milk. On one point Sherringham's mind might be at

rest: Miss Rooth was a woman who would do every blessed thing there was

to do. Give her time and she would walk straight through the repertory.

She was a woman who would do this--she was a woman who would do that:

her spokesman employed this phrase so often that Peter, nervous, got up

and threw an unsmoked cigarette away. Of course she was a woman; there

was no need of his saying it a hundred times.

As for the repertory, the young man went on, the most beautiful girl in

the world could give but what she had. He explained, after their visitor

sat down again, that the noise made by Miss Rooth was not exactly what

this admirer appeared to suppose. Sherringham had seen the house the

night before and would recognise that, though good, it was very far from

great. She had done very well, it was all right, but she had never gone

above a point which Dashwood expressed in pounds sterling, to the

edification of his companion, who vaguely thought the figure high. Peter

remembered that he had been unable to get a stall, but Dashwood insisted

that "Miriam" had not leaped into commanding fame: that was a thing that

never happened in fact--it happened only in grotesque works of fiction.

She had attracted notice, unusual notice for a woman whose name, the day

before, had never been heard of: she was recognised as having, for a

novice, extraordinary cleverness and confidence--in addition to her

looks, of course, which were the thing that had really fetched the

crowd. But she hadn't been the talk of London; she had only been the

talk of Gabriel Nash. He wasn't London, more was the pity. He knew the

esthetic people--the worldly, semi-smart ones, not the frumpy, sickly

lot who wore dirty drapery; and the esthetic people had run after her.

Mr. Dashwood sketchily instructed the pilgrim from Paris as to the

different sects in the great religion of beauty, and was able to give

him the particular "note" of the critical clique to which Miriam had

begun so quickly to owe it that she had a vogue. The information made

our friend feel very ignorant of the world, very uninitiated and buried

in his little professional hole. Dashwood warned him that it would be a

long time before the general public would wake up to Miss Rooth, even

after she had waked up to herself; she would have to do some really big

thing first. \_They\_ knew it was in her, the big thing--Peter and he and

even poor Nash--because they had seen her as no one else had; but London

never took any one on trust--it had to be cash down. It would take their

young lady two or three years to pay out her cash and get her

equivalent. But of course the equivalent would be simply a gold-mine.

Within its limits, however, certainly, the mark she had made was already

quite a fairy-tale: there was magic in the way she had concealed from

the first her want of experience. She absolutely made you think she had

a lot of it, more than any one else. Mr. Dashwood repeated several times

that she was a cool hand--a deucedly cool hand, and that he watched her

himself, saw ideas come to her, saw her have different notions, and more

or less put them to the test, on different nights. She was always

alive--she liked it herself. She gave him ideas, long as he had been on

the stage. Naturally she had a great deal to learn, no end even of quite

basic things; a cosmopolite like Sherringham would understand that a

girl of that age, who had never had a friend but her mother--her mother

was greater fun than ever now--naturally \_would\_ have. Sherringham

winced at being dubbed a "cosmopolite" by his young entertainer, just as

he had winced a moment before at hearing himself lumped in esoteric

knowledge with Dashwood and Gabriel Nash; but the former of these

gentlemen took no account of his sensibility while he enumerated a few

of the elements of the "basic." He was a mixture of acuteness and

innocent fatuity; and Peter had to recognise in him a rudiment or two of

criticism when he said that the wonderful thing in the girl was that she

learned so fast--learned something every night, learned from the same

old piece a lot more than any one else would have learned from twenty.

"That's what it is to be a genius," Peter concurred. "Genius is only the

art of getting your experience fast, of stealing it, as it were; and in

this sense Miss Rooth's a regular brigand." Dashwood condoned the

subtlety and added less analytically, "Oh she'll do!" It was exactly in

these simple words, addressed to her, that her other admirer had phrased

the same truth; yet he didn't enjoy hearing them on his neighbour's

lips: they had a profane, patronising sound and suggested displeasing

equalities.

The two men sat in silence for some minutes, watching a fat robin hop

about on the little seedy lawn; at the end of which they heard a vehicle

stop on the other side of the garden-wall and the voices of occupants

alighting. "Here they come, the dear creatures," said Basil Dashwood

without moving; and from where they sat Peter saw the small door in the

wall pushed open. The dear creatures were three in number, for a

gentleman had added himself to Mrs. Rooth and her daughter. As soon as

Miriam's eyes took in her Parisian friend she fell into a large, droll,

theatrical attitude and, seizing her mother's arm, exclaimed

passionately: "Look where he sits, the author of all my woes--cold,

cynical, cruel!" She was evidently in the highest spirits; of which Mrs.

Rooth partook as she cried indulgently, giving her a slap, "Oh get

along, you gypsy!"

"She's always up to something," Dashwood laughed as Miriam, radiant and

with a conscious stage tread, glided toward Sherringham as if she were

coming to the footlights. He rose slowly from his seat, looking at her

and struck with her beauty: he had been impatient to see her, yet in the

act his impatience had had a disconcerting check.

He had had time to note that the man who had come in with her was

Gabriel Nash, and this recognition brought a low sigh to his lips as he

held out his hand to her--a sigh expressive of the sudden sense that his

interest in her now could only be a gross community. Of course that

didn't matter, since he had set it, at the most, such rigid limits; but

he none the less felt vividly reminded that it would be public and

notorious, that inferior people would be inveterately mixed up with it,

that she had crossed the line and sold herself to the vulgar, making him

indeed only one of an equalised multitude. The way Nash turned up there

just when he didn't want to see him proved how complicated a thing it

was to have a friendship with a young woman so clearly booked for

renown. He quite forgot that the intruder had had this object of

interest long before his own first view of it and had been present at

that passage, which he had in a measure brought about. Had Sherringham

not been so cut out to make trouble of this particular joy he might have

found some adequate assurance that their young hostess distinguished him

in the way in which, taking his hand in both of hers, she looked up at

him and murmured, "Dear old master!" Then as if this were not

acknowledgment enough she raised her head still higher and, whimsically,

gratefully, charmingly, almost nobly, kissed him on the lips before the

other men, before the good mother whose "Oh you honest creature!" made

everything regular.

XXXI

If he was ruffled by some of her conditions there was thus comfort and

consolation to be drawn from others, beside the essential

fascination--so small the doubt of that now--of the young lady's own

society. He spent the afternoon, they all spent the afternoon, and the

occasion reminded him of pages in \_Wilhelm Meister\_. He himself could

pass for Wilhelm, and if Mrs. Rooth had little resemblance to Mignon,

Miriam was remarkably like Philina. The movable feast awaiting

them--luncheon, tea, dinner?--was delayed two or three hours; but the

interval was a source of gaiety, for they all smoked cigarettes in the

garden and Miriam gave striking illustrations of the parts she was

studying. Peter was in the state of a man whose toothache has suddenly

stopped--he was exhilarated by the cessation of pain. The pain had been

the effort to remain in Paris after the creature in the world in whom he

was most interested had gone to London, and the balm of seeing her now

was the measure of the previous soreness.

Gabriel Nash had, as usual, plenty to say, and he talked of Nick's

picture so long that Peter wondered if he did it on purpose to vex him.

They went in and out of the house; they made excursions to see what form

the vague meal was taking; and Sherringham got half an hour alone, or

virtually alone, with the mistress of his unsanctioned passion--drawing

her publicly away from the others and making her sit with him in the

most sequestered part of the little gravelled grounds. There was summer

enough for the trees to shut out the adjacent villas, and Basil Dashwood

and Gabriel Nash lounged together at a convenient distance while Nick's

whimsical friend dropped polished pebbles, sometimes audibly splashing,

into the deep well of the histrionic simplicity. Miriam confessed that

like all comedians they ate at queer hours; she sent Dashwood in for

biscuits and sherry--she proposed sending him round to the grocer's in

the Circus Road for superior wine. Peter judged him the factotum of the

little household: he knew where the biscuits were kept and the state of

the grocer's account. When he himself congratulated her on having so

useful an inmate she said genially, but as if the words disposed of him,

"Oh he's awfully handy." To this she added, "You're not, you know";

resting the kindest, most pitying eyes on him. The sensation they gave

him was as sweet as if she had stroked his cheek, and her manner was

responsive even to tenderness. She called him "Dear master" again and

again, and still often "\_Cher maÃ®tre\_," and appeared to express

gratitude and reverence by every intonation.

"You're doing the humble dependent now," he said: "you do it

beautifully, as you do everything." She replied that she didn't make it

humble enough--she couldn't; she was too proud, too insolent in her

triumph. She liked that, the triumph, too much, and she didn't mind

telling him she was perfectly happy. Of course as yet the triumph was

very limited; but success was success, whatever its quantity; the dish

was a small one but had the right taste. Her imagination had already

bounded beyond the first phase unexpectedly great as this had been: her

position struck her as modest compared with the probably future now

vivid to her. Peter had never seen her so soft and sympathetic; she had

insisted in Paris that her personal character was that of the good

girl--she used the term in a fine loose way--and it was impossible to be

a better girl than she showed herself this pleasant afternoon. She was

full of gossip and anecdote and drollery; she had exactly the air he

would have wished her to have--that of thinking of no end of things to

tell him. It was as if she had just returned from a long journey and had

had strange adventures and made wonderful discoveries. She began to

speak of this and that, then broke off to speak of something else; she

talked of the theatre, of the "critics," and above all of London, of the

people she had met and the extraordinary things they said to her, of the

parts she was going to take up, of lots of new ideas that had come to

her about the art of comedy. She wanted to do comedy now--to do the

comedy of London life. She was delighted to find that seeing more of the

world suggested things to her; they came straight from the fact, from

nature, if you could call it nature; she was thus convinced more than

ever that the artist ought to \_live\_ so as to get on with his business,

gathering ideas and lights from experience--ought to welcome any

experience that would give him lights. But work of course \_was\_

experience, and everything in one's life that was good was work. That

was the jolly thing in the actor's trade--it made up for other elements

that were odious: if you only kept your eyes open nothing could happen

to you that wouldn't be food for observation and grist to your mill,

showing you how people looked and moved and spoke, cried and grimaced,

writhed and dissimulated, in given situations. She saw all round her

things she wanted to "do"--London bristled with them if you had eyes to

see. She was fierce to know why people didn't take them up, put them

into plays and parts, give one a chance with them; she expressed her

sharp impatience of the general literary \_bÃ©tise\_. She had never been

chary of this particular displeasure, and there were moments--it was an

old story and a subject of frank raillery to Sherringham--when to hear

her you might have thought there was no cleverness anywhere but in her

own splendid impatience. She wanted tremendous things done that she

might use them, but she didn't pretend to say exactly what they were to

be, nor even approximately how they were to be handled: her ground was

rather that if \_she\_ only had a pen--it was exasperating to have to

explain! She mainly contented herself with the view that nothing had

really been touched: she felt that more and more as she saw more of

people's goings-on.

Peter went to her theatre again that evening and indeed made no scruple

of going every night for a week. Rather perhaps I should say he made a

scruple, but a high part of the pleasure of his life during these

arbitrary days was to overcome it. The only way to prove he could

overcome it was to go; and he was satisfied, after he had been seven

times, not only with the spectacle on the stage but with his perfect

independence. He knew no satiety, however, with the spectacle on the

stage, which induced for him but a further curiosity. Miriam's

performance was a thing alive, with a power to change, to grow, to

develop, to beget new forms of the same life. Peter contributed to it in

his amateurish way and watched with solicitude the effect of his care

and the fortune of his hints. He talked it over in Balaklava Place,

suggested modifications and variations worth trying. She professed

herself thankful for any refreshment that could be administered to her

interest in \_Yolande\_, and with an energy that showed large resource

touched up her part and drew several new airs from it. Peter's

liberties bore on her way of uttering certain speeches, the intonations

that would have more beauty or make the words mean more. She had her

ideas, or rather she had her instincts, which she defended and

illustrated, with a vividness superior to argument, by a happy pictorial

phrase or a snatch of mimicry; but she was always for trying; she liked

experiments and caught at them, and she was especially thankful when

some one gave her a showy reason, a plausible formula, in a case where

she only stood on an intuition. She pretended to despise reasons and to

like and dislike at her sovereign pleasure; but she always honoured the

exotic gift, so that Sherringham was amused with the liberal way she

produced it, as if she had been a naked islander rejoicing in a present

of crimson cloth.

Day after day he spent most of his time in her society, and Miss Laura

Lumley's recent habitation became the place in London to which his

thoughts and his steps were most attached. He was highly conscious of

his not now carrying out that principle of abstention he had brought to

such maturity before leaving Paris; but he contented himself with a much

cruder justification of this lapse than he would have thought adequate

in advance. It consisted simply in the idea that to be identified with

the first fresh exploits of a young genius was a delightful experience.

What was the harm of it when the genius was real? His main security was

thus that his relations with Miriam had been placed under the protection

of that idea of approved extravagance. In this department they made a

very creditable figure and required much less watching and pruning than

when it had been his effort to adjust them to a worldly plan. He had in

fine a sense of real wisdom when he pronounced it surely enough that

this momentary intellectual participation in the girl's dawning fame was

a charming thing. Charming things were not frequent enough in a busy

man's life to be kicked out of the way. Balaklava Place, looked at in

this philosophic way, became almost idyllic: it gave Peter the

pleasantest impression he had ever had of London.

The season happened to be remarkably fine; the temperature was high, but

not so high as to keep people from the theatre. Miriam's "business"

visibly increased, so that the question of putting on the second play

underwent some revision. The girl persisted, showing in her persistence

a temper of which Peter had already caught some sharp gleams. It was

plain that through her career she would expect to carry things with a

high hand. Her managers and agents wouldn't find her an easy victim or a

calculable force; but the public would adore her, surround her with the

popularity that attaches to a good-natured and free-spoken princess, and

her comrades would have a kindness for her because she wouldn't be

selfish. They too would, besides representing her body-guard, form in a

manner a portion of her affectionate public. This was the way her friend

read the signs, liking her whimsical tolerance of some of her vulgar

playfellows almost well enough to forgive their presence in Balaklava

Place, where they were a sore trial to her mother, who wanted her to

multiply her points of contact only with the higher orders. There were

hours when Peter seemed to make out that her principal relation to the

proper world would be to have within two or three years a grand battle

with it resulting in its taking her, should she let it have her at all,

absolutely on her own terms: a picture which led our young man to ask

himself with a helplessness that was not exempt, as he perfectly knew,

from absurdity, what part \_he\_ should find himself playing in such a

contest and if it would be reserved to him to be the more ridiculous as

a peacemaker or as a heavy backer.

"She might know any one she would, and the only person she appears to

take any pleasure in is that dreadful Miss Rover," Mrs. Rooth whimpered

to him more than once--leading him thus to recognise in the young lady

so designated the principal complication of Balaklava Place. Miss Rover

was a little actress who played at Miriam's theatre, combining with an

unusual aptitude for delicate comedy a less exceptional absence of

rigour in private life. She was pretty and quick and brave, and had a

fineness that Miriam professed herself already in a position to estimate

as rare. She had no control of her inclinations, yet sometimes they were

wholly laudable, like the devotion she had formed for her beautiful

colleague, whom she admired not only as an ornament of the profession

but as a being altogether of a more fortunate essence. She had had an

idea that real ladies were "nasty," but Miriam was not nasty, and who

could gainsay that Miriam was a real lady? The girl justified herself to

her patron from Paris, who had found no fault with her; she knew how

much her mother feared the proper world wouldn't come in if they knew

that the improper, in the person of pretty Miss Rover, was on the

ground. What did she care who came and who didn't, and what was to be

gained by receiving half the snobs in London? People would have to take

her exactly as they found her--that they would have to learn; and they

would be much mistaken if they thought her capable of turning snob too

for the sake of their sweet company. She didn't pretend to be anything

but what she meant to be, the best general actress of her time; and what

had that to do with her seeing or not seeing a poor ignorant girl who

had loved--well, she needn't say what Fanny had done. They had met in

the way of business; she didn't say she would have run after her. She

had liked her because she wasn't a slick, and when Fanny Rover had asked

her quite wistfully if she mightn't come and see her and like her she

hadn't bristled with scandalised virtue. Miss Rover wasn't a bit more

stupid or more ill-natured than any one else; it would be time enough to

shut the door when she should become so.

Peter commended even to extravagance the liberality of such comradeship;

said that of course a woman didn't go into that profession to see how

little she could swallow. She was right to live with the others so long

as they were at all possible, and it was for her and only for her to

judge how long that might be. This was rather heroic on his part, for

his assumed detachment from the girl's personal life still left him a

margin for some forms of uneasiness. It would have made in his spirit a

great difference for the worse that the woman he loved, and for whom he

wished no baser lover than himself, should have embraced the prospect of

consorting only with the cheaper kind. It was all very well, but Fanny

Rover was simply a rank \_cabotine\_, and that sort of association was an

odd training for a young woman who was to have been good enough--he

couldn't forget that, but kept remembering it as if it might still have

a future use--to be his admired wife. Certainly he ought to have thought

of such things before he permitted himself to become so interested in a

theatrical nature. His heroism did him service, however, for the hour;

it helped him by the end of the week to feel quite broken in to Miriam's

little circle. What helped him most indeed was to reflect that she would

get tired of a good many of its members herself in time; for if it was

not that they were shocking--very few of them shone with that intense

light--they could yet be thoroughly trusted in the long run to bore

you.

There was a lovely Sunday in particular, spent by him almost all in

Balaklava Place--he arrived so early--when, in the afternoon, every sort

of odd person dropped in. Miriam held a reception in the little garden

and insisted on all the company's staying to supper. Her mother shed

tears to Peter, in the desecrated house, because they had accepted,

Miriam and she, an invitation--and in Cromwell Road too--for the

evening. Miriam had now decreed they shouldn't go--they would have so

much better fun with their good friends at home. She was sending off a

message--it was a terrible distance--by a cabman, and Peter had the

privilege of paying the messenger. Basil Dashwood, in another vehicle,

proceeded to an hotel known to him, a mile away, for supplementary

provisions, and came back with a cold ham and a dozen of champagne. It

was all very Bohemian and dishevelled and delightful, very supposedly

droll and enviable to outsiders; and Miriam told anecdotes and gave

imitations of the people she would have met if she had gone out, so that

no one had a sense of loss--the two occasions were fantastically united.

Mrs. Rooth drank champagne for consolation, though the consolation was

imperfect when she remembered she might have drunk it, though not quite

so much perhaps, in Cromwell Road.

Taken in connection with the evening before, the day formed for our

friend the most complete exhibition of his young woman he had yet

enjoyed. He had been at the theatre, to which the Saturday night

happened to have brought the very fullest house she had played to, and

he came early to Balaklava Place, to tell her once again--he had told

her half-a-dozen times the evening before--that with the excitement of

her biggest audience she had surpassed herself, acted with remarkable

intensity. It pleased her to hear this, and the spirit with which she

interpreted the signs of the future and, during an hour he spent alone

with her, Mrs. Rooth being upstairs and Basil Dashwood luckily absent,

treated him to twenty specimens of feigned passion and character, was

beyond any natural abundance he had yet seen in a woman. The impression

could scarcely have been other if she had been playing wild snatches to

him at the piano: the bright up-darting flame of her talk rose and fell

like an improvisation on the keys. Later, the rest of the day, he could

as little miss the good grace with which she fraternised with her

visitors, finding always the fair word for each--the key to a common

ease, the right turn to keep vanity quiet and make humility brave. It

was a wonderful expenditure of generous, nervous life. But what he read

in it above all was the sense of success in youth, with the future loose

and big, and the action of that charm on the faculties. Miriam's limited

past had yet pinched her enough to make emancipation sweet, and the

emancipation had come at last in an hour. She had stepped into her magic

shoes, divined and appropriated everything they could help her to,

become in a day a really original contemporary. He was of course not

less conscious of that than Nick Dormer had been when in the cold light

of his studio this more detached observer saw too how she had altered.

But the great thing to his mind, and during these first days the

irresistible seduction of the theatre, was that she was a rare

revelation of beauty. Beauty was the principle of everything she did and

of the way she unerringly did it--an exquisite harmony of line and

motion and attitude and tone, what was at once most general and most

special in her performance. Accidents and instincts played together to

this end and constituted something that was independent of her talent

or of her merit in a given case, and which as a value to Peter's

imagination was far superior to any merit and any talent. He could but

call it a felicity and an importance incalculable, and but know that it

connected itself with universal values. To see this force in operation,

to sit within its radius and feel it shift and revolve and change and

never fail, was a corrective to the depression, the humiliation, the

bewilderment of life. It transported our troubled friend from the vulgar

hour and the ugly fact; drew him to something that had no warrant but

its sweetness, no name nor place save as the pure, the remote, the

antique. It was what most made him say to himself "Oh hang it, what does

it matter?" when he reflected that an \_homme sÃ©rieux\_, as they said in

Paris, rather gave himself away, as they said in America, by going every

night to the same sordid stall at which all the world might stare. It

was what kept him from doing anything but hover round Miriam--kept him

from paying any other visits, from attending to any business, from going

back to Calcutta Gardens. It was a spell he shrank intensely from

breaking and the cause of a hundred postponements, confusions, and

absurdities. It put him in a false position altogether, but it made of

the crooked little stucco villa in Saint John's Wood a place in the

upper air, commanding the prospect; a nest of winged liberties and

ironies far aloft above the huddled town. One should live at altitudes

when one could--they braced and simplified; and for a happy interval he

never touched the earth.

It was not that there were no influences tending at moments to drag him

down--an abasement from which he escaped only because he was up so high.

We have seen that Basil Dashwood could affect him at times as a chunk of

wood tied to his ankle--this through the circumstance that he made

Miriam's famous conditions, those of the public exhibition of her

genius, seem small and prosaic; so that Peter had to remind himself how

much this smallness was perhaps involved in their being at all. She

carried his imagination off into infinite spaces, whereas she carried

Dashwood's only into the box-office and the revival of plays that were

barbarously bad. The worst was its being so open to him to see that a

sharp young man really in the business might know better than he.

Another vessel of superior knowledge--he talked, that is, as if he knew

better than any one--was Gabriel Nash, who lacked no leisure for

hatefully haunting Balaklava Place, or in other words appeared to enjoy

the same command of his time as Peter Sherringham. The pilgrim from

Paris regarded him with mingled feelings, for he had not forgotten the

contentious character of their first meeting or the degree to which he

had been moved to urge upon Nick Dormer's consideration that his

talkative friend was probably one of the most eminent of asses. This

personage turned up now as an admirer of the charming creature he had

scoffed at, and there was much to exasperate in the smooth gloss of his

inconsistency, at which he never cast an embarrassed glance. He

practised indeed such loose license of regard to every question that it

was difficult, in vulgar parlance, to "have" him; his sympathies hummed

about like bees in a garden, with no visible plan, no economy in their

flight. He thought meanly of the modern theatre and yet had discovered a

fund of satisfaction in the most promising of its exponents; and Peter

could more than once but say to him that he should really, to keep his

opinions at all in hand, attach more value to the stage or less to the

interesting a tress. Miriam took her perfect ease at his expense and

treated him as the most abject of her slaves: all of which was worth

seeing as an exhibition, on Nash's part, of the beautifully

imperturbable. When Peter all too grossly pronounced him "damned"

impudent he always felt guilty later on of an injustice--Nash had so

little the air of a man with something to gain. He was aware

nevertheless of a certain itching in his boot-toe when his

fellow-visitor brought out, and for the most part to Miriam herself, in

answer to any charge of tergiversation, "Oh it's all right; it's the

voice, you know--the enchanting voice!" Nash meant by this, as indeed he

more fully set forth, that he came to the theatre or to the villa simply

to treat his ear to the sound--the richest then to be heard on earth, as

he maintained--issuing from Miriam's lips. Its richness was quite

independent of the words she might pronounce or the poor fable they

might subserve, and if the pleasure of hearing her in public was the

greater by reason of the larger volume of her utterance it was still

highly agreeable to see her at home, for it was there the strictly

mimetic gift he freely conceded to her came out most. He spoke as if she

had been formed by the bounty of nature to be his particular recreation,

and as if, being an expert in innocent joys, he took his pleasure

wherever he found it.

He was perpetually in the field, sociable, amiable, communicative,

inveterately contradicted but never confounded, ready to talk to any one

about anything and making disagreement--of which he left the

responsibility wholly to others--a basis of harmony. Every one knew what

he thought of the theatrical profession, and yet who could say he didn't

regard, its members as embodiments of comedy when he touched with such a

hand the spring of their foibles?--touched it with an art that made even

Peter laugh, notwithstanding his attitude of reserve where this

interloper was concerned. At any rate, though he had committed himself

as to their general fatuity he put up with their company, for the sake

of Miriam's vocal vibrations, with a practical philosophy that was all

his own. And she frankly took him for her supreme, her incorrigible

adorer, masquerading as a critic to save his vanity and tolerated for

his secret constancy in spite of being a bore. He was meanwhile really

not a bore to Peter, who failed of the luxury of being able to regard

him as one. He had seen too many strange countries and curious things,

observed and explored too much, to be void of illustration. Peter had a

sense that if he himself was in the \_grandes espaces\_ Gabriel had

probably, as a finer critic, a still wider range. If among Miriam's

associates Mr. Dashwood dragged him down, the other main sharer of his

privilege challenged him rather to higher and more fantastic flights. If

he saw the girl in larger relations than the young actor, who mainly saw

her in ill-written parts, Nash went a step further and regarded her,

irresponsibly and sublimely, as a priestess of harmony, a figure with

which the vulgar ideas of success and failure had nothing to do. He

laughed at her "parts," holding that without them she would still be

great. Peter envied him his power to content himself with the pleasures

he could get; Peter had a shrewd impression that contentment wouldn't be

the final sweetener of his own repast.

Above all Nash held his attention by a constant element of easy

reference to Nick Dormer, who, as we know, had suddenly become much more

interesting to his kinsman. Peter found food for observation, and in

some measure for perplexity, in the relations of all these clever people

with each other. He knew why his sister, who had a personal impatience

of unapplied ideas, had not been agreeably affected by Miriam's prime

patron and had not felt happy about the attribution of value to "such

people" by the man she was to marry. This was a side on which he had no

desire to resemble Julia, for he needed no teaching to divine that Nash

must have found her accessible to no light--none even about himself. He,

Peter, would have been sorry to have to confess he couldn't more or less

understand him. He understood furthermore that Miriam, in Nick's studio,

might very well have appeared to Julia a formidable force. She was

younger and would have "seen nothing," but she had quite as much her own

resources and was beautiful enough to have made Nick compare her with

the lady of Harsh even if he had been in love with that benefactress--a

pretension as to which her brother, as we know, entertained doubts.

Peter at all events saw for many days nothing of his cousin, though it

might have been said that Nick participated by implication at least in

the life of Balaklava Place. Had he given Julia tangible grounds and was

his unexpectedly fine rendering of Miriam an act of virtual infidelity?

In that case to what degree was the girl to be regarded as an accomplice

in his defection, and what was the real nature of Miriam's esteem for

her new and (as he might be called) distinguished ally? These questions

would have given Peter still more to think about had he not flattered

himself he had made up his mind that they concerned Nick and his sitter

herself infinitely more than they concerned any one else. That young

lady meanwhile was personally before him, so that he had no need to

consult for his pleasure his fresh recollection of the portrait. But he

thought of this striking production each time he thought of his so

good-looking kinsman's variety of range. And that happened often, for in

his hearing Miriam often discussed the happy artist and his

possibilities with Gabriel Nash, and Nash broke out about them to all

who might hear. Her own tone on the subject was uniform: she kept it on

record to a degree slightly irritating that Mr. Dormer had been

unforgettably--Peter particularly noted "unforgettably"--kind to her.

She never mentioned Julia's irruption to Julia's brother; she only

referred to the portrait, with inscrutable amenity, as a direct

consequence of this gentleman's fortunate suggestion that first day at

Madame CarrÃ©'s. Nash showed, however, such a disposition to dwell

sociably and luminously on the peculiarly interesting character of what

he called Dormer's predicament and on the fine suspense it was fitted to

kindle in the breast of the truly discerning, that Peter wondered, as I

have already hinted, if this insistence were not a subtle perversity, a

devilish little invention to torment a man whose jealousy was

presumable. Yet his fellow-pilgrim struck him as on the whole but

scantly devilish and as still less occupied with the prefigurement of so

plain a man's emotions. Indeed he threw a glamour of romance over Nick;

tossed off toward him such illuminating yet mystifying references that

they operated quite as a bait to curiosity, invested with amusement the

view of the possible, any wish to follow out the chain of events. He

learned from Gabriel that Nick was still away, and he then felt he could

almost submit to instruction, to initiation. The loose charm of these

days was troubled, however--it ceased to be idyllic--when late on the

evening of the second Sunday he walked away with Nash southward from

Saint John's Wood. For then something came out.

BOOK SIX

XXXII

It mattered not so much what the doctors thought--and Sir Matthew Hope,

the greatest of them all, had been down twice in one week--as that Mr.

Chayter, the omniscient butler, declared with all the authority of his

position and his experience that Mr. Carteret was very bad indeed. Nick

Dormer had a long talk with him--it lasted six minutes--the day he

hurried to Beauclere in response to a telegram. It was Mr. Chayter who

had taken upon himself to telegraph in spite of the presence in the

house of Mr. Carteret's nearest relation and only surviving sister, Mrs.

Lendon. This lady, a large, mild, healthy woman with a heavy tread, a

person who preferred early breakfasts, uncomfortable chairs and the

advertisement-sheet of the \_Times\_, had arrived the week before and was

awaiting the turn of events. She was a widow and occupied in Cornwall a

house nine miles from a station, which had, to make up for this

inconvenience as she had once told Nick, a fine old herbaceous garden.

She was extremely fond of an herbaceous garden--her main consciousness

was of herbaceous possibilities. Nick had often seen her--she had always

come to Beauclere once or twice a year. Her sojourn there made no great

difference; she was only an "Urania dear" for Mr. Carteret to look

across the table at when, on the close of dinner, it was time for her to

retire. She went out of the room always as if it were after some one

else; and on the gentlemen's "joining" her later--the junction was not

very close--she received them with an air of gratified surprise.

Chayter honoured Nick with a regard which approached, though not

improperly competing with it, the affection his master had placed on the

same young head, and Chayter knew a good many things. Among them he knew

his place; but it was wonderful how little that knowledge had rendered

him inaccessible to other kinds. He took upon himself to send for Nick

without speaking to Mrs. Lendon, whose influence was now a good deal

like that of some large occasional piece of furniture introduced on a

contingency. She was one of the solid conveniences that a comfortable

house would have, but you couldn't talk with a mahogany sofa or a

folding screen. Chayter knew how much she had "had" from her brother,

and how much her two daughters had each received on marriage; and he was

of the opinion that it was quite enough, especially considering the

society in which they--you could scarcely call it--moved. He knew beyond

this that they would all have more, and that was why he hesitated little

about communicating with Nick. If Mrs. Lendon should be ruffled at the

intrusion of a young man who neither was the child of a cousin nor had

been formally adopted, Chayter was parliamentary enough to see that the

forms of debate were observed. He had indeed a slightly compassionate

sense that Mrs. Lendon was not easily ruffled. She was always down an

extraordinary time before breakfast--Chayter refused to take it as in

the least admonitory--but usually went straight into the garden as if to

see that none of the plants had been stolen in the night, and had in the

end to be looked for by the footman in some out-of-the-way spot behind

the shrubbery, where, plumped upon the ground, she was mostly doing

something "rum" to a flower.

Mr. Carteret himself had expressed no wishes. He slept most of the

time--his failure at the last had been sudden, but he was rheumatic and

seventy-seven--and the situation was in Chayter's hands. Sir Matthew

Hope had opined even on a second visit that he would rally and go on, in

rudimentary comfort, some time longer; but Chayter took a different and

a still more intimate view. Nick was embarrassed: he scarcely knew what

he was there for from the moment he could give his good old friend no

conscious satisfaction. The doctors, the nurses, the servants, Mrs.

Lendon, and above all the settled equilibrium of the square thick house,

where an immutable order appeared to slant through the polished windows

and tinkle in the quieter bells, all these things represented best the

kind of supreme solace to which the master was most accessible.

It was judged best that for the first day Nick should not be introduced

into the darkened room. This was the decision of the two decorous

nurses, of whom the visitor had had a glimpse and who, with their black

uniforms and fresh faces of business, suggested the barmaid emulating

the nun. He was depressed and restless, felt himself in a false

position, and thought it lucky Mrs. Lendon had powers of placid

acceptance. They were old acquaintances: she treated him formally,

anxiously, but it was not the rigour of mistrust. It was much more an

expression of remote Cornish respect for young abilities and

distinguished connexions, inasmuch as she asked him rather yearningly

about Lady Agnes and about Lady Flora and Lady Elizabeth. He knew she

was kind and ungrudging, and his main regret was for his meagre

knowledge and poor responses in regard to his large blank aunts. He sat

in the garden with newspapers and looked at the lowered blinds in Mr.

Carteret's windows; he wandered round the abbey with cigarettes and

lightened his tread and felt grave, wishing everything might be over. He

would have liked much to see Mr. Carteret again, but had no desire that

Mr. Carteret should see him. In the evening he dined with Mrs. Lendon,

and she talked to him at his request and as much as she could about her

brother's early years, his beginnings of life. She was so much younger

that they appeared to have been rather a tradition of her own youth; but

her talk made Nick feel how tremendously different Mr. Carteret had been

at that period from what he, Nick, was to-day. He had published at the

age of thirty a little volume, thought at the time wonderfully clever,

called \_The Incidence of Rates\_; but Nick had not yet collected the

material for any such treatise. After dinner Mrs. Lendon, who was in

merciless full dress, retired to the drawing-room, where at the end of

ten minutes she was followed by Nick, who had remained behind only

because he thought Chayter would expect it. Mrs. Lendon almost shook

hands with him again and then Chayter brought in coffee. Almost in no

time afterwards he brought in tea, and the occupants of the drawing-room

sat for a slow half-hour, during which the lady looked round at the

apartment with a sigh and said: "Don't you think poor Charles had

exquisite taste?"

Fortunately the "local man" was at this moment ushered in. He had been

upstairs and he smiled himself in with the remark: "It's quite

wonderful, quite wonderful." What was wonderful was a marked improvement

in the breathing, a distinct indication of revival. The doctor had some

tea and chatted for a quarter of an hour in a way that showed what a

"good" manner and how large an experience a local man could have. When

he retired Nick walked out with him. The doctor's house was near by and

he had come on foot. He left the visitor with the assurance that in all

probability Mr. Carteret, who was certainly picking up, would be able to

see him on the morrow. Our young man turned his steps again to the abbey

and took a stroll about it in the starlight. It never looked so huge as

when it reared itself into the night, and Nick had never felt more fond

of it than on this occasion, more comforted and confirmed by its beauty.

When he came back he was readmitted by Chayter, who surveyed him in

respectful deprecation of the frivolity which had led him to attempt to

help himself through such an evening in such a way.

He went to bed early and slept badly, which was unusual with him; but it

was a pleasure to him to be told almost as soon as he appeared that Mr.

Carteret had asked for him. He went in to see him and was struck with

the change in his appearance. He had, however, spent a day with him just

after the New Year and another at the beginning of March, and had then

noted in him the menace of the final weakness. A week after Julia

Dallow's departure for the Continent he had again devoted several hours

to the place and to the intention of telling his old friend how the

happy event had been brought to naught--the advantage he had been so

good as to desire for him and to make the condition of a splendid gift.

Before this, for a few days, he had been keeping back, to announce it

personally, the good news that Julia had at last set their situation in

order: he wanted to enjoy the old man's pleasure--so sore a trial had

her arbitrary behaviour been for a year. If she had offered Mr. Carteret

a conciliatory visit before Christmas, had come down from London one day

to lunch with him, this had but contributed to make him subsequently

exhibit to poor Nick, as the victim of her elegant perversity, a great

deal of earnest commiseration in a jocose form. Upon his honour, as he

said, she was as clever and "specious" a woman--this was his odd

expression--as he had ever seen in his life. The merit of her behaviour

on that occasion, as Nick knew, was that she had not been specious at

her lover's expense: she had breathed no doubt of his public purpose and

had had the strange grace to say that in truth she was older than he, so

that it was only fair to give his affections time to mature. But when

Nick saw their hopeful host after the rupture at which we have been

present he found him in no state to deal with worries: he was seriously

ailing, it was the beginning of worse things and not a time to put his

attention to the stretch. After this excursion Nick had gone back to

town saddened by his patient's now unmistakably settled decline, but

rather relieved that he had had himself to make no confession. It had

even occurred to him that the need for making one at all might never

come up. Certainly it wouldn't if the ebb of Mr. Carteret's strength

should continue unchecked. He might pass away in the persuasion that

everything would happen as he wished it, though indeed without enriching

Nick on his wedding-day to the tune he had promised. Very likely he had

made legal arrangements in virtue of which his bounty would take effect

in case of the right event and in that case alone. At present Nick had a

bigger, an uglier truth to tell--the last three days had made the

difference; but, oddly enough, though his responsibility had increased

his reluctance to speak had vanished: he was positively eager to clear

up a situation over which it was not consistent with his honour to leave

a shade.

The doctor had been right on coming in after dinner; it was clear in

the morning that they had not seen the last of Mr. Carteret's power of

picking up. Chayter, who had waited on him, refused austerely to change

his opinion with every change in his master's temperature; but the

nurses took the cheering view that it would do their charge good for Mr.

Dormer to sit with him a little. One of them remained in the room in the

deep window-seat, and Nick spent twenty minutes by the bedside. It was

not a case for much conversation, but his helpless host seemed still to

like to look at him. There was life in his kind old eyes, a stir of

something that would express itself yet in some further wise provision.

He laid his liberal hand on Nick's with a confidence that showed how

little it was really disabled. He said very little, and the nurse had

recommended that the visitor himself should not overflow in speech; but

from time to time he murmured with a faint smile: "To-night's division,

you know--you mustn't miss it." There was probably to be no division

that night, as happened, but even Mr. Carteret's aberrations were

parliamentary. Before Nick withdrew he had been able to assure him he

was rapidly getting better and that such valuable hours, the young man's

own, mustn't be wasted. "Come back on Friday if they come to the second

reading." These were the words with which Nick was dismissed, and at

noon the doctor said the invalid was doing very well, but that Nick had

better leave him quiet for that day. Our young man accordingly

determined to go up to town for the night, and even, should he receive

no summons, for the next day. He arranged with Chayter that he should be

telegraphed to if Mr. Carteret were either better or worse.

"Oh he can't very well be worse, sir," Chayter replied inexorably; but

he relaxed so far as to remark that of course it wouldn't do for Nick

to neglect the House.

"Oh the House!"--Nick was ambiguous and avoided the butler's eye. It

would be easy enough to tell Mr. Carteret, but nothing would have

sustained him in the effort to make a clean breast to Chayter.

He might equivocate about the House, but he had the sense of things to

be done awaiting him in London. He telegraphed to his servant and spent

that night in Rosedale Road. The things to be done were apparently to be

done in his studio: his servant met him there with a large bundle of

letters. He failed that evening to stray within two miles of

Westminster, and the legislature of his country reassembled without his

support. The next morning he received a telegram from Chayter, to whom

he had given Rosedale Road as an address. This missive simply informed

him that Mr. Carteret wished to see him; it seemed a sign that he was

better, though Chayter wouldn't say so. Nick again accordingly took his

place in the train to Beauclere. He had been there very often, but it

was present to him that now, after a little, he should go only once

more--for a particular dismal occasion. All that was over, everything

that belonged to it was over. He learned on his arrival--he saw Mrs.

Lendon immediately--that his old friend had continued to pick up. He had

expressed a strong and a perfectly rational desire to talk with his

expected visitor, and the doctor had said that if it was about anything

important they should forbear to oppose him. "He says it's about

something very important," Mrs. Lendon remarked, resting shy eyes on him

while she added that she herself was now sitting with her dear brother.

She had sent those wonderful young ladies out to see the abbey. Nick

paused with her outside Mr. Carteret's door. He wanted to say something

rather intimate and all soothing to her in return for her homely

charity--give her a hint, for which she was far from looking, that

practically he had now no interest in her brother's estate. This was of

course impossible; her lack of irony, of play of mind, gave him no

pretext, and such a reference would be an insult to her simple

discretion. She was either not thinking of his interest at all, or was

thinking of it with the tolerance of a nature trained to a hundred

decent submissions. Nick looked a little into her mild, uninvestigating

eyes, and it came over him supremely that the goodness of these people

was singularly pure: they were a part of what was cleanest and sanest

and dullest in humanity. There had been just a little mocking inflexion

in Mrs. Lendon's pleasant voice; but it was dedicated to the young

ladies in the black uniforms--she could perhaps be humorous about

\_them\_--and not to the theory of the "importance" of Nick's interview

with her brother. His arrested desire to let her know he was not greedy

translated itself into a vague friendliness and into the abrupt, rather

bewildering words: "I can't tell you half the good I think of you." As

he passed into Mr. Carteret's room it occurred to him that she would

perhaps interpret this speech as an acknowledgment of obligation--of her

good nature in not keeping him away from the rich old man.

XXXIII

The rich old man was propped up on pillows, and in this attitude,

beneath the high, spare canopy of his bed, presented himself to Nick's

picture-seeking vision as a figure in a clever composition or a "story."

He had gathered strength, though this strength was not much in his

voice; it was mainly in his brighter eyes and his air of being pleased

with himself. He put out his hand and said, "I daresay you know why I

sent for you"; on which Nick sank into the seat he had occupied the day

before, replying that he had been delighted to come, whatever the

reason. Mr. Carteret said nothing more about the division or the second

reading; he only murmured that they were keeping the newspapers for him.

"I'm rather behind--I'm rather behind," he went on; "but two or three

quiet mornings will make it all right. You can go back to-night, you

know--you can easily go back." This was the only thing not quite

straight that Nick found in him--his making light of his young friend's

flying to and fro. The young friend sat looking at him with a sense that

was half compunction and half the idea of the rare beauty of his face,

to which, strangely, the waste of illness now seemed to have restored

something of its youth. Mr. Carteret was evidently conscious that this

morning he shouldn't be able to go on long, so that he must be

practical and concise. "I daresay you know--you've only to remember," he

continued.

"I needn't tell you what a pleasure it is to me to see you--there can be

no better reason than that," was what Nick could say.

"Hasn't the year come round--the year of that foolish arrangement?"

Nick thought a little, asking himself if it were really necessary to

disturb his companion's earnest faith. Then the consciousness of the

falsity of his own position surged over him again and he replied: "Do

you mean the period for which Mrs. Dallow insisted on keeping me

dangling? Oh \_that's\_ over!" he almost gaily brought out.

"And are you married--has it come off?" the old man asked eagerly. "How

long have I been ill?"

"We're uncomfortable, unreasonable people, not deserving of your

interest. We're not married," Nick said.

"Then I haven't been ill so long?" his host quavered with vague relief.

"Not very long--but things \_are\_ different," he went on.

The old man's eyes rested on his--he noted how much larger they

appeared. "You mean the arrangements are made--the day's at hand?"

"There are no arrangements," Nick smiled. "But why should it trouble

you?"

"What then will you do--without arrangements?" The inquiry was plaintive

and childlike.

"We shall do nothing--there's nothing to be done. We're not to be

married--it's all off," said poor Nick. Then he added: "Mrs. Dallow has

gone abroad."

The old man, motionless among his pillows, gave a long groan. "Ah I

don't like that."

"No more do I, sir."

"What's the matter? It was so good--so good."

"It wasn't good enough for Julia," Nick declared.

"For Julia? Is Julia so great as that? She told me she had the greatest

regard for you. You're good enough for the best, my dear boy," Mr.

Carteret pursued.

"You don't know me: I \_am\_ disappointing. She had, I believe, a great

regard for me, but I've forfeited her good opinion."

The old man stared at this cynical announcement: he searched his

visitor's face for some attenuation of the words. But Nick apparently

struck him as unashamed, and a faint colour coming into his withered

cheek indicated his mystification and alarm. "Have you been unfaithful

to her?" he still considerately asked.

"She thinks so--it comes to the same thing. As I told you a year ago,

she doesn't believe in me."

"You ought to have made her--you ought to have made her," said Mr.

Carteret. Nick was about to plead some reason when he continued: "Do you

remember what I told you I'd give you if you did? Do you remember what I

told you I'd give you on your wedding-day?"

"You expressed the most generous intentions; and I remember them as much

as a man may do who has no wish to remind you of them."

"The money's there--I've put it aside."

"I haven't earned it--I haven't earned a penny of it. Give it to those

who deserve it more," said Nick.

"I don't understand, I don't understand," Mr. Carteret whimpered, the

tears of weakness in his eyes. His face flushed and he added: "I'm not

good for much discussion; I'm very much disappointed."

"I think I may say it's not my fault--I've done what I can," Nick

declared.

"But when people are in love they do more than that."

"Oh it's all over!" said our young man; not caring much now, for the

moment, how disconcerted his companion might be, so long as he disabused

him of the idea that they were partners to a bargain. "We've tormented

each other and we've tormented you--and that's all that has come of it."

His companion's eyes seemed to stare at strange things. "Don't you care

for what I'd have done for you--shouldn't you have liked it?"

"Of course one likes kindness--one likes money. But it's all over," Nick

repeated. Then he added: "I fatigue you, I knock you up, with telling

you these troubles. I only do so because it seems to me right you should

know. But don't be worried--everything's for the best."

He patted the pale hand reassuringly, inclined himself affectionately,

but Mr. Carteret was not easily soothed. He had practised lucidity all

his life, had expected it of others and had never given his assent to an

indistinct proposition. He was weak, yet not too weak to recognise that

he had formed a calculation now vitiated by a wrong factor--put his name

to a contract of which the other side had not been carried out. More

than fifty years of conscious success pressed him to try to understand;

he had never muddled his affairs and he couldn't muddle them now. At the

same time he was aware of the necessity of economising his effort, and

he would gather that inward force, patiently and almost cunningly, for

the right question and the right induction. He was still able to make

his agitation reflective, and it could still consort with his high hopes

of Nick that he should find himself regarding mere vague, verbal

comfort, words in the air, as an inadequate guarantee. So after he had

attached his dim vision to his young friend's face a moment he brought

out: "Have you done anything bad?"

"Nothing worse than usual," Nick laughed.

"Ah everything should have been better than usual."

"Well, it hasn't been that--that I must say."

"Do you sometimes think of your father?" Mr. Carteret continued.

Nick had a decent pause. "\_You\_ make me think of him--you've always that

pleasant effect."

"His name would have lived--it mustn't be lost."

"Yes, but the competition to-day is terrible," Nick returned.

His host considered this as if he found a serious flaw in it; after

which he began again: "I never supposed you a trifler."

"I'm determined not to be."

"I thought her charming. Don't you love Mrs. Dallow?" Mr. Carteret

profoundly asked.

"Don't put it to me so to-day, for I feel sore and injured. I don't

think she has treated me well."

"You should have held her--you shouldn't have let her go," the old man

returned with unexpected fire.

His visitor flushed at this, so strange was it to receive a lesson in

energy from a dying octogenarian. Yet after an instant Nick answered

with due modesty: "I haven't been clever enough, no doubt."

"Don't say that, don't say that--!" Mr. Carteret shrunk from the

thought. "Don't think I can allow you any easing-off of that sort. I

know how well you've done. You're taking your place. Several gentlemen

have told me. Hasn't she felt a scruple, knowing my settlement on you to

depend----?" he pursued.

"Oh she hasn't known--hasn't known anything about it."

"I don't understand; though I think you explained somewhat a year

ago"--the poor gentleman gave it up. "I think she wanted to speak to

me--of any intentions I might have in regard to you--the day she was

here. Very nicely, very properly she'd have done it, I'm sure. I think

her idea was that I ought to make any settlement quite independent of

your marrying her or not marrying her. But I tried to convey to her--I

don't know whether she understood me--that I liked her too much for

that, I wanted too much to make sure of her."

"To make sure of me, you mean," said Nick. "And now after all you see

you haven't."

"Well, perhaps it was that," sighed the old man confusedly.

"All this is very bad for you--we'll talk again," Nick urged.

"No, no--let us finish it now. I like to know what I'm doing. I shall

rest better when I do know. There are great things to be done; the

future will be full--the future will be fine," Mr. Carteret wandered.

"Let me be distinct about this for Julia: that if we hadn't been

sundered her generosity to me would have been complete--she'd have put

her great fortune absolutely at my disposal," Nick said after a moment.

"Her consciousness of all that naturally carries her over any particular

distress in regard to what won't come to me now from another source."

"Ah don't lose it!" the old man painfully pleaded.

"It's in your hands, sir," Nick returned.

"I mean Mrs. Dallow's fortune. It will be of the highest utility. That

was what your father missed."

"I shall miss more than my father did," said Nick.

"Shell come back to you--I can't look at you and doubt that."

Nick smiled with a slow headshake. "Never, never, never! You look at me,

my grand old friend, but you don't see me. I'm not what you think."

"What is it--what is it? \_Have\_ you been bad?" Mr. Carteret panted.

"No, no; I'm not bad. But I'm different."

"Different----?"

"Different from my father. Different from Mrs. Dallow. Different from

you."

"Ah why do you perplex me?" the old man moaned. "You've done something."

"I don't want to perplex you, but I have done something," said Nick,

getting up.

He had heard the door open softly behind him and Mrs. Lendon come

forward with precautions. "What has he done--what has he done?" quavered

Mr. Carteret to his sister. She, however, after a glance at the patient,

motioned their young friend away and, bending over the bed, replied, in

a voice expressive at that moment of an ample provision of vital

comfort:

"He has only excited you, I'm afraid, a little more than is good for

you. Isn't your dear old head a little too high?" Nick regarded himself

as justly banished, and he quitted the room with a ready acquiescence in

any power to carry on the scene of which Mrs. Lendon might find herself

possessed. He felt distinctly brutal as he heard his host emit a weak

exhalation of assent to some change of position. But he would have

reproached himself more if he had wished less to guard against the

acceptance of an equivalent for duties unperformed. Mr. Carteret had had

in his mind, characteristically, the idea of a fine high contract, and

there was something more to be said about that.

Nick went out of the house and stayed away for two or three hours, quite

ready to regard the place as quieter and safer without him. He haunted

the abbey as usual and sat a long time in its simplifying stillness,

turning over many things. He came back again at the luncheon-hour,

through the garden, and heard, somewhat to his surprise and greatly to

his relief, that his host had composed himself promptly enough after

their agitating interview. Mrs. Lendon talked at luncheon much as if she

expected her brother to be, as she said, really quite fit again. She

asked Nick no awkward question; which was uncommonly good of her, he

thought, considering that she might have said, "What in the world were

you trying to get out of him?" She only reported to our young man that

the invalid had every hope of a short interview about half-past seven, a

\_very\_ short one: this gentle emphasis was Mrs. Lendon's single tribute

to the critical spirit. Nick divined that Mr. Carteret's desire for

further explanations was really strong and had been capable of

sustaining him through a bad morning, capable even of helping him--it

would have been a secret and wonderful momentary conquest of

weakness--to pass it off for a good one. He wished he might make a

sketch of him, from the life, as he had seen him after breakfast; he had

a conviction he could make a strong one, which would be a precious

memento. But he shrank from proposing this--the dear man might think it

unparliamentary. The doctor had called while Nick was out, and he came

again at five o'clock without that inmate's seeing him. The latter was

busy in his room at that hour: he wrote a short letter which took him a

long time. But apparently there had been no veto on a resumption of

talk, for at half-past seven his friend sent for him. The nurse at the

door said, "Only a moment, I hope, sir?" but took him in and then

withdrew.

The prolonged daylight was in the room and its occupant again

established on his pile of pillows, but with his head a little lower.

Nick sat down by him and expressed the hope of not having upset him in

the morning; but the old man, with fixed, enlarged eyes, took up their

conversation exactly where they had left it. "What have you done--what

have you done? Have you associated yourself with some other woman?"

"No, no; I don't think she can accuse me of that."

"Well then she'll come back to you if you take the right way with her."

It might have been droll to hear the poor gentleman, in his situation,

give his views on the right way with women; but Nick was not moved to

enjoy that diversion. "I've taken the wrong way. I've done something

that must spoil my prospects in that direction for ever. I've written a

letter," the visitor went on; but his companion had already interrupted

him.

"You've written a letter?"

"To my constituents, informing them of my determination to resign my

seat."

"To resign your seat?"

"I've made up my mind, after no end of reflexion, dear Mr. Carteret, to

work on quite other lines. I've a plan of becoming a painter. So I've

given up the idea of a political life."

"A painter?" Mr. Carteret seemed to turn whiter. "I'm going in for the

portrait in oils. It sounds absurd, I know, and I'm thus specific only

to show you I don't in the least expect you to count on me." The invalid

had continued to stare at first; then his eyes slowly closed and he lay

motionless and blank. "Don't let it trouble you now; it's a long story

and rather a poor one; when you get better I'll tell you all about it.

Well talk it over amicably and I'll bring you to my view," Nick went on

hypocritically. He had laid his hand again on the hand beside him; it

felt cold, and as the old man remained silent he had a moment of

exaggerated fear.

"This is dreadful news"--and Mr. Carteret opened his eyes.

"Certainly it must seem so to you, for I've always kept from you--I was

ashamed, and my present confusion is a just chastisement--the great

interest I have always taken in the----!" But Nick broke down with a

gasp, to add presently, with an intention of the pleasant and a sense of

the foolish: "In the pencil and the brush." He spoke of his current

confusion, though his manner might have been thought to show it but

little. He was himself surprised at his brazen assurance and had to

recognise that at the point things had come to now he was profoundly

obstinate and quiet.

"The pencil--the brush? They're not the weapons of a gentleman," Mr.

Carteret pronounced.

"I was sure that would be your feeling. I repeat that I mention them

only because you once said you intended to do something for me, as the

phrase is, and I thought you oughtn't to do it in ignorance."

"My ignorance was better. Such knowledge isn't good for me."

"Forgive me, my dear old friend," Nick kept it bravely up. "When you're

better you'll see it differently."

"I shall never be better now."

"Ah no," Nick insisted; "it will really do you good after a little.

Think it over quietly and you'll be glad I've stopped humbugging."

"I loved you--I loved you as my son," the old man wailed.

He sank on his knee beside the bed and leaned over him tenderly. "Get

better, get better, and I'll be your son for the rest of your life."

"Poor Dormer--poor Dormer!" Mr. Carteret continued to lament.

"I admit that if he had lived I probably shouldn't have done it," said

Nick. "I daresay I should have deferred to his prejudices even though

thinking them narrow."

"Do you turn against your father?" his host asked, making, to disengage

his arm from the young man's touch, an effort betraying the irritation

of conscious weakness. Nick got up at this and stood a moment looking

down at him while he went on: "Do you give up your name, do you give up

your country?"

"If I do something good my country may like it." Nick spoke as if he had

thought that out.

"Do you regard them as equal, the two glories?"

"Here comes your nurse to blow me up and turn me out," said Nick.

The nurse had come in, but Mr. Carteret directed to her an audible dry,

courteous "Be so good as to wait till I send for you," which arrested

her in the large room at some distance from the bed and then had the

effect of making her turn on her heel with a professional laugh. She

clearly judged that an old gentleman with the fine manner of his prime

might still be trusted to take care of himself. When she had gone that

personage addressed to his visitor the question for which his deep

displeasure lent him strength. "Do you pretend there's a nobler life

than a high political career?"

"I think the noble life's doing one's work well. One can do it very ill

and be very base and mean in what you call a high political career. I

haven't been in the House so many months without finding that out. It

contains some very small souls."

"You should stand against them--you should expose them!" stammered Mr.

Carteret.

"Stand against them, against one's own party!"

The old man contended a moment with this and then broke out: "God

forgive you, are you a Tory, are you a Tory?"

"How little you understand me!" laughed Nick with a ring of bitterness.

"Little enough--little enough, my boy. Have you sent your electors your

dreadful letter?"

"Not yet; but it's all ready and I shan't change my mind."

"You will--you will. You'll think better of it. You'll see your duty,"

said the invalid almost coaxingly.

"That seems very improbable, for my determination, crudely and abruptly

as, to my great regret, it comes to you here, is the fruit of a long and

painful struggle. The difficulty is that I see my duty just in this

other effort."

"An effort? Do you call it an effort to fall away, to sink far down, to

give up every effort? What does your mother say, heaven help her?" Mr.

Carteret went on before Nick could answer the other question.

"I haven't told her yet."

"You're ashamed, you're ashamed!" Nick only looked out of the west

window now--he felt his ears turn hot. "Tell her it would have been

sixty thousand. I had the money all ready."

"I shan't tell her that," said Nick, redder still.

"Poor woman--poor dear woman!" Mr. Carteret woefully cried.

"Yes indeed--she won't like it."

"Think it all over again; don't throw away a splendid future!" These

words were uttered with a final flicker of passion--Nick had never heard

such an accent on his old friend's lips. But he next began to murmur,

"I'm tired--I'm very tired," and sank back with a groan and with closed

lips. His guest gently assured him that he had but too much cause to be

exhausted and that the worst was over now. He smoothed his pillows for

him and said he must leave him, would send in the nurse. "Come back,

come back," Mr. Carteret pleaded against that; "come back and tell me

it's a horrible dream."

Nick did go back very late that evening; his host had sent a message to

his room. But one of the nurses was on the ground this time and made

good her opposition watch in hand. The sick-room was shrouded and

darkened; the shaded candle left the bed in gloom. Nick's interview with

his venerable friend was the affair of but a moment; the nurse

interposed, impatient and not understanding. She heard Nick say that he

had posted his letter now and their companion flash out with an acerbity

still savouring of the sordid associations of a world he had not done

with: "Then of course my settlement doesn't take effect!"

"Oh that's all right," Nick answered kindly; and he went off next

morning by the early train--his injured host was still sleeping. Mrs.

Lendon's habits made it easy for her to be present in matutinal bloom at

the young man's hasty breakfast, and she sent a particular remembrance

to Lady Agnes and (when he should see them) to the Ladies Flora and

Elizabeth. Nick had a prevision of the spirit in which his mother at

least would now receive hollow compliments from Beauclere.

The night before, as soon as he had quitted Mr. Carteret, the old man

said to the nurse that he wished Mr. Chayter instructed to go and fetch

Mr. Mitton the first thing in the morning. Mr. Mitton was the leading

solicitor at Beauclere.

XXXIV

The really formidable thing for Nick had been to tell his mother: a

truth of which he was so conscious that he had the matter out with her

the very morning he returned from Beauclere. She and Grace had come back

the afternoon before from their own enjoyment of rural hospitality, and,

knowing this--she had written him her intention from the country--he

drove straight from the station to Calcutta Gardens. There was a little

room on the right of the house-door known as his own room; but in which

of a morning, when he was not at home, Lady Agnes sometimes wrote her

letters. These were always numerous, and when she heard our young man's

cab she happened to be engaged with them at the big brass-mounted bureau

that had belonged to his father, where, amid a margin of works of

political reference, she seemed to herself to make public affairs feel

the point of her elbow.

She came into the hall to meet her son and to hear about their

benefactor, and Nick went straight back into the room with her and

closed the door. It would be in the evening paper and she would see it,

and he had no right to allow her to wait for that. It proved indeed a

terrible hour; and when ten minutes later Grace, who had learned

upstairs her brother's return, went down for further news of him she

heard from the hall a sound of voices that made her first pause and

then retrace her steps on tiptoe. She mounted to the drawing-room and

crept about there, palpitating, looking at moments into the dull street

and wondering what on earth had taken place. She had no one to express

her wonder to, for Florence Tressilian had departed and Biddy after

breakfast betaken herself, in accordance with a custom now inveterate,

to Rosedale Road. Her mother was unmistakably and passionately crying--a

fact tremendous in its significance, for Lady Agnes had not often been

brought so low. Nick had seen her cry, but this almost awful spectacle

had seldom been offered to Grace, and it now convinced her that some

dreadful thing had happened.

That was of course in order, after Nick's mysterious quarrel with Julia,

which had made his mother so ill and was at present followed up with new

horrors. The row, as Grace mentally phrased it, had had something to do

with the rupture of the lovers--some deeper depth of disappointment had

begun to yawn. Grace asked herself if they were talking about Broadwood;

if Nick had demanded that in the conditions so unpleasantly altered Lady

Agnes should restore that awfully nice house to its owner. This was

very possible, but why should he so suddenly have broken out about

it? And, moreover, their mother, though sore to bleeding about

the whole business--for Broadwood, in its fresh comfort, was too

delightful--wouldn't have met this pretension with tears: hadn't she

already so perversely declared that they couldn't decently continue to

make use of the place? Julia had said that of course they must go on,

but Lady Agnes was prepared with an effective rejoinder to that. It

didn't consist of words--it was to be austerely practical, was to

consist of letting Julia see, at the moment she should least expect it,

that they quite wouldn't go on. Lady Agnes was ostensibly waiting for

this moment--the moment when her renunciation would be most impressive.

Grace was conscious of how she had for many days been moving with her

mother in darkness, deeply stricken by Nick's culpable--oh he was

culpable!--loss of his prize, but feeling an obscure element in the

matter they didn't grasp, an undiscovered explanation that would perhaps

make it still worse, though it might make \_them\_, poor things, a little

better. He had explained nothing, he had simply said, "Dear mother, we

don't hit it off, after all; it's an awful bore, but we don't"--as if

that were in the dire conditions an adequate balm for two aching hearts.

From Julia naturally no flood of light was to be looked for--Julia

\_never\_ humoured curiosity--and, though she very often did the thing you

wouldn't suppose, she was not unexpectedly apologetic in this case.

Grace recognised that in such a position it would savour of apology for

her to disclose to Lady Agnes her grounds for having let Nick off; and

she wouldn't have liked to be the person to suggest to Julia that any

one looked for anything from her. Neither of the disunited pair blamed

the other or cast an aspersion, and it was all very magnanimous and

superior and impenetrable and exasperating. With all this Grace had a

suspicion that Biddy knew something more, that for Biddy the tormenting

curtain had been lifted.

Biddy had come and gone in these days with a perceptible air of

detachment from the tribulations of home. It had made her, fortunately,

very pretty--still prettier than usual: it sometimes happened that at

moments when Grace was most angry she had a faint sweet smile which

might have been drawn from some source of occult consolation. It was

perhaps in some degree connected with Peter Sherringham's visit, as to

which the girl had not been superstitiously silent. When Grace asked

her if she had secret information and if it pointed to the idea that

everything would be all right in the end, she pretended to know

nothing--What should she know? she asked with the loveliest arch of

eyebrows over an unblinking candour--and begged her sister not to let

Lady Agnes believe her better off than themselves. She contributed

nothing to their gropings save a much better patience, but she went with

noticeable regularity, on the pretext of her foolish modelling, to

Rosedale Road. She was frankly on Nick's side; not going so far as to

say he had been right, but saying distinctly how sure she was that,

whatever had happened, he couldn't have helped it, not a mite. This was

striking, because, as Grace knew, the younger of the sisters had been

much favoured by Julia and wouldn't have sacrificed her easily. It

associated itself in the irritated mind of the elder with Biddy's

frequent visits to the studio and made Miss Dormer ask herself if the

crisis in Nick's and Julia's business had not somehow been linked to

that unnatural spot.

She had gone there two or three times while Biddy was working, gone to

pick up any clue to the mystery that might peep out. But she had put her

hand on nothing more--it wouldn't have occurred to her to say nothing

less--than the so dreadfully pointed presence of Gabriel Nash. She once

found that odd satellite, to her surprise, paying a visit to her

sister--he had come for Nick, who was absent; she remembered how they

had met in Paris and how little he had succeeded with them. When she had

asked Biddy afterwards how she could receive him that way Biddy had

replied that even she, Grace, would have some charity for him if she

could hear how fond he was of poor Nick. He had talked to her only of

Nick--of nothing else. Grace had observed how she spoke of Nick as

injured, and had noted the implication that some one else, ceasing to be

fond of him, was thereby condemned in Biddy's eyes. It seemed to Grace

that some one else had at least a right not to like some of his friends.

The studio struck her as mean and horrid; and so far from suggesting to

her that it could have played a part in making Nick and Julia fall out

she only felt how little its dusty want of consequence, could count, one

way or the other, for Julia. Grace, who had no opinions on art, saw no

merit whatever in those "impressions" on canvas from Nick's hand with

which the place was bestrewn. She didn't at all wish her brother to have

talent in that direction, yet it was secretly humiliating to her that he

hadn't more.

Nick meanwhile felt a pang of almost horrified penitence, in the little

room on the right of the hall, the moment after he had made his mother

really understand he had thrown up his scat and that it would probably

be in the evening papers. That she would take this very ill was an idea

that had pressed upon him hard enough, but she took it even worse than

he had feared. He measured, in the look she gave him when the full truth

loomed upon her, the mortal cruelty of her distress; her face was like

that of a passenger on a ship who sees the huge bows of another vessel

towering close out of the fog. There are visions of dismay before which

the best conscience recoils, and though Nick had made his choice on all

the grounds there were a few minutes in which he would gladly have

admitted that his wisdom was a dark mistake. His heart was in his

throat, he had gone too far; he had been ready to disappoint his

mother--he had not been ready to destroy her.

Lady Agnes, I hasten to add, was not destroyed; she made, after her

first drowning gasp, a tremendous scene of opposition, in the face of

which her son could only fall back on his intrenchments. She must know

the worst, he had thought: so he told her everything, including the

little story of the forfeiture of his "expectations" from Mr. Carteret.

He showed her this time not only the face of the matter, but what lay

below it; narrated briefly the incident in his studio which had led to

Julia Dallow's deciding she couldn't after all put up with him. This was

wholly new to Lady Agnes, she had had no clue to it, and he could

instantly see how it made the event worse for her, adding a hideous

positive to an abominable negative. He noted now that, distressed and

distracted as she had been by his rupture with Julia, she had still held

to the faith that their engagement would come on again; believing

evidently that he had a personal empire over the mistress of Harsh which

would bring her back. Lady Agnes was forced to recognise this empire as

precarious, to forswear the hope of a blessed renewal from the moment

the question was of base infatuations on his own part. Nick confessed to

an infatuation, but did his best to show her it wasn't base; that it

wasn't--since Julia had had faith in his loyalty--for the person of the

young lady who had been discovered posturing to him and whom he had seen

but half-a-dozen times in his life. He endeavoured to recall to his

mother the identity of this young lady, he adverted to the occasion in

Paris when they all had seen her together. But Lady Agnes's mind and

memory were a blank on the subject of Miss Miriam Rooth and she wanted

to hear nothing whatever about her: it was enough that she was the cause

of their ruin and a part of his pitiless folly. She needed to know

nothing of her to allude to her as if it were superfluous to give a

definite name to the class to which she belonged.

But she gave a name to the group in which Nick had now taken his place,

and it made him feel after the lapse of years like a small, scolded,

sorry boy again; for it was so far away he could scarcely remember

it--besides there having been but a moment or two of that sort in his

happy childhood--the time when this parent had slapped him and called

him a little fool. He was a big fool now--hugely immeasurable; she

repeated the term over and over with high-pitched passion. The most

painful thing in this painful hour was perhaps his glimpse of the

strange feminine cynicism that lurked in her fine sense of injury. Where

there was such a complexity of revolt it would have been difficult to

pick out particular wrongs; but Nick could see that, to his mother's

imagination, he was most a fool for not having kept his relations with

the actress, whatever they were, better from Julia's knowledge. He

remained indeed freshly surprised at the ardour with which she had

rested her hopes on Julia. Julia was certainly a combination--she was

accomplished, she was a sort of leading woman and she was rich; but

after all--putting aside what she might be to a man in love with

her--she was not the keystone of the universe. Yet the form in which the

consequences of his apostasy appeared most to come home to Lady Agnes

was the loss for the Dormer family of the advantages attached to the

possession of Mrs. Dallow. The larger mortification would round itself

later; for the hour the damning thing was that Nick had made that lady

the gift of an unforgivable grievance. He had clinched their separation

by his letter to his electors--and that above all was the wickedness of

the letter. Julia would have got over the other woman, but she would

never get over his becoming a nobody.

Lady Agnes challenged him upon this low prospect exactly as if he had

embraced it with the malignant purpose of making the return of his late

intended impossible. She contradicted her premises and lost her way in

her wrath. What had made him suddenly turn round if he had been in good

faith before? He had never been in good faith--never, never; he had had

from his earliest childhood the nastiest hankerings after a vulgar

little daubing, trash-talking life; they were not in him, the grander,

nobler aspirations--they never had been--and he had been anything but

honest to lead her on, to lead them all on, to think he would do

something: the fall and the shame would have been less for them if they

had come earlier. Moreover, what need under heaven had he to tell

Charles Carteret of the cruel folly on his very death-bed?--as if he

mightn't have let it all alone and accepted the benefit the old man was

so delighted to confer. No wonder Mr. Carteret would keep his money for

his heirs if that was the way Nick proposed to repay him; but where was

the common sense, where was the common charity, where was the common

decency of tormenting him with such vile news in his last hours? Was he

trying what he could invent that would break her heart, that would send

her in sorrow down to her grave? Weren't they all miserable enough and

hadn't he a ray of pity for his wretched sisters?

The relation of effect and cause, in regard to his sisters'

wretchedness, was but dimly discernible to Nick, who, however, perceived

his mother genuinely to consider that his action had disconnected them

all, still more than she held they were already disconnected, from the

good things of life. Julia was money, Mr. Carteret was money--everything

else was the absence of it. If these precious people had been primarily

money for Nick it after all flattered the distributive impulse in him to

have taken for granted that for the rest of the family too the

difference would have been so great. For days, for weeks and months to

come, the little room on the right of the hall was to vibrate for our

young man, as if the very walls and window-panes still suffered, with

the odious trial of his true temper.

XXXV

That evening--the evening of his return from Beauclere--he was conscious

of a keen desire to get away, to go abroad, to leave behind him the

little chatter his resignation would be sure to produce in an age of

publicity which never discriminated as to the quality of events. Then he

felt it decidedly better to stay, to see the business through on the

spot. Besides, he would have to meet his constituents--would a parcel of

cheese-eating burgesses ever have been "met" on so queer an

occasion?--and when that was over the incident would practically be

closed. Nick had an idea he knew in advance how it would affect him to

be pointed at as a person who had given up a considerable chance of

eventual "office" to take likenesses at so much a head. He wouldn't

attempt down at Harsh to touch on the question of motive; for, given the

nature of the public mind of Harsh, that would be a strain on his

faculty of exposition. But as regards the chaff of the political world

and of society he had a hope he should find chaff enough for retorts. It

was true that when his mother twitted him in her own effective way he

had felt rather flattened out; but then one's mother might have a

heavier hand than any one else. He had not thrown up the House of

Commons to amuse himself; he had thrown it up to work, to sit quietly

down and bend over his task. If he should go abroad his parent might

think he had some weak-minded view of joining Julia and trying, with

however little hope, to win her back--an illusion it would be singularly

pernicious to encourage. His desire for Julia's society had succumbed

for the present at any rate to a dire interruption--he had become more

and more aware of their speaking a different language. Nick felt like a

young man who has gone to the Rhineland to "get up" his German for an

examination--committed to talk, to read, to dream only in the new idiom.

Now that he had taken his jump everything was simplified, at the same

time that everything was pitched in a higher and intenser key; and he

wondered how in the absence of a common dialect he had conversed on the

whole so happily with Mrs. Dallow. Then he had aftertastes of

understandings tolerably independent of words. He was excited because

every fresh responsibility is exciting, and there was no manner of doubt

he had accepted one. No one knew what it was but himself--Gabriel Nash

scarcely counted, his whole attitude on the question of responsibility

being so fantastic--and he would have to ask his dearest friends to take

him on trust. Rather indeed he would ask nothing of any one, but would

cultivate independence, mulishness, and gaiety, and fix his thoughts on

a bright if distant morrow. It was disagreeable to have to remember that

his task would not be sweetened by a sense of heroism; for if it might

be heroic to give up the muses for the strife of great affairs, no

romantic glamour worth speaking of would ever gather round an Englishman

who in the prime of his strength had given up great or even small

affairs for the muses. Such an original might himself privately and

perversely regard certain phases of this inferior commerce as a great

affair; but who would give him the benefit of that sort of

confidence--except indeed a faithful, clever, exalted little sister

Biddy, if he should have the good luck to have one? Biddy was in fact

all ready for heroic flights and eager to think she might fight the

battle of the beautiful by her brother's side; so that he had really to

moderate her and remind her how little his actual job was a crusade with

bugles and banners and how much a grey, sedentary grind, the charm of

which was all at the core. You might have an emotion about it, and an

emotion that would be a help, but this was not the sort of thing you

could show--the end in view would seem so disproportionately small. Nick

put it to her that one really couldn't talk to people about the

"responsibility" of what she would see him pottering at in his studio.

He therefore didn't "run," as he would have said, to winged words any

more than he was forced to, having, moreover, a sense that apologetic

work (if apology it should be called to carry the war straight into the

enemy's country) might be freely left to Gabriel Nash. He laid the

weight of explanation on his commentators, meeting them all on the firm

ground of his own amusement. He saw he should live for months in a thick

cloud of irony, not the finest air of the season, and he adopted the

weapon to which a person whose use of tobacco is only occasional resorts

when every one else produces a cigar--he puffed the spasmodic, defensive

cigarette. He accepted as to what he had done the postulate of the

obscurely tortuous, abounding so in that sense that his critics were

themselves bewildered. Some of them felt that they got, as the phrase

is, little out of him--he rose in his good humour so much higher than

the "rise" they had looked for--on his very first encounter with the

world after his scrimmage with his mother. He went to a dinner-party--he

had accepted the invitation many days before--having seen his

resignation, in the form of a telegram from Harsh, announced in the

evening papers. The people he found there had seen it as well, and the

wittiest wanted to know what he was now going to do. Even the most

embarrassed asked if it were true he had changed his politics. He gave

different answers to different persons, but left most of them under the

impression that he had strange scruples of conscience. This, however,

was not a formidable occasion, for there had happened to be no one

present he would have desired, on the old basis, especially to gratify.

There were real good friends it would be less easy to meet--Nick was

almost sorry for an hour that he had so many real good friends. If he

had had more enemies the case would have been simpler, and he was fully

aware that the hardest thing of all would be to be let off too easily.

Then he would appear to himself to have been put, all round, on his

generosity, and his deviation would thus wear its ugliest face.

When he left the place at which he had been dining he betook himself to

Rosedale Road: he saw no reason why he should go down to the House,

though he knew he had not done with that yet. He had a dread of behaving

as if he supposed he should be expected to make a farewell speech, and

was thankful his eminence was not of a nature to create on such an

occasion a demand for his oratory. He had in fact nothing whatever to

say in public--not a vain word, not a sorry syllable. Though the hour

was late he found Gabriel Nash established in his studio, drawn thither

by the fine exhilaration of having seen an evening paper. Trying it

late, on the chance, he had been told by Nick's servant that Nick would

sleep there that night, and he had come in to wait, he was so eager to

congratulate him. Nick submitted with a good grace to his society--he

was tired enough to go to bed, but was restless too--in spite of noting

now, oddly enough, that Nash's congratulations could add little to his

fortitude. He had felt a good deal, before, as if he were in this

philosopher's hands; but since making his final choice he had begun to

strike himself as all in his own. Gabriel might have been the angel of

that name, but no angel could assist him much henceforth.

Nash indeed was as true as ever to his genius while he lolled on a divan

and emitted a series of reflexions that were even more ingenious than

opportune. Nick walked up and down the room, and it might have been

supposed from his manner that he was impatient for his friend to

withdraw. This idea would have been contradicted, however, by the fact

that subsequently, after the latter had quitted him, he continued to

perambulate. He had grown used to Gabriel and must now have been

possessed of all he had to say. That was one's penalty with persons

whose main gift was for talk, however inspiring; talk engendered a sense

of sameness much sooner than action. The things a man did were

necessarily more different from each other than the things he said, even

if he went in for surprising you. Nick felt Nash could never surprise

him any more save by mere plain perpetration.

He talked of his host's future, talked of Miriam Rooth and of Peter

Sherringham, whom he had seen at that young woman's and whom he

described as in a predicament delightful to behold. Nick put a question

about Peter's predicament and learned, rather to his disappointment,

that it consisted only of the fact that he was in love with Miriam. He

appealed to his visitor to do better than this, and Nash then added the

touch that Sherringham wouldn't be able to have her. "Oh they've ideas!"

he said when Nick asked him why.

"What ideas? So has he, I suppose."

"Yes, but they're not the same."

"Well, they'll nevertheless arrange something," Nick opined.

"You'll have to help them a bit. She's in love with another man," Nash

went on.

"Do you mean with you?"

"Oh, I'm never another man--I'm always more the wrong one than the man

himself. It's you she's after." And on his friend's asking him what he

meant by this Nash added: "While you were engaged in transferring her

image to the tablet of your genius you stamped your own on that of her

heart."

Nick stopped in his walk, staring. "Ah, what a bore!"

"A bore? Don't you think her formed to please?"

Nick wondered, but didn't conclude. "I wanted to go on with her--now I

can't."

Nash himself, however, jumped straight to what really mattered. "My dear

fellow, it only makes her handsomer. I wondered what happy turn she had

taken."

"Oh, that's twaddle," said Nick, turning away. "Besides, has she told

you?"

"No, but her mother has."

"Has she told her mother?"

"Mrs. Rooth says not. But I've known Mrs. Rooth to say that which

isn't."

"Apply that rule then to the information you speak of."

"Well, since you press me, I know more," Gabriel said. "Miriam knows

you're engaged to a wonderful, rich lady; she told me as much, told me

she had seen her here. That was enough to set her off--she likes

forbidden fruit."

"I'm not engaged to any lady whatever. I was," Nick handsomely

conceded, "but we've altered our minds."

"Ah, what a pity!" his friend wailed.

"Mephistopheles!"--and he stopped again with the point of this.

"Pray then whom do you call Margaret? May I ask if your failure of

interest in the political situation is the cause of this change in your

personal one?" Nash went on. Nick signified that he mightn't; whereupon

he added: "I'm not in the least devilish--I only mean it's a pity you've

altered your minds, since Miriam may in consequence alter hers. She goes

from one thing to another. However, I won't tell her."

"I will then!" Nick declared between jest and earnest.

"Would that really be prudent?" his companion asked more completely in

the frolic key.

"At any rate," he resumed, "nothing would induce me to interfere with

Peter Sherringham. That sounds fatuous, but to you I don't mind

appearing an ass."

"The thing would be to get Sherringham, out of spite," Nash threw off,

"to entangle himself with another woman."

"What good would that do?"

"Ah, Miriam would then begin to think of him."

"Spite surely isn't a conceivable motive--for a healthy man."

The plea, however, found Gabriel ready. "Sherringham's just precisely

not a healthy man. He's too much in love."

"Then he won't care for another woman."

"He would try to, and that would produce its effect--its effect on

Miriam."

"You talk like an American novel. Let him try, and God keep us all

straight." Nick adverted in extreme silence to his poor little Biddy

and greatly hoped--he would have to see to it a little--that Peter

wouldn't "try" on \_her\_. He changed the subject and before Nash withdrew

took occasion to remark--the occasion was offered by some new allusion

of the visitor's to the sport he hoped to extract from seeing Nick carry

out everything to which he stood committed--that the comedy of the

matter would fall flat and the incident pass unnoticed.

But Nash lost no heart. "Oh, if you'll simply do your part I'll take

care of the rest."

"If you mean by doing my part minding my business and working like a

beaver I shall easily satisfy you," Nick replied.

"Ah, you reprobate, you'll become another Sir Joshua, a mere P.R.A.!"

his companion railed, getting up to go.

When he had gone Nick threw himself back on the cushions of the divan

and, with his hands locked above his head, sat a long time lost in

thought. He had sent his servant to bed; he was unmolested. He gazed

before him into the gloom produced by the unheeded burning-out of the

last candle. The vague outer light came in through the tall studio

window and the painted images, ranged about, looked confused in the

dusk. If his mother had seen him she might have thought he was staring

at his father's ghost.

XXXVI

The night Peter Sherringham walked away from Balaklava Place with

Gabriel Nash the talk of the two men directed itself, as was natural at

the time, to the question of Miriam's future fame and the pace, as Nash

called it, at which she would go. Critical spirits as they both were,

and one of them as dissimulative in passion as the other was paradoxical

in the absence of it, they yet took her career for granted as completely

as the simple-minded, a pair of hot spectators in the pit, might have

done, and exchanged observations on the assumption that the only

uncertain element would be the pace. This was a proof of general

subjugation. Peter wished not to show, yet wished to know, and in the

restlessness of his anxiety was ready even to risk exposure, great as

the sacrifice might be of the imperturbable, urbane scepticism most

appropriate to a secretary of embassy. He couldn't rid himself of the

sense that Nash had got up earlier than he, had had opportunities of

contact in days already distant, the days of Mrs. Rooth's hungry foreign

rambles. Something of authority and privilege stuck to him from this,

and it made Sherringham still more uncomfortable when he was most

conscious that, at the best, even the trained diplomatic mind would

never get a grasp of Miriam as a whole. She was constructed to revolve

like the terraqueous globe; some part or other of her was always out of

sight or in shadow.

Peter talked to conceal his feelings, and, like many a man practising

that indirectness, rather lost himself in the wood. They agreed that,

putting strange accidents aside, the girl would go further than any one

had gone in England within the memory of man; and that it was a pity, as

regards marking the comparison, that for so long no one had gone any

distance worth speaking of. They further agreed that it would naturally

seem absurd to any one who didn't know, their prophesying such big

things on such small evidence; and they agreed lastly that the absurdity

quite vanished as soon as the prophets knew as \_they\_ knew. Their

knowledge--they quite recognised this--was simply confidence raised to a

high point, the communication of their young friend's own confidence.

The conditions were enormously to make, but it was of the very essence

of Miriam's confidence that she would make them. The parts, the plays,

the theatres, the "support," the audiences, the critics, the money were

all to be found, but she cast a spell that prevented this from seeming a

serious hitch. One mightn't see from one day to the other what she would

do or how she would do it, but this wouldn't stay her steps--she would

none the less go on. She would have to construct her own road, as it

were, but at the worst there would only be delays in making it. These

delays would depend on the hardness of the stones she had to break.

As Peter had noted, you never knew where to "have" Gabriel Nash; a truth

exemplified in his unexpected delight at the prospect of Miriam's

drawing forth the modernness of the age. You might have thought he would

loathe that modernness; but he had a joyous, amused, amusing vision of

it--saw it as something huge and fantastically vulgar. Its vulgarity

would rise to the grand style, like that of a London railway station,

and the publicity achieved by their charming charge be as big as the

globe itself. All the machinery was ready, the platform laid; the

facilities, the wires and bells and trumpets, the roaring, deafening

newspaperism of the period--its most distinctive sign--were waiting for

her, their predestined mistress, to press her foot on the spring and set

them all in motion. Gabriel brushed in a large, bright picture of her

progress through the time and round the world, round it and round it

again, from continent to continent and clime to clime; with populations

and deputations, reporters and photographers, placards and interviews

and banquets, steamers, railways, dollars, diamonds, speeches and

artistic ruin all jumbled into her train. Regardless of expense the

spectacle would be and thrilling, though somewhat monotonous, the

drama--a drama more bustling than any she would put on the stage and a

spectacle that would beat everything for scenery. In the end her divine

voice would crack, screaming to foreign ears and antipodal barbarians,

and her clever manner would lose all quality, simplified to a few

unmistakable knock-down dodges. Then she would be at the fine climax of

life and glory, still young and insatiate, but already coarse, hard, and

raddled, with nothing left to do and nothing left to do it with, the

remaining years all before her and the \_raison d'Ãªtre\_ all behind. It

would be splendid, dreadful, grotesque.

"Oh, she'll have some good years--they'll be worth having," Peter

insisted as they went. "Besides, you see her too much as a humbug and

too little as a real producer. She has ideas--great ones; she loves the

thing for itself. That may keep a woman serious."

"Her greatest idea must always be to show herself, and fortunately she

has a great quantity of that treasure to show. I think of her absolutely

as a real producer, but as a producer whose production is her own

person. No 'person,' even as fine a one as hers, will stand that for

more than an hour, so that humbuggery has very soon to lend a hand.

However," Nash continued, "if she's a fine humbug it will do as well, it

will perfectly suit the time. We can all be saved by vulgarity; that's

the solvent of all difficulties and the blessing of this delightful age.

One doesn't die of it--save in soul and sense: one dies only of minding

it. Therefore let no man despair--a new hope has dawned."

"She'll do her work like any other worker, with the advantage over many

that her talent's rare," Peter obliquely answered. "Compared with the

life of many women that's security and sanity of the highest order. Then

she can't help her beauty. You can't vulgarise that."

"Oh, can't you?" Gabriel cried.

"It will abide with her till the day of her death. It isn't a mere

superficial freshness. She's very noble."

"Yes, that's the pity of it," said Nash. "She's a big more or less

directed force, and I quite admit that she'll do for a while a lot of

good. She'll have brightened up the world for a great many people--have

brought the ideal nearer to them and held it fast for an hour with its

feet on earth and its great wings trembling. That's always something,

for blest is he who has dropped even the smallest coin into the little

iron box that contains the precious savings of mankind. Miriam will

doubtless have dropped a big gold-piece. It will be found in the general

scramble on the day the race goes bankrupt. And then for herself she'll

have had a great go at life."

"Oh yes, she'll have got out of her hole--she won't have vegetated,"

Peter concurred. "That makes her touching to me--it adds to the many

good reasons for which one may want to help her. She's tackling a big

job, and tackling it by herself; throwing herself upon the world in good

faith and dealing with it as she can; meeting alone, in her youth, her

beauty, her generosity, all the embarrassments of notoriety and all the

difficulties of a profession of which, if one half's what's called

brilliant the other's frankly odious."

"She has great courage, but you speak of her as solitary with such a lot

of us all round her?" Nash candidly inquired.

"She's a great thing for you and me, but we're a small thing for her."

"Well, a good many small things, if they but stick together, may make up

a mass," Gabriel said. "There must always be the man, you see. He's the

indispensable element in such a life, and he'll be the last thing she'll

ever lack."

"What man are you talking about?" Peter asked with imperfect ease.

"The man of the hour, whoever he is. She'll inspire innumerable

devotions."

"Of course she will, and they'll be precisely a part of the insufferable

side of her life."

"Insufferable to whom?" Nash demanded. "Don't forget that the

insufferable side of her life will be just the side she'll thrive on.

You can't eat your cake and have it, and you can't make omelettes

without breaking eggs. You can't at once sit by the fire and parade

about the world, and you can't take all chances without having some

adventures. You can't be a great actress without the luxury of nerves.

Without a plentiful supply--or without the right ones--you'll only be

second fiddle. If you've all the tense strings you may take life for

your fiddlestick. Your nerves and your adventures, your eggs and your

cake, are part of the cost of the most expensive of professions. You

play with human passions, with exaltations and ecstasies and terrors,

and if you trade on the fury of the elements you must know how to ride

the storm."

Well, Peter thought it over. "Those are the fine old commonplaces about

the artistic temperament, but I usually find the artist a very meek,

decent, little person."

"You \_never\_ find the artist--you only find his work, and that's all you

need find. When the artist's a woman, and the woman's an actress,

meekness and decency will doubtless be there in the right proportions,"

Nash went on. "Miriam will represent them for you, if you give her her

cue, with the utmost charm."

"Of course she'll inspire devotions--\_that's\_ all right," said Peter

with a wild cheerfulness.

"And of course they'll inspire responses, and with that

consequence--don't you see?--they'll mitigate her solitude, they'll even

enliven it," Nash set forth.

"She'll probably box a good many ears: that'll be lively!" Peter

returned with some grimness.

"Oh magnificent!--it will be a merry life. Yet with its tragic passages,

its distracted or its pathetic hours," Gabriel insisted. "In short, a

little of everything."

They walked on without further speech till at last Peter resumed: "The

best thing for a woman in her situation is to marry some decent

care-taking man."

"Oh I daresay she'll do that too!" Nash laughed; a remark as a result of

which his companion lapsed afresh into silence. Gabriel left him a

little to enjoy this; after which he added: "There's somebody she'd

marry to-morrow."

Peter wondered. "Do you mean her friend Dashwood?"

"No, no, I mean Nick Dormer."

"She'd marry \_him\_?" Peter gasped.

"I mean her head's full of him. But she'll hardly get the chance."

Peter watched himself. "Does she like him as much as that?"

"I don't quite know how much you mean, but enough for all practical

ends."

"Marrying a fashionable actress is hardly a practical end."

"Certainly not, but I'm not speaking from his point of view." Nash was

perfectly lucid. "Moreover, I thought you just now said it would be such

a good thing for her."

"To marry Nick Dormer?"

"You said a good decent man, and he's one of the very decentest."

"I wasn't thinking of the individual, but of the protection. It would

fence her about, settle certain questions, or appear to; it would make

things safe and comfortable for her and keep a lot of cads and

blackguards away."

"She ought to marry the prompter or the box-keeper," said Nash. "Then it

would be all right. I think indeed they generally do, don't they?"

Peter felt for a moment a strong disposition to drop his friend on the

spot, to cross to the other side of the street and walk away without

him. But there was a different impulse which struggled with this one and

after a minute overcame it, the impulse that led to his saying

presently: "Has she told you she's--a--she's in love with Nick?"

"No, no--that's not the way I know it."

"Has Nick told you then?"

"On the contrary, I've told \_him\_."

"You've rendered him a questionable service if you've no proof," Peter

pronounced.

"My proof's only that I've seen her with him. She's charming, poor dear

thing."

"But surely she isn't in love with every man she's charming to."

"I mean she's charming to \_me\_," Nash returned. "I see her that way. I

see her interested--and what it does to her, with her, \_for\_ her. But

judge for yourself--the first time you get a chance."

"When shall I get a chance? Nick doesn't come near her."

"Oh he'll come, he'll come; his picture isn't finished."

"You mean \_he'll\_ be the box-keeper, then?"

"My dear fellow, I shall never allow it," said Gabriel Nash. "It would

be idiotic and quite unnecessary. He's beautifully arranged--in quite a

different line. Fancy his taking that sort of job on his hands! Besides,

she'd never expect it; she's not such a goose. They're very good

friends--it will go on that way. She's an excellent person for him to

know; she'll give him lots of ideas of the plastic kind. He would have

been up there before this, but it has taken him time to play his

delightful trick on his constituents. That of course is pure amusement;

but when once his effect has been well produced he'll get back to

business, and his business will be a very different matter from

Miriam's. Imagine him writing her advertisements, living on her money,

adding up her profits, having rows and recriminations with her agent,

carrying her shawl, spending his days in her rouge-pot. The right man

for that, if she must have one, will turn up. '\_Pour le mariage, non\_.'

She isn't wholly an idiot; she really, for a woman, quite sees things as

they are."

As Peter had not crossed the street and left Gabriel planted he now

suffered the extremity of irritation. But descrying in the dim vista of

the Edgware Road a vague and vigilant hansom he waved his stick with

eagerness and with the abrupt declaration that, feeling tired, he must

drive the rest of his way. He offered Nash, as he entered the vehicle,

no seat, but this coldness was not reflected in the lucidity with which

that master of every subject went on to affirm that there was of course

a danger--the danger that in given circumstances Miriam would leave the

stage.

"Leave it, you mean, for some man?"

"For the man we're talking about."

"For Nick Dormer?" Peter asked from his place in the cab, his paleness

lighted by its lamps.

"If he should make it a condition. But why should he? why should he make

\_any\_ conditions? He's not an ass either. You see it would be a

bore"--Nash kept it up while the hansom waited--"because if she were to

do anything of that sort she'd make him pay for the sacrifice."

"Oh yes, she'd make him pay for the sacrifice," Peter blindly concurred.

"And then when he had paid she'd go back to her footlights," Gabriel

developed from the curbstone as his companion closed the apron of the

cab.

"I see--she'd go back--good-night," Peter returned. "\_Please\_ go on!" he

cried to the driver through the hole in the roof. And while the vehicle

rolled away he growled to himself: "Of course she would--and quite

right!"

XXXVII

"Judge for yourself when you get a chance," Nash had said to him; and as

it turned out he was able to judge two days later, for he found his

cousin in Balaklava Place on the Tuesday following his walk with their

insufferable friend. He had not only stayed away from the theatre on the

Monday evening--he regarded this as an achievement of some

importance--but had not been near Miriam during the day. He had meant to

absent himself from her company on Tuesday as well; a determination

confirmed by the fact that the afternoon turned to rain. But when at ten

minutes to five o'clock he jumped into a hansom and directed his course

to Saint John's Wood it was precisely upon the weather that he shifted

the responsibility of his behaviour.

Miriam had dined when he reached the villa, but she was lying down,

unduly fatigued, before going to the theatre. Mrs. Rooth was, however,

in the drawing-room with three gentlemen, in two of whom the fourth

visitor was not startled to recognise Basil Dashwood and Gabriel Nash.

Dashwood appeared to have become Miriam's brother-in-arms and a second

child--a fonder one--to Mrs. Rooth; it had reached Peter on some late

visit that the young actor had finally moved his lodgings into the

quarter, making himself a near neighbour for all sorts of convenience.

"Hang his convenience!" Peter thought, perceiving that Mrs. Lovick's

"Arty" was now altogether one of the family. Oh the family!--it was a

queer one to be connected with: that consciousness was acute in

Sherringham's breast to-day as he entered Mrs. Rooth's little circle.

The place was filled with cigarette-smoke and there was a messy

coffee-service on the piano, whose keys Basil Dashwood lightly touched

for his own diversion. Nash, addressing the room of course, was at one

end of a little sofa with his nose in the air, and Nick Dormer was at

the other end, seated much at his ease and with a certain privileged

appearance of having been there often before, though Sherringham knew he

had not. He looked uncritical and very young, as rosy as a school-boy on

a half-holiday. It was past five o'clock in the day, but Mrs. Rooth was

not dressed; there was, however, no want of finish in her elegant

attitude--the same relaxed grandeur (she seemed to let you understand)

for which she used to be distinguished at Castle Nugent when the house

was full. She toyed incongruously, in her unbuttoned wrapper, with a

large tinsel fan which resembled a theatrical property.

It was one of the discomforts of Peter's position that many of those

minor matters which are superficially at least most characteristic of

the histrionic life had power to displease him, so that he was obliged

constantly to overlook and condone and pretend. He disliked besmoked

drawing-rooms and irregular meals and untidy arrangements; he could

suffer from the vulgarity of Mrs. Rooth's apartments, the importunate

photographs which gave on his nerves, the barbarous absence of signs of

an orderly domestic life, the odd volumes from the circulating library

(you could see what they were--the very covers told you--at a glance)

tumbled about under smeary cups and glasses. He hadn't waited till now

to feel it "rum" that fate should have let him in for such contacts;

but as he stood before his hostess and her companions he wondered

perhaps more than ever why he should. Her companions somehow, who were

not responsible, didn't keep down his wonder; which was particularly

odd, since they were not superficially in the least of Bohemian type.

Almost the first thing that struck him, as happened, in coming into the

room, was the fresh fact of the high good looks of his cousin, a

gentleman, to one's taste and for one's faith, in a different enough

degree from the stiff-collared, conversible Dashwood. Peter didn't hate

Nick for being of so fine an English grain; he knew rather the brush of

a new wave of annoyance at Julia's stupid failure to get on with him

under that good omen.

It was his first encounter with the late member for Harsh since his

arrival in London: they had been on one side and the other so much taken

up with their affairs. Since their last meeting Nick had, as we know, to

his kinsman's perception, really put on a new character: he had done the

finest stroke of business in the quietest way. This had made him a

presence to be counted with, and in just the sense in which poor Peter

desired least to count. Poor Peter, after his somersault in the blue,

had just lately been much troubled; he was ravaged by contending

passions; he paid every hour in a torment of unrest for what was false

in his position, the impossibility of keeping the presentable parts of

his character together, the opposition of interest and desire. Nick, his

junior and a lighter weight, had settled \_his\_ problem and showed no

wounds; there was something impertinent and mystifying in it. Yet he

looked, into the bargain, too innocently young and happy, and too

careless and modest and amateurish, to figure as a rival or even as the

genius he was apparently going to try to be--the genius that the other

day, in the studio there with Biddy, Peter had got a startled glimpse of

his power to become. Julia's brother would have liked to be aware of

grounds of resentment, to be able to hold she had been badly treated or

that Nick was basely fatuous, for in that case he might have had the

resource of taking offence. But where was the outrage of his merely

being liked by a woman in respect to whom one had definitely denied

one's self the luxury of pretensions, especially if, as the wrong-doer,

he had taken no action in the matter? It could scarcely be called

wrong-doing to call, casually, on an afternoon when the lady didn't seem

to be there. Peter could at any rate rejoice that Miriam didn't; and he

proposed to himself suggesting to Nick after a little that they should

adjourn together--they had such interesting things to talk about.

Meanwhile Nick greeted him with a friendly freedom in which he could

read neither confusion nor defiance. Peter was reassured against a

danger he believed he didn't recognise and puzzled by a mystery he

flattered himself he hadn't heeded. And he was still more ashamed of

being reassured than of being puzzled.

It must be recorded that Miriam's absence from the scene was not

prolonged. Nick, as Sherringham gathered, had been about a quarter of an

hour in the house, which would have given her, gratified by his

presence, due time to array herself to come down to him. At all events

she was in the room, prepared apparently to go to the theatre, very

shortly after one of her guests had become sensible of how glad he was

she was out of it. Familiarity had never yet cured him of a certain

tremor of expectation, and even of suspense, in regard to her entrances;

a flutter caused by the simple circumstance of her infinite variety. To

say she was always acting would too much convey that she was often

fatiguing; since her changing face affected this particular admirer at

least not as a series of masks, but as a response to perceived

differences, an intensity of that perception, or still more as something

richly constructional, like the shifting of the scene in a play or like

a room with many windows. The image she was to project was always

incalculable, but if her present denied her past and declined

responsibility for her future it made a good thing of the hour and kept

the actual peculiarly fresh. This time the actual was a bright, gentle,

graceful, smiling, young woman in a new dress, eager to go out, drawing

on fresh gloves, who looked as if she were about to step into a carriage

and--it was Gabriel Nash who thus formulated her physiognomy--do a lot

of London things.

The young woman had time to spare, however, and she sat down and talked

and laughed and presently gave, as seemed to Peter, a deeper glow to the

tawdry little room, which could do for others if it had to do for her.

She described herself as in a state of nervous muddle, exhausted,

blinded, \_abrutie\_, with the rehearsals of the forthcoming piece--the

first night was close at hand, and it was going to be of a vileness:

they would all see!--but there was no correspondence between this

account of the matter and her present bravery of mood. She sent her

mother away--to "put on some clothes or something"--and, left alone with

the visitors, went to a long glass between the windows, talking always

to Nick Dormer, and revised and rearranged a little her own attire. She

talked to Nick, over her shoulder, and to Nick only, as if he were the

guest to recognise and the others didn't count. She broke out at once on

his having thrown up his seat, wished to know if the strange story told

her by Mr. Nash were true--that he had knocked all the hopes of his

party into pie.

Nick took it any way she liked and gave a pleasant picture of his

party's ruin, the critical condition of public affairs: he was as yet

clearly closed to contrition or shame. The pilgrim from Paris, before

Miriam's entrance, had not, in shaking hands with him, made even a

roundabout allusion to his odd "game"; he felt he must somehow show good

taste--so English people often feel--at the cost of good manners. But he

winced on seeing how his scruples had been wasted, and was struck with

the fine, jocose, direct turn of his kinsman's conversation with the

young actress. It was a part of her unexpectedness that she took the

heavy literal view of Nick's behaviour; declared frankly, though without

ill nature, that she had no patience with his mistake. She was horribly

disappointed--she had set her heart on his being a great statesman, one

of the rulers of the people and the glories of England. What was so

useful, what was so noble?--how it belittled everything else! She had

expected him to wear a cordon and a star some day--acquiring them with

the greatest promptitude--and then to come and see her in her \_loge\_: it

would look so particularly well. She talked after the manner of a lovely

Philistine, except perhaps when she expressed surprise at

hearing--hearing from Gabriel Nash--that in England gentlemen accoutred

with those emblems of their sovereign's esteem didn't so far forget

themselves as to stray into the dressing-rooms of actresses. She

admitted after a moment that they were quite right and the

dressing-rooms of actresses nasty places; but she was sorry, for that

was the sort of thing she had always figured in a corner--a

distinguished man, slightly bald, in evening dress, with orders,

admiring the smallness of a satin shoe and saying witty things. Nash was

convulsed with hilarity at this--such a vision of the British political

hero. Coming back from the glass and making that critic give her his

place on the sofa, she seated herself near Nick and continued to

express her regret at his perversity.

"They all say that--all the charming women, but I shouldn't have looked

for it from you," Nick replied. "I've given you such an example of what

I can do in another line."

"Do you mean my portrait? Oh I've got it, with your name and 'M.P.' in

the corner, and that's precisely why I'm content. 'M.P.' in the corner

of a picture is delightful, but I want to break the mould: I don't in

the least insist on your giving specimens to others. And the artistic

life, when you can lead another--if you've any alternative, however

modest--is a very poor business. It comes last in dignity--after

everything else. Ain't I up to my eyes in it and don't I truly know?"

"You talk like my broken-hearted mother," said Nick.

"Does she hate it so intensely?"

"She has the darkest ideas about it--the wildest theories. I can't

imagine where she gets them; partly I think from a general conviction

that the 'esthetic'--a horrible insidious foreign disease--is eating the

healthy core out of English life (dear old English life!) and partly

from the charming pictures in \_Punch\_ and the clever satirical articles,

pointing at mysterious depths of contamination, in the other weekly

papers. She believes there's a dreadful coterie of uncannily artful and

desperately refined people who wear a kind of loose faded uniform and

worship only beauty--which is a fearful thing; that Gabriel has

introduced me to it; that I now spend all my time in it, and that for

its sweet sake I've broken the most sacred vows. Poor Gabriel, who, so

far as I can make out, isn't in any sort of society, however bad!"

"But I'm uncannily artful," Nash objected, "and though I can't afford

the uniform--I believe you get it best somewhere in South Audley

Street--I do worship beauty. I really think it's me the weekly papers

mean."

"Oh I've read the articles--I know the sort!" said Basil Dashwood.

Miriam looked at him. "Go and see if the brougham's there--I ordered it

early."

Dashwood, without moving, consulted his watch. "It isn't time yet--I

know more about the brougham than you. I've made a ripping good

arrangement for her stable--it really costs her nothing," the young

actor continued confidentially to Peter, near whom he had placed

himself.

"Your mother's quite right to be broken-hearted," Miriam declared, "and

I can imagine exactly what she has been through. I should like to talk

with her--I should like to see her." Nick showed on this easy amusement,

reminding her she had talked to him while she sat for her portrait in

quite the opposite sense, most helpfully and inspiringly; and Nash

explained that she was studying the part of a political duchess and

wished to take observations for it, to work herself into the character.

The girl might in fact have been a political duchess as she sat, her

head erect and her gloved hands folded, smiling with aristocratic

dimness at Nick. She shook her head with stately sadness; she might have

been trying some effect for Mary Stuart in Schiller's play. "I've

changed since that. I want you to be the grandest thing there is--the

counsellor of kings."

Peter wondered if it possibly weren't since she had met his sister in

Nick's studio that she had changed, if perhaps she hadn't seen how it

might give Julia the sense of being more effectually routed to know that

the woman who had thrown the bomb was one who also tried to keep Nick in

the straight path. This indeed would involve an assumption that Julia

might know, whereas it was perfectly possible she mightn't and more than

possible that if she should she wouldn't care. Miriam's essential

fondness for trying different ways was always there as an adequate

reason for any particular way; a truth which, however, sometimes only

half-prevented the particular way from being vexatious to a particular

observer.

"Yet after all who's more esthetic than you and who goes in more for the

beautiful?" Nick asked. "You're never so beautiful as when you pitch

into it."

"Oh, I'm an inferior creature, of an inferior sex, and I've to earn my

bread as I can. I'd give it all up in a moment, my odious trade--for an

inducement."

"And pray what do you mean by an inducement?" Nick demanded.

"My dear fellow, she means you--if you'll give her a permanent

engagement to sit for you!" Gabriel volunteered. "What singularly crude

questions you ask!"

"I like the way she talks," Mr. Dashwood derisively said, "when I gave

up the most brilliant prospects, of very much the same kind as Mr.

Dormer's, expressly to go on the stage."

"You're an inferior creature too," Miriam promptly pronounced.

"Miss Rooth's very hard to satisfy," Peter observed at this. "A man of

distinction, slightly bald, in evening dress, with orders, in the corner

of her \_loge\_--she has such a personage ready made to her hand and she

doesn't so much as look at him. Am \_I\_ not an inducement? Haven't I

offered you a permanent engagement?"

"Your orders--where are your orders?" she returned with a sweet smile,

getting up.

"I shall be a minister next year and an ambassador before you know it.

Then I shall stick on everything that can be had."

"And they call \_us\_ mountebanks!" cried the girl. "I've been so glad to

see you again--do you want another sitting?" she went on to Nick as if

to take leave of him.

"As many as you'll give me--I shall be grateful for all," he made

answer. "I should like to do you as you are at present. You're totally

different from the woman I painted--you're wonderful."

"The Comic Muse!" she laughed. "Well, you must wait till our first

nights are over--I'm \_sur les dents\_ till then. There's everything to do

and I've to do it all. That fellow's good for nothing, for nothing but

domestic life"--and she glanced at Basil Dashwood. "He hasn't an

idea--not one you'd willingly tell of him, though he's rather useful for

the stables. We've got stables now--or we try to look as if we had:

Dashwood's ideas are \_de cette force\_. In ten days I shall have more

time."

"The Comic Muse? Never, never," Peter protested. "You're not to go

smirking through the age and down to posterity--I'd rather see you as

Medusa crowned with serpents. That's what you look like when you look

best."

"That's consoling--when I've just bought a lovely new bonnet, all red

roses and bows. I forgot to tell you just now that when you're an

ambassador you may propose anything you like," Miriam went on. "But

forgive me if I make that condition. Seriously speaking, come to me

glittering with orders and I shall probably succumb. I can't resist

stars and garters. Only you must, as you say, have them all. I \_don't\_

like to hear Mr. Dormer talk the slang of the studio--like that phrase

just now: it \_is\_ a fall to a lower state. However, when one's low one

must crawl, and I'm crawling down to the Strand. Dashwood, see if

mamma's ready. If she isn't I decline to wait; you must bring her in a

hansom. I'll take Mr. Dormer in the brougham; I want to talk with Mr.

Dormer; he must drive with me to the theatre. His situation's full of

interest." Miriam led the way out of the room as she continued to

chatter, and when she reached the house-door with the four men in her

train the carriage had just drawn up at the garden-gate. It appeared

that Mrs. Rooth was not ready, and the girl, in spite of a remonstrance

from Nick, who had a sense of usurping the old lady's place, repeated

her injunction that she should be brought on in a cab. Miriam's

gentlemen hung about her at the gate, and she insisted on Nick's taking

his seat in the brougham and taking it first. Before she entered she put

her hand out to Peter and, looking up at him, held his own kindly. "Dear

old master, aren't you coming to-night? I miss you when you're not

there."

"Don't go--don't go--it's too much," Nash freely declared.

"She is wonderful," said Mr. Dashwood, all expert admiration; "she \_has\_

gone into the rehearsals tooth and nail. But nothing takes it out of

her."

"Nothing puts it into you, my dear!" Miriam returned. Then she pursued

to Peter: "You're the faithful one--you're the one I count on." He was

not looking at her; his eyes travelled into the carriage, where they

rested on Nick Dormer, established on the farther seat with his face

turned toward the farther window. He was the one, faithful or no,

counted on or no, whom a charming woman had preferred to carry off, and

there was clear triumph for him in that fact. Yet it pleased, it

somewhat relieved, his kinsman to see his passivity as not a little

foolish. Miriam noted something of this in Peter's eyes, for she

exclaimed abruptly, "Don't kill him--he doesn't care for me!" With which

she passed into the carriage and let it roll away.

Peter stood watching it till he heard Dashwood again beside him. "You

wouldn't believe what I make him do the whole thing for--a little rascal

I know."

"Good-bye; take good care of Mrs. Rooth," said Gabriel Nash, waving a

bland farewell to the young actor. He gave a smiling survey of the

heavens and remarked to Sherringham that the rain had stopped. Was he

walking, was he driving, should they be going in the same direction?

Peter cared little about his direction and had little account of it to

give; he simply moved away in silence and with Gabriel at his side. This

converser was partly an affliction to him; indeed the fact that he

couldn't only make light of him added to the oppression. It was just to

him nevertheless to note that he could hold his peace occasionally: he

had for instance this afternoon taken little part in the talk at

Balaklava Place. Peter greatly disliked to speak to him of Miriam, but

he liked Nash himself to make free with her, and even liked him to say

such things as might be a little viciously and unguardedly contradicted.

He was not, however, moved to gainsay something dropped by his

companion, disconnectedly, at the end of a few minutes; a word to the

effect that she was after all the best-natured soul alive. All the same,

Nash added, it wouldn't do for her to take possession of a nice life

like Nick's; and he repeated that for his part he would never allow it.

It would be on his conscience to interfere. To which Peter returned

disingenuously that they might all do as they liked--it didn't matter a

button to \_him\_. And with an effort to carry off that comedy he changed

the subject.

XXXVIII

He wouldn't for a moment have admitted that he was jealous of his old

comrade, but would almost have liked to be accused of it: for this would

have given him a chance he rather lacked and missed, the right occasion

to declare with plausibility that motives he couldn't avow had no

application to his case. How could a man be jealous when he was not a

suitor? how could he pretend to guard a property which was neither his

own nor destined to become his own? There could be no question of loss

when one had nothing at stake, and no question of envy when the

responsibility of possession was exactly what one prayed to be delivered

from. The measure of one's susceptibility was one's pretensions, and

Peter was not only ready to declare over and over again that, thank God,

he had none: his spiritual detachment was still more complete--he

literally suffered from the fact that nobody appeared to care to hear

him say it. He connected an idea of virtue and honour with his attitude,

since surely it was a high case of conduct to have quenched a personal

passion for the good of the public service. He had gone over the whole

question at odd, irrepressible hours; he had returned, spiritually

speaking, the buffet administered to him all at once, that day in

Rosedale Road, by the spectacle of the \_crÃ¢nerie\_ with which Nick could

let worldly glories slide. Resolution for resolution he preferred after

all another sort, and his own \_crÃ¢nerie\_ would be shown in the way he

should stick to his profession and stand up for British interests. If

Nick had leaped over a wall he would leap over a river. The course of

his river was already traced and his loins were already girded. Thus he

was justified in holding that the measure of a man's susceptibility was

a man's attitude: that was the only thing he was bound to give an

account of.

He was perpetually giving an account of it to his own soul in default of

other listeners. He was quite angry at having tasted a sweetness in

Miriam's assurance at the carriage--door, bestowed indeed with very

little solemnity, that Nick didn't care for her. Wherein did it concern

him that Nick cared for her or that Nick didn't? Wherein did it signify

to him that Gabriel Nash should have taken upon himself to disapprove of

a union between the young actress and the young painter and to frustrate

an accident that might perhaps prove fortunate? For those had also been

cooling words at the hour, though Peter blushed on the morrow to think

that he felt in them anything but Nash's personal sublimity. He was

ashamed of having been refreshed, and refreshed by so sickly a

draught--it being all his theory that he was not in a fever. As for

keeping an eye on Nick, it would soon become clear to that young man and

that young man's charming friend that he had quite other uses for his

eyes. The pair, with Nash to help, might straighten out their

complications according to their light. He would never speak to Nick of

Miriam; he felt indeed just now as if he should never speak to Nick of

anything. He had traced the course of his river, as I say, and the real

proof would be in the way he should, clearing the air, land on the

opposite bank. It was a case for action--for vigorous, unmistakable

action. He had done very little since his arrival in London but moon

round a \_fille de thÃ©Ã¢tre\_ who was taken up partly, though she bluffed

it off, with another man, and partly with arranging new petticoats for a

beastly old "poetic drama"; but this little waste of time should

instantly be made up. He had given himself a definite rope, and he had

danced to the end of his rope, and now he would dance back. That was all

right--so right that Peter could only express to himself how right it

was by whistling with extravagance.

He whistled as he went to dine with a great personage the day after his

meeting with Nick in Balaklava Place; a great personage to whom he had

originally paid his respects--it was high time--the day before that

meeting, the previous Monday. The sense of omissions to repair, of a

superior line to take, perhaps made him study with more zeal to please

the personage, who gave him ten minutes and asked him five questions. A

great many doors were successively opened before any palpitating pilgrim

who was about to enter the presence of this distinguished man; but they

were discreetly closed again behind Sherringham, and I must ask the

reader to pause with me at the nearer end of the momentary vista. This

particular pilgrim fortunately felt he could count on recognition not

only as a faithful if obscure official in the great hierarchy, but as a

clever young man who happened to be connected by blood with people his

lordship had intimately known. No doubt it was simply as the clever

young man that Peter received the next morning, from the dispenser of

his lordship's hospitality, a note asking him to dine on the morrow.

Such cards had come to him before, and he had always obeyed their call;

he did so at present, however, with a sense of unusual intention. In due

course his intention was translated into words; before the gentlemen

left the dining-room he respectfully asked his noble host for some

further brief and benevolent hearing.

"What is it you want? Tell me now," the master of his fate replied,

motioning to the rest of the company to pass out and detaining him where

they stood.

Peter's excellent training covered every contingency: he could always be

as concise or as diffuse as the occasion required. Even he himself,

however, was surprised at the quick felicity of the terms in which he

was conscious of conveying that, were it compatible with higher

conveniences, he should extremely like to be transferred to duties in a

more distant quarter of the globe. Indeed, fond as he was of thinking

himself a man of emotions controlled by civility, it is not impossible

that a greater candour than he knew glimmered through Peter's expression

and trembled through his tone as he presented this petition. He had

aimed at a good manner in presenting it, but perhaps the best of the

effect produced for his interlocutor was just where it failed, where it

confessed a secret that the highest diplomacy would have guarded.

Sherringham remarked to the minister that he didn't care in the least

where the place might be, nor how little coveted a post; the further

away the better, and the climate didn't matter. He would only prefer of

course that there should be really something to do, though he would make

the best of it even if there were not. He stopped in time, or at least

thought he did, not to betray his covertly seeking relief from minding

his having been jilted in a flight to latitudes unfavourable to human

life. His august patron gave him a sharp look which for a moment seemed

the precursor of a sharper question; but the moment elapsed and the

question failed to come. This considerate omission, characteristic of a

true man of the world and representing quick guesses and still quicker

indifferences, made our gentleman from that moment his lordship's ardent

partisan. What did come was a good-natured laugh and the exclamation:

"You know there are plenty of swamps and jungles, if you want that sort

of thing," Peter replied that it was very much that sort of thing he did

want; whereupon his chief continued: "I'll see--I'll see. If anything

turns up you shall hear."

Something turned up the very next day: our young man, taken at his word,

found himself indebted to the postman for a note of concise intimation

that the high position of minister to the smallest of Central American

republics would be apportioned him. The republic, though small, was big

enough to be "shaky," and the position, though high, not so exalted that

there were not much greater altitudes above it to which it was a

stepping-stone. Peter, quite ready to take one thing with another,

rejoiced at his easy triumph, reflected that he must have been even more

noticed at headquarters than he had hoped, and, on the spot, consulting

nobody and waiting for nothing, signified his unqualified acceptance of

the place. Nobody with a grain of sense would have advised him to do

anything else. It made him happier than he had supposed he should ever

be again; it made him feel professionally in the train, as they said in

Paris; it was serious, it was interesting, it was exciting, and his

imagination, letting itself loose into the future, began once more to

scale the crowning eminence. It was very simple to hold one's course if

one really tried, and he blessed the variety of peoples. Further

communications passed, the last enjoining on him to return to Paris for

a short interval a week later, after which he would be advised of the

date for his proceeding to his remoter duties.

XXXIX

The next thing he meanwhile did was to call with his news on Lady Agnes

Dormer; it is not unworthy of note that he took on the other hand no

step to make his promotion known to Miriam Rooth. To render it probable

he should find his aunt he went at the luncheon-hour; and she was indeed

on the point of sitting down to that repast with Grace. Biddy was not at

home--Biddy was never at home now, her mother said: she was always at

Nick's place, she spent her life there, she ate and drank there, she

almost slept there. What she contrived to do there for so many hours and

what was the irresistible spell Lady Agnes couldn't pretend she had

succeeded in discovering. She spoke of this baleful resort only as

"Nick's place," and spoke of it at first as little as possible. She

judged highly probable, however, that Biddy would come in early that

afternoon: there was something or other, some common social duty, she

had condescended to promise she would perform with Grace. Poor Lady

Agnes, whom Peter found somehow at once grim and very prostrate--she

assured her nephew her nerves were all gone--almost abused her younger

daughter for two minutes, having evidently a deep-seated need of abusing

some one. I must yet add that she didn't wait to meet Grace's eye before

recovering, by a rapid gyration, her view of the possibilities of

things--those possibilities from which she still might squeeze, as a

parent almost in despair, the drop that would sweeten her cup. "Dear

child," she had the presence of mind to subjoin, "her only fault is

after all that she adores her brother. She has a capacity for adoration

and must always take her gospel from some one."

Grace declared to Peter that her sister would have stayed at home if she

had dreamed he was coming, and Lady Agnes let him know that she had

heard all about the hour he had spent with the poor child at Nick's

place and about his extraordinary good nature in taking the two girls to

the play. Peter lunched in Calcutta Gardens, spending an hour there

which proved at first unexpectedly and, as seemed to him, unfairly

dismal. He knew from his own general perceptions, from what Biddy had

told him and from what he had heard Nick say in Balaklava Place, that

his aunt would have been wounded by her son's apostasy; but it was not

till he saw her that he appreciated the dark difference this young man's

behaviour had made in the outlook of his family. Evidently that

behaviour had sprung a dreadful leak in the great vessel of their hopes.

These were things no outsider could measure, and they were none of an

outsider's business; it was enough that Lady Agnes struck him really as

a woman who had received her death-blow. She looked ten years older; she

was white and haggard and tragic. Her eyes burned with a strange fitful

fire that prompted one to conclude her children had better look out for

her. When not filled with this unnatural flame they were suffused with

comfortless tears; and altogether the afflicted lady was, as he viewed

her, very bad, a case for anxiety. It was because he had known she would

be very bad that he had, in his kindness, called on her exactly in this

manner; but he recognised that to undertake to be kind to her in

proportion to her need might carry one very far. He was glad he had not

himself a wronged mad mother, and he wondered how Nick could bear the

burden of the home he had ruined. Apparently he didn't bear it very far,

but had taken final, convenient refuge in Rosedale Road.

Peter's judgement of his perverse cousin was considerably confused, and

not the less so for the consciousness that he was perhaps just now not

in the best state of mind for judging him at all. At the same time,

though he held in general that a man of sense has always warrant enough

in his sense for doing the particular thing he prefers, he could

scarcely help asking himself whether, in the exercise of a virile

freedom, it had been absolutely indispensable Nick should work such

domestic woe. He admitted indeed that that was an anomalous figure for

Nick, the worker of domestic woe. Then he saw that his aunt's

grievance--there came a moment, later, when she asserted as much--was

not quite what her recreant child, in Balaklava Place, had represented

it--with questionable taste perhaps--to a mocking actress; was not a

mere shocked quarrel with his adoption of a "low" career, or a horror,

the old-fashioned horror, of the \_louches\_ licences taken by artists

under pretext of being conscientious: the day for this was past, and

English society thought the brush and the fiddle as good as anything

else--with two or three exceptions. It was not what he had taken up but

what he had put down that made the sorry difference, and the tragedy

would have been equally great if he had become a wine-merchant or a

horse-dealer. Peter had gathered at first that Lady Agnes wouldn't trust

herself to speak directly of her trouble, and he had obeyed what he

supposed the best discretion in making no allusion to it. But a few

minutes before they rose from table she broke out, and when he

attempted to utter a word of mitigation there was something that went to

his heart in the way she returned: "Oh you don't know--you don't know!"

He felt Grace's eyes fixed on him at this instant in a mystery of

supplication, and was uncertain as to what she wanted--that he should

say something more to console her mother or should hurry away from the

subject. Grace looked old and plain and--he had thought on coming

in--rather cross, but she evidently wanted something. "You don't know,"

Lady Agnes repeated with a trembling voice, "you don't know." She had

pushed her chair a little away from her place; she held her

pocket-handkerchief pressed hard to her mouth, almost stuffed into it,

and her eyes were fixed on the floor. She made him aware he did

virtually know--know what towering piles of confidence and hope had been

dashed to the earth. Then she finished her sentence unexpectedly--"You

don't know what my life with my great husband was." Here on the other

hand Peter was slightly at fault--he didn't exactly see what her life

with her great husband had to do with it. What was clear to him,

however, was that they literally had looked for things all in the very

key of that greatness from Nick. It was not quite easy to see why this

had been the case--it had not been precisely Peter's own prefigurement.

Nick appeared to have had the faculty of planting that sort of

flattering faith in women; he had originally given Julia a tremendous

dose of it, though she had since shaken off the effects.

"Do you really think he would have done such great things, politically

speaking?" Peter risked. "Do you consider that the root of the matter

was so essentially in him?"

His hostess had a pause, looking at him rather hard. "I only think what

all his friends--all his father's friends--have thought. He was his

father's son after all. No young man ever had a finer training, and he

gave from the first repeated proof of the highest ability, the highest

ambition. See how he got in everywhere. Look at his first seat--look at

his second," Lady Agnes continued. "Look at what every one says at this

moment."

"Look at all the papers!" said Grace. "Did you ever hear him speak?" she

asked. And when Peter reminded her how he had spent his life in foreign

lands, shut out from such pleasures, she went on: "Well, you lost

something."

"It was very charming," said Lady Agnes quietly and poignantly.

"Of course he's charming, whatever he does," Peter returned. "He'll be a

charming artist."

"Oh God help us!" the poor lady groaned, rising quickly.

"He won't--that's the worst," Grace amended. "It isn't as if he'd do

things people would like, I've been to his place, and I never saw such a

horrid lot of things--not at all clever or pretty."

Yet her mother, at this, turned upon her with sudden asperity. "You know

nothing whatever about the matter!" Then she added for Peter that, as it

happened, her children did have a good deal of artistic taste: Grace was

the only one who was totally deficient in it. Biddy was very

clever--Biddy really might learn to do pretty things. And anything the

poor child could learn was now no more than her duty--there was so

little knowing what the future had in store for them all.

"You think too much of the future--you take terribly gloomy views," said

Peter, looking for his hat.

"What other views can one take when one's son has deliberately thrown

away a fortune?"

"Thrown one away? Do you mean through not marrying----?"

"I mean through killing by his perversity the best friend he ever had."

Peter stared a moment; then with laughter: "Ah but Julia isn't dead of

it!"

"I'm not talking of Julia," said his aunt with a good deal of majesty.

"Nick isn't mercenary, and I'm not complaining of that."

"She means Mr. Carteret," Grace explained with all her competence. "He'd

have done anything if Nick had stayed in the House."

"But he's not dead?"

"Charles Carteret's dying," said Lady Agnes--"his end's dreadfully near.

He has been a sort of providence to us--he was Sir Nicholas's second

self. But he won't put up with such insanity, such wickedness, and that

chapter's closed."

"You mean he has dropped Nick out of his will?"

"Cut him off utterly. He has given him notice."

"The old scoundrel!"--Peter couldn't keep this back. "But Nick will work

the better for that--he'll depend on himself."

"Yes, and whom shall we depend on?" Grace spoke up.

"Don't be vulgar, for God's sake!" her mother ejaculated with a certain

inconsequence.

"Oh leave Nick alone--he'll make a lot of money," Peter declared

cheerfully, following his two companions into the hall.

"I don't in the least care if he does or not," said Lady Agnes. "You

must come upstairs again--I've lots to say to you yet," she went on,

seeing him make for his hat. "You must arrange to come and dine with us

immediately; it's only because I've been so steeped in misery that I

didn't write to you the other day--directly after you had called. We

don't give parties, as you may imagine, but if you'll come just as we

are, for old acquaintance' sake--"

"Just with Nick--if Nick will come--and dear Biddy," Grace interposed.

"Nick must certainly come, as well as dear Biddy, whom I hoped so much

to find," Peter pronounced. "Because I'm going away--I don't know when

I, shall see them again."

"Wait with mamma. Biddy will come in now at any moment," Grace urged.

"You're going away?" said Lady Agnes, pausing at the foot of the stairs

and turning her white face upon him. Something in her voice showed she

had been struck by his own tone.

"I've had promotion and you must congratulate me. They're sending me out

as minister to a little hot hole in Central America--six thousand miles

away. I shall have to go rather soon."

"Oh I'm so glad!" Lady Agnes breathed. Still she paused at the foot of

the stair and still she gazed.

"How very delightful--it will lead straight off to all sorts of other

good things!" Grace a little coarsely commented.

"Oh I'm crawling up--I'm an excellency," Peter laughed.

"Then if you dine with us your excellency must have great people to meet

you."

"Nick and Biddy--they're great enough."

"Come upstairs--come upstairs," said Lady Agnes, turning quickly and

beginning to ascend.

"Wait for Biddy--I'm going out," Grace continued, extending her hand to

her kinsman. "I shall see you again--not that you care; but good-bye

now. Wait for Biddy," the girl repeated in a lower tone, fastening her

eyes on his with the same urgent mystifying gleam he thought he had

noted at luncheon.

"Oh I'll go and see her in Rosedale Road," he threw off.

"Do you mean to-day--now?"

"I don't know about to-day, but before I leave England."

"Well, she'll be in immediately," said Grace. "Good-bye to your

excellency."

"Come up, Peter--\_please\_ come up," called Lady Agnes from the top of

the stairs.

He mounted and when he found himself in the drawing-room with her and

the door closed she expressed her great interest in his fine prospects

and position, which she wished to hear all about. She rang for coffee

and indicated the seat he would find most comfortable: it shone before

him for a moment that she would tell him he might if he wished light a

cigar. For Peter had suddenly become restless--too restless to occupy a

comfortable chair; he seated himself in it only to jump up again, and he

went to the window, while he imparted to his hostess the very little he

knew about his post, on hearing a vehicle drive up to the door. A strong

light had just been thrown into his mind, and it grew stronger when,

looking out, he saw Grace Dormer issue from the house in a hat and a

jacket which had all the air of having been assumed with extraordinary

speed. Her jacket was unbuttoned and her gloves still dangling from the

hands with which she was settling her hat. The vehicle into which she

hastily sprang was a hansom-cab which had been summoned by the butler

from the doorstep and which rolled away with her after she had given an

address.

"Where's Grace going in such a hurry?" he asked of Lady Agnes; to which

she replied that she hadn't the least idea--her children, at the pass

they had all come to, knocked about as they liked.

Well, he sat down again; he stayed a quarter of an hour and then he

stayed longer, and during this time his appreciation of what she had in

her mind gathered force. She showed him that precious quantity clearly

enough, though she showed it by no clumsy, no voluntary arts. It looked

out of her sombre, conscious eyes and quavered in her preoccupied,

perfunctory tones. She took an extravagant interest in his future

proceedings, the probable succession of events in his career, the

different honours he would be likely to come in for, the salary attached

to his actual appointment, the salary attached to the appointments that

would follow--they would be sure to, wouldn't they?--and what he might

reasonably expect to save. Oh he must save--Lady Agnes was an advocate

of saving; and he must take tremendous pains and get on and be clever

and fiercely ambitious: he must make himself indispensable and rise to

the top. She was urgent and suggestive and sympathetic; she threw

herself into the vision of his achievements and emoluments as if to

appease a little the sore hunger with which Nick's treachery had left

her. This was touching to her nephew, who didn't remain unmoved even at

those more importunate moments when, as she fell into silence, fidgeting

feverishly with a morsel of fancy-work she had plucked from a table, her

whole presence became an intense, repressed appeal to him. What that

appeal would have been had it been uttered was: "Oh Peter, take little

Biddy; oh my dear young friend, understand your interests at the same

time that you understand mine; be kind and reasonable and clever; save

me all further anxiety and tribulation and accept my lovely, faultless

child from my hands."

That was what Lady Agnes had always meant, more or less, that was what

Grace had meant, and they meant it with singular lucidity on the present

occasion, Lady Agnes meant it so much that from one moment to another

he scarce knew what she might do; and Grace meant it so much that she

had rushed away in a hansom to fetch her sister from the studio. Grace,

however, was a fool, for Biddy certainly wouldn't come. The news of his

promotion had started them off, adding point to their idea of his being

an excellent match; bringing home to them sharply the sense that if he

were going away to strange countries he must take Biddy with him--that

something at all events must be settled about Biddy before he went. They

had suddenly begun to throb, poor things, with alarm at the ebbing

hours.

Strangely enough the perception of all this hadn't the effect of

throwing him on the defensive and still less that of making him wish to

bolt. When once he had made sure what was in the air he recognised a

propriety, a real felicity in it; couldn't deny that he was in certain

ways a good match, since it was quite probable he would go far; and was

even generous enough--as he had no fear of being materially dragged to

the altar--to enter into the conception that he might offer some balm to

a mother who had had a horrid disappointment. The feasibility of

marrying Biddy was not exactly augmented by the idea that his doing so

would be a great offset to what Nick had made Lady Agnes suffer; but at

least Peter didn't dislike his strenuous aunt so much as to wish to

punish her for her nature. He was not afraid of her, whatever she might

do; and though unable to grasp the practical relevancy of Biddy's being

produced on the instant was willing to linger half an hour on the chance

of successful production.

There was meanwhile, moreover, a certain contagion in Lady Agnes's

appeal--it made him appeal sensibly to himself, since indeed, as it is

time to say, the glass of our young man's spirit had been polished for

that reflexion. It was only at this moment really that he became

inwardly candid. While making up his mind that his only safety was in

flight and taking the strong measure of a request for help toward it, he

was yet very conscious that another and probably still more effectual

safeguard--especially if the two should be conjoined--lay in the hollow

of his hand. His sister's words in Paris had come back to him and had

seemed still wiser than when uttered: "She'll save you disappointments;

you'd know the worst that can happen to you, and it wouldn't be bad."

Julia had put it into a nutshell--Biddy would probably save him

disappointments. And then she was--well, she was Biddy. Peter knew

better what that was since the hour he had spent with her in Rosedale

Road. But he had brushed away the sense of it, though aware that in

doing so he took only half-measures and was even guilty of a sort of

fraud upon himself. If he was sincere in wishing to put a gulf between

his future and that sad expanse of his past and present over which

Miriam had cast her shadow there was a very simple way to do so. He had

dodged this way, dishonestly fixing on another which, taken alone, was

far from being so good; but Lady Agnes brought him back to it. She held

him in well-nigh confused contemplation of it, during which the safety,

as Julia had called it, of the remedy wrought upon him as he wouldn't

have believed beforehand, and not least to the effect of sweetening, of

prettily colouring, the pill. It would be simple and it would deal with

all his problems; it would put an end to all alternatives, which, as

alternatives were otherwise putting an end to him, would be an excellent

thing. It would settle the whole question of his future, and it was high

time this should be settled.

Peter took two cups of coffee while he made out his future with Lady

Agnes, but though he drank them slowly he had finished them before Biddy

turned up. He stayed three-quarters of an hour, saying to himself she

wouldn't come--why should she come? Lady Agnes stooped to no avowal; she

really stooped, so far as bald words went, to no part of the business;

but she made him fix the next day save one for coming to dinner, and her

repeated declaration that there would be no one else, not another

creature but themselves, had almost the force of the supplied form for a

promise to pay. In giving his word that he would come without fail, and

not write the next day to throw them over for some function he should

choose to dub obligatory, he felt quite as if he were putting his name

to such a document. He went away at half-past three; Biddy of course

hadn't come, and he had been sure she wouldn't. He couldn't imagine what

Grace's idea had been, nor what pretext she had put forward to her

sister. Whatever these things Biddy had seen through them and hated

them. Peter could but like her the more for that.

XL

Lady Agnes would doubtless have done better, in her own interest or in

that of her child, to have secured his company for the very next

evening. This she had indeed attempted, but her application of her

thought had miscarried, Peter bethinking himself that he was importantly

engaged. Her ladyship, moreover, couldn't presume to answer for Nick,

since after all they must of course \_have\_ Nick, though, to tell the

truth, the hideous truth, she and her son were scarcely on terms. Peter

insisted on Nick, wished particularly to see him, and gave his hostess

notice that he would make each of them forgive everything to the other.

She returned that all her son had to forgive was her loving him more

than her life, and she would have challenged Peter, had he allowed it,

on the general ground of the comparative dignity of the two arts of

painting portraits and governing nations. Our friend declined the

challenge: the most he did was to intimate that he perhaps saw Nick more

vividly as a painter than as a governor. Later he remembered vaguely

something his aunt had said about their being a governing family.

He was going, by what he could ascertain, to a very queer climate and

had many preparations to make. He gave his best attention to these, and

for a couple of hours after leaving Lady Agnes rummaged London for books

from which he might extract information about his new habitat. It made

apparently no great figure in literature, and Peter could reflect that

he was perhaps destined to find a salutary distraction in himself

filling the void with a volume of impressions. After he had resigned

himself to necessary ignorance he went into the Park. He treated himself

to an afternoon or two there when he happened to drop upon London in

summer--it refreshed his sense of the British interests he would have to

stand up for. Moreover, he had been hiding more or less, and now all

that was changed and this was the simplest way not to hide. He met a

host of friends, made his situation as public as possible and accepted

on the spot a great many invitations; all subject, however, to the

mental reservation that he should allow none of them to interfere with

his being present the first night of Miriam's new venture. He was going

to the equator to get away from her, but to repudiate the past with some

decency of form he must show an affected interest, if he could muster

none other, in an occasion that meant so much for her. The least

intimate of her associates would do that, and Peter remembered how, at

the expense of good manners, he had stayed away from her first

appearance on any stage at all. He would have been shocked had he found

himself obliged to go back to Paris without giving her at the imminent

crisis the personal countenance she had so good a right to expect.

It was nearly eight o'clock when he went to Great Stanhope Street to

dress for dinner and learn that a note awaiting him on the hall-table

and which bore the marks of hasty despatch had come three or four hours

before. It exhibited the signature of Miriam Rooth and let him know that

she positively expected him at the theatre by eleven o'clock the next

morning, for which hour a dress-rehearsal of the revived play had been

hurriedly projected, the first night being now definitely fixed for the

impending Saturday. She counted on his attendance at both ceremonies,

but with particular reasons for wishing to see him in the morning. "I

want you to see and judge and tell me," she said, "for my mind's like a

flogged horse--it won't give another kick." It was for the Saturday he

had made Lady Agnes his promise; he had thought of the possibility of

the play in doing so, but had rested in the faith that, from valid

symptoms, this complication would not occur till the following week. He

decided nothing on the spot as to the conflict of occupations--it was

enough to send Miriam three words to the effect that he would sooner

perish than fail her on the morrow.

He went to the theatre in the morning, and the episode proved curious

and instructive. Though there were twenty people in the stalls it bore

little resemblance to those \_rÃ©pÃ©titions gÃ©nÃ©rales\_ to which, in Paris,

his love of the drama had often attracted him and which, taking place at

night, in the theatre closed to the public, are virtually first

performances with invited spectators. They were to his sense always

settled and stately, rehearsals of the \_premiÃ¨re\_ even more than

rehearsals of the play. The present occasion was less august; it was not

so much a concert as a confusion of sounds, and it took audible and at

times disputatious counsel with itself. It was rough and frank and

spasmodic, but was lively and vivid and, in spite of the serious

character of the piece, often exceedingly droll: while it gave

Sherringham, oddly enough, a more present sense than ever of bending

over the hissing, smoking, sputtering caldron in which a palatable

performance is stewed. He looked into the gross darkness that may result

from excess of light; that is, he understood how knocked up, on the eve

of production, every one concerned in the preparation of a piece might

be, with nerves overstretched and glasses blurred, awaiting the test

and the response, the echo to be given back by the big, receptive,

artless, stupid, delightful public. Peter's interest had been great in

advance, and as Miriam since his arrival had taken him much into her

confidence he knew what she intended to do and had discussed a hundred

points with her. They had differed about some of them and she had always

said: "Ah but wait till you see how I shall do it at the time!" That was

usually her principal reason and her most convincing argument. She had

made some changes at the last hour--she was going to do several things

in another way. But she wanted a touchstone, wanted a fresh ear, and, as

she told Sherringham when he went behind after the first act, that was

why she had insisted on this private trial, to which a few fresh ears

were to be admitted. They didn't want to allow it her, the theatre

people, they were such a parcel of donkeys; but as to what she meant in

general to insist on she had given them a hint she flattered herself

they wouldn't soon forget.

She spoke as if she had had a great battle with her fellow-workers and

had routed them utterly. It was not the first time he had heard her talk

as if such a life as hers could only be a fighting life and of her frank

measure of the fine uses of a faculty for making a row. She rejoiced she

possessed this faculty, for she knew what to do with it; and though

there might be a certain swagger in taking such a stand in advance when

one had done the infinitely little she had yet done, she nevertheless

trusted to the future to show how right she should have been in

believing a pack of idiots would never hold out against her and would

know they couldn't afford to. Her assumption of course was that she

fought for the light and the right, for the good way and the thorough,

for doing a thing properly if one did it at all. What she had really

wanted was the theatre closed for a night and the dress-rehearsal, put

on for a few people, given instead of \_Yolande\_. That she had not got,

but she would have it the next time. She spoke as if her triumphs behind

the scenes as well as before would go by leaps and bounds, and he could

perfectly see, for the time, that she would drive her coadjutors in

front of her like sheep. Her tone was the sort of thing that would have

struck one as preposterous if one hadn't believed in her; but if one did

so believe it only seemed thrown in with the other gifts. How was she

going to act that night and what could be said for such a hateful way of

doing things? She thrust on poor Peter questions he was all unable to

answer; she abounded in superlatives and tremendously strong objections.

He had a sharper vision than usual of the queer fate, for a peaceable

man, of being involved in a life of so violent a rhythm: one might as

well be hooked to a Catharine-wheel and whiz round in flame and smoke.

It had only been for five minutes, in the wing, amid jostling and

shuffling and shoving, that they held this conference. Miriam, splendid

in a brocaded anachronism, a false dress of the beginning of the

century, and excited and appealing, imperious, reckless and

good-humoured, full of exaggerated propositions, supreme determinations

and comic irrelevancies, showed as radiant a young head as the stage had

ever seen. Other people quickly surrounded her, and Peter saw that

though, she wanted, as she said, a fresh ear and a fresh eye she was

liable to rap out to those who possessed these advantages that they

didn't know what they were talking about. It was rather hard for her

victims--Basil Dashwood let him into this, wonderfully painted and in a

dress even more beautiful than Miriam's, that of a young dandy under

Charles the Second: if you were not in the business you were one kind

of donkey and if you \_were\_ in the business you were another kind. Peter

noted with a certain chagrin that Gabriel Nash had failed; he preferred

to base his annoyance on that ground when the girl, after the remark

just quoted from Dashwood, laughing and saying that at any rate the

thing would do because it would just have to do, thrust vindictively but

familiarly into the young actor's face a magnificent feather fan. "Isn't

he too lovely," she asked, "and doesn't he know how to do it?" Dashwood

had the sense of costume even more than Peter had inferred or supposed

he minded, inasmuch as it now appeared he had gone profoundly into the

question of what the leading lady was to wear. He had drawn patterns and

hunted up stuffs, had helped her to try on her clothes, had bristled

with ideas and pins. It would not have been quite clear, Peter's ground

for resenting Nash's cynical absence; it may even be thought singular he

should have missed him. At any rate he flushed a little when their young

woman, of whom he inquired whether she hadn't invited her oldest and

dearest friend, made answer: "Oh he says he doesn't like the

kitchen-fire--he only wants the pudding!" It would have taken the

kitchen-fire to account at that point for the red of Sherringham's

cheek; and he was indeed uncomfortably heated by helping to handle, as

he phrased it, the saucepans.

This he felt so much after he had returned to his seat, which he forbore

to quit again till the curtain had fallen on the last act, that in spite

of the high beauty of that part of the performance of which Miriam

carried the weight there were moments when his relief overflowed into

gasps, as if he had been scrambling up the bank of a torrent after an

immersion. The girl herself, out in the open of her field to win, was of

the incorruptible faith: she had been saturated to good purpose with the

great spirit of Madame CarrÃ©. That was conspicuous while the play went

on and she guarded the whole march with fagged piety and passion.

Sherringham had never liked the piece itself; he held that as barbarous

in form and false in feeling it did little honour to the British

theatre; he despised many of the speeches, pitied Miriam for having to

utter them, and considered that, lighted by that sort of candle, the

path of fame might very well lead nowhere.

When the ordeal was over he went behind again, where in the

rose-coloured satin of the silly issue the heroine of the occasion said

to him: "Fancy my having to drag through that other stuff to-night--the

brutes!" He was vague about the persons designated in this allusion, but

he let it pass: he had at the moment a kind of detached foreboding of

the way any gentleman familiarly connected with her in the future would

probably form the habit of letting objurgations and some other things

pass. This had become indeed now a frequent state of mind with him; the

instant he was before her, near her, next her, he found himself a

helpless subject of the spell which, so far at least as he was

concerned, she put forth by contact and of which the potency was

punctual and absolute: the fit came on, as he said, exactly as some

esteemed express-train on a great line bangs at a given moment into the

station. At a distance he partly recovered himself--that was the

encouragement for going to the shaky republic; but as soon as he entered

her presence his life struck him as a thing disconnected from his will.

It was as if he himself had been one thing and his behaviour another; he

had shining views of this difference, drawn as they might be from the

coming years--little illustrative scenes in which he saw himself in

strange attitudes of resignation, always rather sad and still and with a

slightly bent head. Such images should not have been inspiring, but it

is a fact that they were something to go upon. The gentleman with the

bent head had evidently given up something that was dear to him, but it

was exactly because he had got his price that he was there. "Come and

see me three or four hours hence," Miriam said--"come, that is, about

six. I shall rest till then, but I want particularly to talk with you.

There will be no one else--not the tip of any tiresome nose. You'll do

me good." So of course he drove up at six.

XLI

"I don't know; I haven't the least idea; I don't care; don't ask

me!"--it was so he met some immediate appeal of her artistic egotism,

some challenge of his impression of her at this and that moment. Hadn't

she frankly better give up such and such a point and return to their

first idea, the one they had talked over so much? Peter replied to this

that he disowned all ideas; that at any rate he should never have

another as long as he lived, and that, so help him heaven, they had

worried that hard bone more than enough.

"You're tired of me--yes, already," she said sadly and kindly. They were

alone, her mother had not peeped out and she had prepared herself to

return to the Strand. "However, it doesn't matter and of course your

head's full of other things. You must think me ravenously

selfish--perpetually chattering about my vulgar shop. What will you have

when one's a vulgar shop-girl? You used to like it, but then you weren't

an ambassador."

"What do you know about my being a minister?" he asked, leaning back in

his chair and showing sombre eyes. Sometimes he held her handsomer on

the stage than off, and sometimes he reversed that judgement. The former

of these convictions had held his mind in the morning, and it was now

punctually followed by the other. As soon as she stepped on the boards

a great and special alteration usually took place in her--she was in

focus and in her frame; yet there were hours too in which she wore her

world's face before the audience, just as there were hours when she wore

her stage face in the world. She took up either mask as it suited her

humour. To-day he was seeing each in its order and feeling each the

best. "I should know very little if I waited for you to tell me--that's

very certain," Miriam returned. "It's in the papers that you've got a

high appointment, but I don't read the papers unless there's something

in them about myself. Next week I shall devour them and think them, no

doubt, inane. It was Basil told me this afternoon of your promotion--he

had seen it announced somewhere, I'm delighted if it gives you more

money and more advantages, but don't expect me to be glad that you're

going away to some distant, disgusting country."

"The matter has only just been settled and we've each been busy with our

own affairs. But even if you hadn't given me these opportunities," Peter

went on, "I should have tried to see you to-day, to tell you my news and

take leave of you."

"Take leave? Aren't you coming to-morrow?"

"Oh yes, I shall see you through that. But I shall rush away the very

moment it's over."

"I shall be much better then--really I shall," the girl said.

"The better you are the worse you are."

She returned his frown with a beautiful charity. "If it would do you any

good I'd be bad."

"The worse you are the better you are!" Peter laughed. "You're a

devouring demon."

"Not a bit! It's you."

"It's I? I like that."

"It's you who make trouble, who are sore and suspicious and supersubtle,

not taking things as they come and for what they are, but twisting them

into misery and falsity. Oh I've watched you enough, my dear friend, and

I've been sorry for you--and sorry as well for myself; for I'm not so

taken up with myself, in the low greedy sense, as you think. I'm not

such a base creature. I'm capable of gratitude, I'm capable of

affection. One may live in paint and tinsel, but one isn't absolutely

without a soul. Yes, I've got one," the girl went on, "though I do smear

my face and grin at myself in the glass and practise my intonations. If

what you're going to do is good for you I'm very glad. If it leads to

good things, to honour and fortune and greatness, I'm enchanted. If it

means your being away always, for ever and ever, of course that's

serious. You know it--I needn't tell you--I regard you as I really don't

regard any one else. I've a confidence in you--ah it's a luxury! You're

a gentleman, \_mon bon\_--ah you're a gentleman! It's just that. And then

you see, you understand, and that's a luxury too. You're a luxury

altogether, dear clever Mr. Sherringham. Your being where I shall never

see you isn't a thing I shall enjoy; I know that from the separation of

these last months--after our beautiful life in Paris, the best thing

that ever happened to me or that ever will. But if it's your career, if

it's your happiness--well, I can miss you and hold my tongue. I \_can\_ be

disinterested--I can!"

"What did you want me to come for?" he asked, all attentive and

motionless. The same impression, the old impression, was with him again;

the sense that if she was sincere it was sincerity of execution, if she

was genuine it was the genuineness of doing it well. She did it so well

now that this very fact was charming and touching. In claiming from him

at the theatre this hour of the afternoon she had wanted honestly (the

more as she had not seen him at home for several days) to go over with

him once again, on the eve of the great night--it would be for her

second creation the critics would lie so in wait; the first success

might have been a fluke--some of her recurrent doubts: knowing from

experience of what good counsel he often was, how he could give a

worrying question its "settler" at the last. Then she had heard from

Dashwood of the change in his situation, and that had really from one

moment to the other made her think sympathetically of his

preoccupations--led her open-handedly to drop her own. She was sorry to

lose him and eager to let him know how good a friend she was conscious

he had been to her. But the expression of this was already, at the end

of a minute, a strange bedevilment: she began to listen to herself, to

speak dramatically, to represent. She uttered the things she felt as if

they were snatches of old play-books, and really felt them the more

because they sounded so well. This, however, didn't prevent their really

being as good feelings as those of anybody else, and at the moment her

friend, to still a rising emotion--which he knew he shouldn't

still--articulated the challenge I have just recorded, she had for his

sensibility, at any rate, the truth of gentleness and generosity.

"There's something the matter with you, my dear--you're jealous," Miriam

said. "You're jealous of poor Mr. Dormer. That's an example of the way

you tangle everything up. Lord, he won't hurt you, nor me either!"

"He can't hurt me, certainly," Peter returned, "and neither can you; for

I've a nice little heart of stone and a smart new breastplate of iron.

The interest I take in you is something quite extraordinary; but the

most extraordinary thing in it is that it's perfectly prepared to

tolerate the interest of others."

"The interest of others needn't trouble it much!" Miriam declared. "If

Mr. Dormer has broken off his marriage to such an awfully fine

woman--for she's that, your swell of a sister--it isn't for a ranting

wretch like me. He's kind to me because that's his nature and he notices

me because that's his business; but he's away up in the clouds--a

thousand miles over my head. He has got something 'on,' as they say;

he's in love with an idea. I think it's a shocking bad one, but that's

his own affair. He's quite \_exaltÃ©\_; living on nectar and ambrosia--what

he has to spare for us poor crawling things on earth is only a few dry

crumbs. I didn't even ask him to come to rehearsal. Besides, he thinks

you're in love with me and that it wouldn't be honourable to cut in.

He's capable of that--isn't it charming?"

"If he were to relent and give up his scruples would you marry him?"

Peter asked.

"Mercy, how you chatter about 'marrying'!" the girl laughed. "\_C'est la

maladie anglaise\_--you've all got it on the brain."

"Why I put it that way to please you," he explained. "You complained to

me last year precisely that this was not what seemed generally wanted."

"Oh last year!"--she made nothing of that. Then differently, "Yes, it's

very tiresome!" she conceded.

"You told me, moreover, in Paris more than once that you wouldn't listen

to anything but that."

"Well," she declared, "I won't, but I shall wait till I find a husband

who's charming enough and bad enough. One who'll beat me and swindle me

and spend my money on other women--that's the sort of man for me. Mr.

Dormer, delightful as he is, doesn't come up to that."

"You'll marry Basil Dashwood." He spoke it with conviction.

"Oh 'marry'?--call it marry if you like. That's what poor mother

threatens me with--she lives in dread of it."

"To this hour," he mentioned, "I haven't managed to make out what your

mother wants. She has so many ideas, as Madame CarrÃ© said."

"She wants me to be some sort of tremendous creature--all her ideas are

reducible to that. What makes the muddle is that she isn't clear about

the creature she wants most. A great actress or a great lady--sometimes

she inclines for one and sometimes for the other, but on the whole

persuading herself that a great actress, if she'll cultivate the right

people, may \_be\_ a great lady. When I tell her that won't do and that a

great actress can never be anything but a great vagabond, then the dear

old thing has tantrums, and we have scenes--the most grotesque: they'd

make the fortune, for a subject, of some play-writing rascal, if he had

the wit to guess them; which, luckily for us perhaps, he never will. She

usually winds up by protesting--\_devinez un peu quoi\_!" Miriam added.

And as her companion professed his complete inability to divine: "By

declaring that rather than take it that way I must marry \_you\_."

"She's shrewder than I thought," Peter returned. "It's the last of

vanities to talk about, but I may state in passing that if you'd marry

me you should be the greatest of all possible ladies."

She had a beautiful, comical gape. "Lord o' mercy, my dear fellow, what

natural capacity have I for that?"

"You're artist enough for anything. I shall be a great diplomatist: my

resolution's firmly taken, I'm infinitely cleverer than you have the

least idea of, and you shall be," he went on, "a great diplomatist's

wife."

"And the demon, the devil, the devourer and destroyer, that you are so

fond of talking about: what, in such a position, do you do with that

element of my nature? \_OÃ¹ le fourrez-vous\_?" she cried as with a real

anxiety.

"I'll look after it, I'll keep it under. Rather perhaps I should say

I'll bribe it and amuse it; I'll gorge it with earthly grandeurs."

"That's better," said Miriam; "for a demon that's kept under is a shabby

little demon. Don't let's be shabby." Then she added: "Do you really go

away the beginning of next week?"

"Monday night if possible."

"Ah that's but to Paris. Before you go to your new post they must give

you an interval here."

"I shan't take it--I'm so tremendously keen for my duties. I shall

insist on going sooner. Oh," he went on, "I shall be concentrated now."

"I'll come and act there." She met it all--she was amused and amusing.

"I've already forgotten what it was I wanted to discuss with you," she

said--"it was some trumpery stuff. What I want to say now is only one

thing: that it's not in the least true that because my life pitches me

in every direction and mixes me up with all sorts of people--or rather

with one sort mainly, poor dears!--I haven't a decent character, I

haven't common honesty. Your sympathy, your generosity, your patience,

your precious suggestions, our dear sweet days last summer in Paris, I

shall never forget. You're the best--you're different from all the

others. Think of me as you please and make profane jokes about my mating

with a disguised 'Arty'--I shall think of \_you\_ only in one way. I've a

great respect for you. With all my heart I hope you'll be a great

diplomatist. God bless you, dear clever man."

She got up as she spoke and in so doing glanced at the clock--a movement

that somehow only added to the noble gravity of her discourse: she was

considering his time so much more than her own. Sherringham, at this,

rising too, took out his watch and stood a moment with his eyes bent

upon it, though without in the least seeing what the needles marked.

"You'll have to go, to reach the theatre at your usual hour, won't you?

Let me not keep you. That is, let me keep you only long enough just to

say this, once for all, as I shall never speak of it again. I'm going

away to save myself," he frankly said, planted before her and seeking

her eyes with his own. "I ought to go, no doubt, in silence, in decorum,

in virtuous submission to hard necessity--without asking for credit or

sympathy, without provoking any sort of scene or calling attention to my

fortitude. But I can't--upon my soul I can't. I can go, I can see it

through, but I can't hold my tongue. I want you to know all about it, so

that over there, when I'm bored to death, I shall at least have the

exasperatingly vain consolation of feeling that you do know--and that it

does neither you nor me any good!"

He paused a moment; on which, as quite vague, she appealed. "That I 'do

know' what?"

"That I've a consuming passion for you and that it's impossible."

"Oh impossible, my friend!" she sighed, but with a quickness in her

assent.

"Very good; it interferes, the gratification of it would interfere

fatally, with the ambition of each of us. Our ambitions are inferior and

odious, but we're tied fast to them."

"Ah why ain't we simple?" she quavered as if all touched by it. "Why

ain't we of the people--\_comme tout le monde\_--just a man and a girl

liking each other?"

He waited a little--she was so tenderly mocking, so sweetly ambiguous.

"Because we're precious asses! However, I'm simple enough, after all,

to care for you as I've never cared for any human creature. You have, as

it happens, a personal charm for me that no one has ever approached, and

from the top of your splendid head to the sole of your theatrical shoe

(I could go down on my face--there, abjectly--and kiss it!) every inch

of you is dear and delightful to me. Therefore good-bye."

She took this in with wider eyes: he had put the matter in a way that

struck her. For a moment, all the same, he was afraid she would reply as

on the confessed experience of so many such tributes, handsome as this

one was. But she was too much moved--the pure colour that had risen to

her face showed it--to have recourse to this particular facility. She

was moved even to the glimmer of tears, though she gave him her hand

with a smile. "I'm so glad you've said all that, for from you I know

what it means. Certainly it's better for you to go away. Of course it's

all wrong, isn't it?--but that's the only thing it can be: therefore

it's all right, isn't it? Some day when we're both great people we'll

talk these things over; then we shall be quiet, we shall be rich, we

shall be at peace--let us hope so at least--and better friends than

others about us will know." She paused, smiling still, and then said

while he held her hand: "Don't, \_don't\_ come to-morrow night."

With this she attempted to draw her hand away, as if everything were

settled and over; but the effect of her movement was that, as he held

her tight, he was simply drawn toward her and close to her. The effect

of this, in turn, was that, releasing her only to possess her the more

completely, he seized her in his arms and, breathing deeply "I love you,

you know," clasped her in a long embrace. His demonstration and her

conscious sufferance, almost equally liberal, so sustained themselves

that the door of the room had time to open slowly before either had

taken notice. Mrs. Rooth, who had not peeped in before, peeped in now,

becoming in this manner witness of an incident she could scarce have

counted on. The unexpected indeed had for Mrs. Rooth never been an

insuperable element in things; it was her position in general to be too

acquainted with all the passions for any crude surprise. As the others

turned round they saw her stand there and smile, and heard her ejaculate

with wise indulgence: "Oh you extravagant children!"

Miriam brushed off her tears, quickly but unconfusedly. "He's going

away, the wretch; he's bidding us farewell."

Peter--it was perhaps a result of his acute agitation--laughed out at

the "us" (he had already laughed at the charge of puerility), and Mrs.

Rooth went on: "Going away? Ah then I must have one too!" She held out

both her hands, and Sherringham, stepping forward to take them, kissed

her respectfully on each cheek, in the foreign manner, while she

continued: "Our dear old friend--our kind, gallant gentleman!"

"The gallant gentleman has been promoted to a great post--the proper

reward of his gallantry," Miriam said. "He's going out as minister to

some impossible place--where is it?"

"As minister--how very charming! We \_are\_ getting on." And their

companion languished up at him with a world of approval.

"Oh well enough. One must take what one can get," he answered.

"You'll get everything now, I'm sure, shan't you?" Mrs. Rooth asked with

an inflexion that called back to him comically--the source of the sound

was so different--the very vibrations he had heard the day before from

Lady Agnes.

"He's going to glory and he'll forget all about us--forget he has ever

known such low people. So we shall never see him again, and it's better

so. Good-bye, good-bye," Miriam repeated; "the brougham must be there,

but I won't take you. I want to talk to mother about you, and we shall

say things not fit for you to hear. Oh I'll let you know what we

lose--don't be afraid," she added to Mrs. Rooth. "He's the rising star

of diplomacy."

"I knew it from the first--I know how things turn out for such people as

you!" cried the old woman, gazing fondly at Sherringham. "But you don't

mean to say you're not coming to-morrow night?"

"Don't--don't; it's great folly," Miriam interposed; "and it's quite

needless, since you saw me to-day."

Peter turned from the mother to the daughter, the former of whom broke

out to the latter: "Oh you dear rogue, to say one has \_seen\_ you yet!

You know how you'll come up to it--you'll be beyond everything."

"Yes, I shall be there--certainly," Peter said, at the door, to Mrs.

Rooth.

"Oh you dreadful goose!" Miriam called after him. But he went out

without looking round at her.

BOOK SEVENTH

XLII

Nick Dormer had for the hour quite taken up his abode at his studio,

where Biddy usually arrived after breakfast to give him news of the

state of affairs in Calcutta Gardens and where many letters and

telegrams were now addressed him. Among such missives, on the morning of

the Saturday on which Peter Sherringham had promised to dine at the

other house, was a note from Miriam Rooth, informing Nick that if he

shouldn't telegraph to put her off she would turn up about half-past

eleven, probably with her mother, for just one more sitting. She added

that it was a nervous day for her and that she couldn't keep still, so

that it would really be very kind to let her come to him as a refuge.

She wished to stay away from the theatre, where everything was now

settled--or so much the worse for the others if it wasn't--till the

evening; in spite of which she should if left to herself be sure to go

there. It would keep her quiet and soothe her to sit--he could keep her

quiet (he was such a blessing that way!) at any time. Therefore she

would give him two or three hours--or rather she would herself ask for

them--if he didn't positively turn her from the door.

It had not been definite to Nick that he wanted another sitting at all

for the slight work, as he held it to be, that Miriam had already helped

him to achieve. He regarded this work as a mere light wind-fall of the

shaken tree: he had made what he could of it and would have been

embarrassed to make more. If it was not finished this was because it was

not finishable; at any rate he had said all he had to say in that

particular phrase. The young man, in truth, was not just now in the

highest spirits; his imagination had within two or three days become

conscious of a check that he tried to explain by the idea of a natural

reaction. Any decision or violent turn, any need of a new sharp choice

in one's career, was upsetting, and, exaggerate that importance and

one's own as little as one would, a deal of flurry couldn't help

attending, especially in the face of so much scandal, the horrid act,

odious to one's modesty at the best, of changing one's clothes in the

marketplace. That made life not at all positively pleasant, yet

decidedly thrilling, for the hour; and it was well enough till the

thrill abated. When this occurred, as it inevitably would, the romance

and the glow of the adventure were exchanged for the chill and the

prose. It was to these latter elements he had waked up pretty wide on

this particular morning; and the prospect was not appreciably fresher

from the fact that he had warned himself in advance it would be dull. He

had in fact known how dull it would be, but now he would have time to

learn even better. A reaction was a reaction, but it was not after all a

catastrophe. It would be a feature of his very freedom that he should

ask himself if he hadn't made a great mistake; this privilege would

doubtless even remain within the limits of its nature in exposing him to

hours of intimate conviction of his madness. But he would live to

retract his retractations--this was the first thing to bear in mind.

He was absorbed, even while he dressed, in the effort to achieve

intelligibly to himself some such revolution when, by the first post,

Miriam's note arrived. At first it did little to help his agility--it

made him, seeing her esthetic faith as so much stronger and simpler than

his own, wonder how he should keep with her at her high level. Ambition,

in her, was always on the rush, and she was not a person to conceive

that others might in bad moments listen for the trumpet in vain. It

would never have occurred to her that only the day before he had spent a

part of the afternoon quite at the bottom of the hill. He had in fact

turned into the National Gallery and had wandered about there for more

than an hour, and it was just while he did so that the immitigable

recoil had begun perversely to make itself felt. The perversity was all

the greater from the fact that if the experience was depressing this was

not because he had been discouraged beyond measure by the sight of the

grand things that had been done--things so much grander than any that

would ever bear his signature. That variation he was duly acquainted

with and should know in abundance again. What had happened to him, as he

passed on this occasion from Titian to Rubens and from Gainsborough to

Rembrandt, was that he found himself calling the whole exhibited art

into question. What was it after all at the best and why had people

given it so high a place? Its weakness, its limits broke upon him;

tacitly blaspheming he looked with a lustreless eye at the palpable,

polished, "toned" objects designed for suspension on hooks. That is, he

blasphemed if it were blasphemy to feel that as bearing on the energies

of man they were a poor and secondary show. The human force producing

them was so far from one of the greatest; their place was a small place

and their connexion with the heroic life casual and slight. They

represented so little great ideas, and it was great ideas that kept the

world from chaos. He had incontestably been in much closer relation with

them a few months before than he was to-day: it made up a great deal

for what was false and hollow, what was merely personal, in "politics"

that, were the idea greater or smaller, they could at their best so

directly deal with it. The love of it had really been much of the time

at the bottom of his impulse to follow them up; though this was not what

he had most talked of with his political friends or even with Julia. No,

political as Julia was, he had not conferred with her much about the

idea. However, this might have been his own fault quite as much as hers,

and she in fact took such things, such enthusiasms, for granted--there

was an immense deal in every way that she took for granted. On the other

hand, he had often put forward this brighter side of the care for the

public weal in his discussions with Gabriel Nash, to the end, it is

true, of making that worthy scoff aloud at what he was pleased to term

his hypocrisy. Gabriel maintained precisely that there were more ideas,

more of those that man lived by, in a single room of the National

Gallery than in all the statutes of Parliament. Nick had replied to this

more than once that the determination of what man did live by was

required; to which Nash had retorted (and it was very rarely that he

quoted Scripture) that it was at any rate not by bread and beans alone.

The statutes of Parliament gave him bread and beans \_tout au plus\_.

Nick had at present no pretension of trying this question over again: he

reminded himself that his ambiguity was subjective, as the philosophers

said; the result of a mood which in due course would be at the mercy of

another mood. It made him curse, and cursing, as a finality, lacked

firmness--one had to drive in posts somewhere under. The greatest time

to do one's work was when it didn't seem worth doing, for then one gave

it a brilliant chance, that of resisting the stiffest test of all--the

test of striking one as too bad. To do the most when there would be the

least to be got by it was to be most in the spirit of high production.

One thing at any rate was certain, Nick reflected: nothing on earth

would induce him to change back again--not even if this twilight of the

soul should last for the rest of his days. He hardened himself in his

posture with a good conscience which, had they had a glimpse of it,

would have made him still more diverting to those who already thought

him so; and now, by a happy chance, Miriam suddenly supplied the bridge

correcting the gap in his continuity. If he had made his sketch it was a

proof he had done her, and that he had done her flashed upon him as a

sign that she would be still more feasible. Art was \_doing\_--it came

back to that--which politics in most cases weren't. He thus, to pursue

our image, planted his supports in the dimness beneath all cursing, and

on the platform so improvised was able, in his relief, to dance. He sent

out a telegram to Balaklava Place requesting his beautiful sitter by no

manner of means to fail him. When his servant came back it was to usher

into the studio Peter Sherringham, whom the man had apparently found at

the door.

The hour was so early for general commerce that Nick immediately guessed

his visitor had come on some rare errand; but this inference yielded to

the reflexion that Peter might after all only wish to make up by present

zeal for not having been near him before. He forgot that, as he had

subsequently learned from Biddy, their foreign, or all but foreign,

cousin had spent an hour in Rosedale Road, missing him there but pulling

out Miriam's portrait, the day of his own last visit to Beauclere. These

young men were not on a ceremonious footing and it was not in Nick's

nature to keep a record of civilities rendered or omitted; nevertheless

he had been vaguely conscious that during a stay in London elastic

enough on Peter's part he and his kinsman had foregathered less than of

yore. It was indeed an absorbing moment in the career of each, but even

while recognising such a truth Nick judged it not impossible that

Julia's brother might have taken upon himself to resent some

suppositions failure of consideration for that lady; though this indeed

would have been stupid and the newly appointed minister (to he had

forgotten where) didn't often make mistakes. Nick held that as he had

treated Julia with studious generosity she had nothing whatever to visit

on him--wherefore Peter had still less. It was at any rate none of that

gentleman's business. There were only two abatements to disposing in a

few frank words of all this: one of them Nick's general hatred of

talking of his private affairs (a reluctance in which he and Peter were

well matched); and the other a truth involving more of a confession--the

subtle truth that the most definite and even most soothing result of the

collapse of his engagement was, as happened, an unprecedented

consciousness of freedom. Nick's observation was of a different sort

from his cousin's; he noted much less the signs of the hour and kept

throughout a looser register of life; nevertheless, just as one of our

young men had during these days in London found the air peopled with

personal influences, the concussion of human atoms, so the other, though

only asking to live without too many questions and work without too many

rubs, to be glad and sorry in short on easy terms, had become aware of a

certain social tightness, of the fact that life is crowded and passion

restless, accident and community inevitable. Everybody with whom one had

relations had other relations too, and even indifference was a mixture

and detachment a compromise. The only wisdom was to consent to the

loss, if necessary, of everything but one's temper and to the ruin, if

necessary, of everything but one's work. It must be added that Peter's

relative took precautions against irritation perhaps in excess of the

danger, as departing travellers about to whiz through foreign countries

mouth in phrase-books combinations of words they will never use. He was

at home in clear air and disliked to struggle either for breath or for

light. He had a dim sense that Peter felt some discomfort from him and

might have come now to tell him so; in which case he should be sorry for

the sufferer in various ways. But as soon as that aspirant began to

speak suspicion reverted to mere ancient kindness, and this in spite

of the fact that his speech had a slightly exaggerated promptitude,

like the promptitude of business, which might have denoted

self-consciousness. To Nick it quickly appeared better to be glad than

to be sorry: this simple argument was more than sufficient to make him

glad Peter was there.

"My dear fellow, it's an unpardonable hour, isn't it? I wasn't even sure

you'd be up, yet had to risk it, because my hours are numbered. I'm

going away to-morrow," Peter went on; "I've a thousand things to do.

I've had no talk with you this time such as we used to have of old (it's

an irreparable loss, but it's your fault, you know), and as I've got to

rush about all day I thought I'd just catch you before any one else

does."

"Some one has already caught me, but there's plenty of time," Nick

returned.

Peter all but asked a question--it fell short. "I see, I see. I'm sorry

to say I've only a few minutes at best."

"Man of crushing responsibilities, you've come to humiliate me!" his

companion cried. "I know all about it."

"It's more than I do then. That's not what I've come for, but I shall be

delighted if I humiliate you a little by the way. I've two things in

mind, and I'll mention the most difficult first. I came here the other

day--the day after my arrival in town."

"Ah yes, so you did; it was very good of you"--Nick remembered. "I ought

to have returned your visit or left a card or written my name--to have

done something in Great Stanhope Street, oughtn't I? You hadn't got this

new thing then, or I'd have 'called.'"

Peter eyed him a moment. "I say, what's the matter with you? Am I really

unforgivable for having taken that liberty?"

"What liberty?" Nick looked now quite innocent of care, and indeed his

visitor's allusion was not promptly clear. He was thinking for the

instant all of Biddy, of whom and whose secret inclinations Grace had

insisted on talking to him. They were none of his business, and if he

wouldn't for the world have let the girl herself suspect he had violent

lights on what was most screened and curtained in her, much less would

he have made Peter a clumsy present of this knowledge. Grace had a queer

theory that Peter treated Biddy badly--treated them all somehow badly;

but Grace's zeal (she had plenty of it, though she affected all sorts of

fine indifference) almost always took the form of her being unusually

wrong. Nick wanted to do only what Biddy would thank him for, and he

knew very well what she wouldn't. She wished him and Peter to be great

friends, and the only obstacle to this was that Peter was too much of a

diplomatist. Peter made him for an instant think of her and of the hour

they had lately spent together in the studio in his absence--an hour of

which Biddy had given him a history full of items and omissions; and

this in turn brought Nick's imagination back to his visitor's own side

of the matter. That general human complexity of which the sense had

lately increased with him, and to which it was owing that any thread one

might take hold of would probably be the extremely wrong end of

something, was illustrated by the fact that while poor Biddy was

thinking of Peter it was ten to one poor Peter was thinking of Miriam

Rooth. All of which danced before Nick's intellectual vision for a space

briefer than my too numerous words.

"I pitched into your treasures--I rummaged among your canvases," Peter

said. "Biddy had nothing whatever to do with it--she maintained an

attitude of irreproachable reserve. It has been on my conscience all

these days and I ought to have done penance before. I've been putting it

off partly because I'm so ashamed of my indiscretion. \_Que voulez-vous\_,

my dear chap? My provocation was great. I heard you had been painting

Miss Rooth, so that I couldn't restrain my curiosity. I simply went into

that corner and struck out there--a trifle wildly no doubt. I dragged

the young lady to the light--your sister turned pale as she saw me. It

was a good deal like breaking open one of your letters, wasn't it?

However, I assure you it's all right, for I congratulate you both on

your style and on your correspondent."

"You're as clever, as witty, as humorous as ever, old boy," Nick

pronounced, going himself into the corner designated by his companion

and laying his hands on the same canvas. "Your curiosity's the highest

possible tribute to my little attempt and your sympathy sets me right

with myself. There she is again," Nick went on, thrusting the picture

into an empty frame; "you shall see her whether you wish to or not."

"Right with yourself? You don't mean to say you've been wrong!" Peter

returned, standing opposite the portrait.

"Oh I don't know. I've been kicking up such a row. Anything's better

than a row."

"She's awfully good--she's awfully true," said Peter. "You've done more

to her since the other day. You've put in several things."

"Yes, but I've worked distractedly. I've not altogether conformed to the

good rule about being off with the old love."

"With the old love?"--and the visitor looked hard at the picture.

"Before you're on with the new!" Nick had no sooner uttered these words

than he coloured: it occurred to him his friend would probably infer an

allusion to Julia. He therefore added quickly: "It isn't so easy to

cease to represent an affectionate constituency. Really most of my time

for a fortnight has been given to letter-writing. They've all been

unexpectedly charming. I should have thought they'd have loathed and

despised me. But not a bit of it; they cling to me fondly--they struggle

with me tenderly. I've been down to talk with them about it, and we've

passed the most sociable, delightful hours. I've designated my

successor; I've felt a good deal like the Emperor Charles the Fifth when

about to retire to the monastery of Yuste. The more I've seen of them in

this way the more I've liked them, and they declare it has been the same

with themselves about me. We spend our time assuring each other we

hadn't begun to know each other till now. In short it's all wonderfully

jolly, but it isn't business. \_C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la

guerre\_."

"They're not so charming as they might be if they don't offer to keep

you and let you paint."

"They do, almost--it's fantastic," said Nick. "Remember they haven't

yet seen a daub of my brush."

"Well, I'm sorry for you; we live in too enlightened an age," Peter

returned. "You can't suffer for art--that grand romance is over. Your

experience is interesting; it seems to show that at the tremendous pitch

of civilisation we've reached you can't suffer from anything but

hunger."

"I shall doubtless," Nick allowed, "do that enough to make up for the

rest."

"Never, never, when you paint so well as this."

"Oh come, you're too good to be true," Nick said. "But where did you

learn that one's larder's full in proportion as one's work's fine?"

Peter waived this curious point--he only continued to look at the

picture; after which he roundly brought out: "I'll give you your price

for it on the spot."

"Ah you're so magnanimous that you shall have it for nothing!" And Nick,

touched to gratitude, passed his arm into his visitor's.

Peter had a pause. "Why do you call me magnanimous?"

"Oh bless my soul, it's hers--I forgot!" laughed Nick, failing in his

turn to answer the other's inquiry. "But you shall have another."

"Another? Are you going to do another?"

"This very morning. That is, I shall begin it. I've heard from her;

she's coming to sit--a short time hence."

Peter turned away a little at this, releasing himself, and, as if the

movement had been an effect of his host's words, looked at his watch

earnestly to dissipate that appearance. He fell back to consider the

work from further off. "The more you do her the better--she has all the

qualities of a great model. From that point of view it's a pity she has

another trade: she might make so good a thing of this one. But how

shall you do her again?" he asked ingenuously.

"Oh I can scarcely say; we'll arrange something; we'll talk it over.

It's extraordinary how well she enters into what one wants: she knows

more than one does one's self. She isn't, as you Frenchmen say, the

first comer. However, you know all about that, since you invented her,

didn't you? That's what she says; she's awfully sweet on you," Nick

kindly pursued. "What I ought to do is to try something as different as

possible from that thing; not the sibyl, the muse, the tremendous

creature, but the charming woman, the person one knows, differently

arranged as she appears \_en ville\_, she calls it. I'll do something

really serious and send it to you out there with my respects. It will

remind you of home and perhaps a little even of me. If she knows it's

for you she'll throw herself into it in the right spirit. Leave it to

us, my dear fellow; we'll turn out something splendid."

"It's jolly to hear you, but I shall send you a cheque," said Peter very

stoutly.

"I suppose it's all right in your position, but you're too proud," his

kinsman answered.

"What do you mean by my position?"

"Your exaltation, your high connexion with the country, your treating

with sovereign powers as the representative of a sovereign power. Isn't

that what they call 'em?"

Peter, who had turned round again, listened to this with his eyes fixed

on Nick's face while he once more drew forth his watch. "Brute!" he

exclaimed familiarly, at the same time dropping his eyes on the watch.

"When did you say you expect your sitter?"

"Oh we've plenty of time; don't be afraid of letting me see you agitated

by her presence."

"Brute!" Peter again ejaculated.

This friendly personal note cleared the air, made their communication

closer. "Stay with me and talk to me," said Nick; "I daresay it's good

for me. It may be the last time I shall see you without having before

anything else to koo-too."

"Beast!" his kinsman once more, and a little helplessly, threw off;

though next going on: "Haven't you something more to show me then--some

other fruit of your genius?"

"Must I bribe you by setting my sign-boards in a row? You know what I've

done; by which I mean of course you know what I haven't. My genius, as

you're so good as to call it, has hitherto been dreadfully sterile. I've

had no time, no opportunity, no continuity. I must go and sit down in a

corner and learn my alphabet. That thing isn't good; what I shall do for

you won't be good. Don't protest, my dear fellow; nothing will be fit to

look at for a long time." After which poor Nick wound up: "And think of

my ridiculous age! As the good people say (or don't they say it?), it's

a rum go. It won't be amusing."

"Ah you're so clever you'll get on fast," Peter returned, trying to

think how he could most richly defy the injunction not to protest.

"I mean it won't be amusing for others," said Nick, unperturbed by this

levity. "They want results, and small blame to them."

"Well, whatever you do, don't talk like Mr. Gabriel Nash," Peter went

on. "Sometimes I think you're just going to."

Nick stared a moment. "Ah he never would have said \_that\_ 'They want

results, the damned asses'--that would have been more in his key."

"It's the difference of a \_nuance\_! And are you extraordinarily happy?"

Peter added as his host now obliged him by arranging half-a-dozen

canvases so that he could look at them.

"Not so much so, doubtless, as the artistic life ought to make one:

because all one's people are not so infatuated as one's electors. But

little by little I'm learning the charm of pig-headedness."

"Your mother's very bad," Peter allowed--"I lunched with her day before

yesterday."

"Yes, I know, I know"--Nick had such reason to know; "but it's too late,

too late. I must just peg away here and not mind. I've after all a great

advantage in my life."

His companion waited impartially to hear. "And that would be--?"

"Well, knowing what I want to do. That's everything, you know."

"It's an advantage, however, that you've only just come in for, isn't

it?"

"Yes, but the delay and the probation only make me prize it the more.

I've got it now; and it makes up for the absence of some other things."

Again Peter had a pause. "That sounds a little flat," he remarked at

last.

"It depends on what you compare it with. It has more point than I

sometimes found in the House of Commons."

"Oh I never thought I should like that!"

There was another drop during which Nick moved about the room turning up

old sketches to see if he had anything more to show, while his visitor

continued to look at the unfinished and in some cases, as seemed,

unpromising productions already exposed. They were far less interesting

than the portrait of Miriam Rooth and, it would have appeared, less

significant of ability. For that particular effort Nick's talent had

taken an inspired flight. So much Peter thought, as he had thought it

intensely before; but the words he presently uttered had no visible

connexion with it. They only consisted of the abrupt inquiry; "Have you

heard anything from Julia?"

"Not a syllable. Have you?"

"Dear no; she never writes to me."

"But won't she on the occasion of your promotion?"

"I daresay not," said Peter; and this was the only reference to Mrs.

Dallow that passed between her brother and her late intended. It left a

slight stir of the air which Peter proceeded to allay by an allusion

comparatively speaking more relevant. He expressed disappointment that

Biddy shouldn't have come in, having had an idea she was always in

Rosedale Road of a morning. That was the other branch of his present

errand--the wish to see her and give her a message for Lady Agnes, upon

whom, at so early an hour, he had not presumed to intrude in Calcutta

Gardens. Nick replied that Biddy did in point of fact almost always turn

up, and for the most part early: she came to wish him good-morning and

start him for the day. She was a devoted Electra, laying a cool, healing

hand on a distracted, perspiring Orestes. He reminded Peter, however,

that he would have a chance of seeing her that evening, and of seeing

Lady Agnes; for wasn't he to do them the honour of dining in Calcutta

Gardens? Biddy, the day before, had arrived full of that excitement.

Peter explained that this was exactly the sad subject of his actual

\_dÃ©marche\_: the project of the dinner in Calcutta Gardens had, to his

exceeding regret, fallen to pieces. The fact was (didn't Nick know it?)

the night had been suddenly and perversely fixed for Miriam's premiÃ¨re,

and he was under a definite engagement with her not to stay away from

it. To add to the bore of the thing he was obliged to return to Paris

the very next morning. He was quite awfully sorry, for he had promised

Lady Agnes: he didn't understand then about Miriam's affair, in regard

to which he had given a previous pledge. He was more grieved than he

could say, but he could never fail Miss Rooth: he had professed from the

first an interest in her which he must live up to a little more. This

was his last chance--he hadn't been near her at the trying time of her

first braving of the public. And the second night of the play wouldn't

do--it must be the first or nothing. Besides, he couldn't wait over till

Monday.

While Peter recited all his hindrance Nick was occupied in rubbing with

a cloth a palette he had just scraped. "I see what you mean--I'm very

sorry too. I'm sorry you can't give my mother this joy--I give her so

little."

"My dear fellow, you might give her a little more!" it came to Peter to

say. "It's rather too much to expect \_me\_ to make up for your

omissions!"

Nick looked at him with a moment's fixedness while he polished the

palette; and for that moment he felt the temptation to reply: "There's a

way you could do that, to a considerable extent--I think you guess

it--which wouldn't be intrinsically disagreeable." But the impulse

passed without expressing itself in speech, and he simply brought out;

"You can make this all clear to Biddy when she comes, and she'll make it

clear to my mother."

"Poor little Biddy!" Peter mentally sighed, thinking of the girl with

that job before her; but what he articulated was that this was exactly

why he had come to the studio. He had inflicted his company on Lady

Agnes the previous Thursday and had partaken of a meal with her, but had

not seen Biddy though he had waited for her, had hoped immensely she'd

come in. Now he'd wait again--dear Bid was thoroughly worth it.

"Patience, patience then--you've always me!" said Nick; to which he

subjoined: "If it's a question of going to the play I scarcely see why

you shouldn't dine at my mother's all the same. People go to the play

after dinner."

"Yes, but it wouldn't be fair, it wouldn't be decent: it's a case when I

must be in my seat from the rise of the curtain." Peter, about this, was

thoroughly lucid. "I should force your mother to dine an hour earlier

than usual and then in return for her courtesy should go off to my

entertainment at eight o'clock, leaving her and Grace and Biddy

languishing there. I wish I had proposed in time that they should go

with me," he continued not very ingenuously.

"You might do that still," Nick suggested.

"Oh at this time of day it would be impossible to get a box."

"I'll speak to Miss Rooth about it if you like when she comes," smiled

Nick.

"No, it wouldn't do," said Peter, turning away and looking once more at

his watch. He made tacitly the addition that still less than asking Lady

Agnes for his convenience to dine early would \_this\_ be decent, would it

be thinkable. His taking Biddy the night he dined with her and with Miss

Tressilian had been something very like a violation of those

proprieties. He couldn't say that, however, to the girl's brother, who

remarked in a moment that it was all right, since Peter's action left

him his own freedom.

"Your own freedom?"--and Peter's question made him turn.

"Why you see now I can go to the theatre myself."

"Certainly; I hadn't thought of that. You'd naturally have been going."

"I gave it up for the prospect of your company at home."

"Upon my word you're too good--I don't deserve such sacrifices," said

Peter, who read in his kinsman's face that this was not a figure of

speech but the absolute truth. "Didn't it, however, occur to you that,

as it would turn out, I might--I even naturally \_would\_--myself be

going?" he put forth.

Nick broke into a laugh. "It would have occurred to me if I understood a

little better--!" But he paused, as still too amused.

"If you understood a little better what?"

"Your situation, simply."

Peter looked at him a moment. "Dine with me to-night by ourselves and at

a club. We'll go to the theatre together and then you'll understand it."

"With pleasure, with pleasure: we'll have a jolly evening," said Nick.

"Call it jolly if you like. When did you say she was coming?" Peter

asked.

"Biddy? Oh probably, as I tell you, at any moment."

"I mean the great Miriam," Peter amended.

"The great Miriam, if she's punctual, will be here in about forty

minutes."

"And will she be likely to find your sister?"

"That will depend, my dear fellow, on whether my sister remains to see

her."

"Exactly; but the point's whether you'll allow her to remain, isn't it?"

Nick looked slightly mystified. "Why shouldn't she do as she likes?"

"In that case she'll probably go."

"Yes, unless she stays."

"Don't let her," Peter dropped; "send her away." And to explain this he

added: "It doesn't seem exactly the right sort of thing, fresh young

creatures like Bid meeting \_des femmes de thÃ©Ã¢tre\_." His explanation, in

turn, struck him as requiring another clause; so he went on: "At least

it isn't thought the right sort of thing abroad, and even in England my

foreign ideas stick to me."

Even with this amplification, however, his plea evidently still had for

his companion a flaw; which, after he had considered it a moment, Nick

exposed in the simple words: "Why, you originally introduced them in

Paris, Biddy and Miss Rooth. Didn't they meet at your rooms and

fraternise, and wasn't that much more 'abroad' than this?"

"So they did, but my hand had been forced and she didn't like it," Peter

answered, suspecting that for a diplomatist he looked foolish.

"Miss Rooth didn't like it?" Nick persisted.

"That I confess I've forgotten. Besides, she wasn't an actress then.

What I mean is that Biddy wasn't particularly pleased with her."

"Why she thought her wonderful--praised her to the sides. I remember

that."

"She didn't like her as a woman; she praised her as an actress."

"I thought you said she wasn't an actress then," Nick returned.

Peter had a pause. "Oh Biddy thought so. She has seen her since,

moreover. I took her the other night, and her curiosity's satisfied."

"It's not of any consequence, and if there's a reason for it I'll bundle

her off directly," Nick made haste to say. "But the great Miriam seems

such a kind, good person."

"So she is, charming, charming,"--and his visitor looked hard at him.

"Here comes Biddy now," Nick went on. "I hear her at the door: you can

warn her yourself."

"It isn't a question of 'warning'--that's not in the least my idea. But

I'll take Biddy away," said Peter.

"That will be still more energetic."

"No, it will be simply more selfish--I like her company." Peter had

turned as if to go to the door and meet the girl; but he quickly checked

himself, lingering in the middle of the room, and the next instant Biddy

had come in. When she saw him there she also stopped.

XLIII

"Come on boldly, my dear," said Nick. "Peter's bored to death waiting

for you."

"Ah he's come to say he won't dine with us to-night!" Biddy stood with

her hand on the latch.

"I leave town to-morrow: I've everything to do; I'm broken-hearted; it's

impossible"--Peter made of it again such a case as he could. "Please

make my peace with your mother--I'm ashamed of not having written to her

last night."

She closed the door and came in while her brother said to her, "How in

the world did you guess it?"

"I saw it in the \_Morning Post\_." And she kept her eyes on their

kinsman.

"In the \_Morning Post\_?" he vaguely echoed.

"I saw there's to be a first night at that theatre, the one you took us

to. So I said, 'Oh he'll go there.'"

"Yes, I've got to do that too," Peter admitted.

"She's going to sit to me again this morning, his wonderful actress--she

has made an appointment: so you see I'm getting on," Nick pursued to his

sister.

"Oh I'm so glad--she's so splendid!" The girl looked away from her

cousin now, but not, though it seemed to fill the place, at the

triumphant portrait of Miriam Rooth.

"I'm delighted you've come in. I \_have\_ waited for you," Peter hastened

to declare to her, though conscious that this was in the conditions

meagre.

"Aren't you coming to see us again?"

"I'm in despair, but I shall really not have time. Therefore it's a

blessing not to have missed you here."

"I'm very glad," said Biddy. Then she added: "And you're going to

America--to stay a long time?"

"Till I'm sent to some better place."

"And will that better place be as far away?"

"Oh Biddy, it wouldn't be better then," said Peter.

"Do you mean they'll give you something to do at home?"

"Hardly that. But I've a tremendous lot to do at home to-day." For the

twentieth time Peter referred to his watch.

She turned to her brother, who had admonished her that she might bid him

good-morning. She kissed him and he asked what the news would be in

Calcutta Gardens; to which she made answer: "The only news is of course

the great preparations they're making, poor dears, for Peter. Mamma

thinks you must have had such a nasty dinner the other day," the girl

continued to the guest of that romantic occasion.

"Faithless Peter!" said Nick, beginning to whistle and to arrange a

canvas in anticipation of Miriam's arrival.

"Dear Biddy, thank your stars you're not in my horrid profession,"

protested the personage so designated. "One's bowled about like a

cricket-ball, unable to answer for one's freedom or one's comfort from

one moment to another."

"Oh ours is the true profession--Biddy's and mine," Nick broke out,

setting up his canvas; "the career of liberty and peace, of charming

long mornings spent in a still north light and in the contemplation, I

may even say in the company, of the amiable and the beautiful."

"That certainty's the case when Biddy comes to see you," Peter returned.

Biddy smiled at him. "I come every day. Anch'io son pittore! I encourage

Nick awfully."

"It's a pity I'm not a martyr--she'd bravely perish with me," Nick said.

"You are--you're a martyr--when people say such odious things!" the girl

cried. "They do say them. I've heard many more than I've repeated to

you."

"It's you yourself then, indignant and loyal, who are the martyr,"

observed Peter, who wanted greatly to be kind to her.

"Oh I don't care!"--but she threw herself, flushed and charming, into a

straight appeal to him. "Don't you think one can do as much good by

painting great works of art as by--as by what papa used to do? Don't you

think art's necessary to the happiness, to the greatness of a people?

Don't you think it's manly and honourable? Do you think a passion for

it's a thing to be ashamed of? Don't you think the artist--the

conscientious, the serious one--is as distinguished a member of society

as any one else?"

Peter and Nick looked at each other and laughed at the way she had got

up her subject, and Nick asked their kinsman if she didn't express it

all in perfection. "I delight in general in artists, but I delight still

more in their defenders," Peter made reply, perhaps a little meagrely,

to Biddy.

"Ah don't attack me if you're wise!" Nick said.

"One's tempted to when it makes Biddy so fine."

"Well, that's the way she encourages me: it's meat and drink to me,"

Nick went on. "At the same time I'm bound to say there's a little

whistling in the dark in it."

"In the dark?" his sister demanded.

"The obscurity, my dear child, of your own aspirations, your mysterious

ambitions and esthetic views. Aren't there some heavyish shadows there?"

"Why I never cared for politics."

"No, but you cared for life, you cared for society, and you've chosen

the path of solitude and concentration."

"You horrid boy!" said Biddy.

"Give it up, that arduous steep--give it up and come out with me," Peter

interposed.

"Come out with you?"

"Let us walk a little or even drive a little. Let us at any rate talk a

little."

"I thought you had so much to do," Biddy candidly objected.

"So I have, but why shouldn't you do a part of it with me? Would there

be any harm? I'm going to some tiresome shops--you'll cheer the frugal

hour."

The girl hesitated, then turned to Nick. "Would there be any harm?"

"Oh it's none of \_his\_ business!" Peter protested.

"He had better take you home to your mother."

"I'm going home--I shan't stay here to-day," Biddy went on. Then to

Peter: "I came in a hansom, but I shall walk back. Come that way with

me."

"With pleasure. But I shall not be able to go in," Peter added.

"Oh that's no matter," said the girl. "Good-bye, Nick."

"You understand then that we dine together--at seven sharp. Wouldn't a

club, as I say, be best?" Peter, before going, inquired of Nick. He

suggested further which club it should be; and his words led Biddy, who

had directed her steps toward the door, to turn a moment as with a

reproachful question--whether it was for this Peter had given up

Calcutta Gardens. But her impulse, if impulse it was, had no sequel

save so far as it was a sequel that Peter freely explained to her, after

Nick had assented to his conditions, that her brother too had a desire

to go to Miss Rooth's first night and had already promised to accompany

him.

"Oh that's perfect; it will be so good for him--won't it?--if he's going

to paint her again," Biddy responded.

"I think there's nothing so good for him as that he happens to have such

a sister as you," Peter declared as they went out. He heard at the same

time the sound of a carriage stopping, and before Biddy, who was in

front of him, opened the door of the house had been able to say to

himself, "What a bore--there's Miriam!" The opened door showed him that

truth--this young lady in the act of alighting from the brougham

provided by Basil Dashwood's thrifty zeal. Her mother followed her, and

both the new visitors exclaimed and rejoiced, in their demonstrative

way, as their eyes fell on their valued friend. The door had closed

behind Peter, but he instantly and violently rang, so that they should

be admitted with as little delay as possible, while he stood

disconcerted, and fearing he showed it, by the prompt occurrence of an

encounter he had particularly sought to avert. It ministered, moreover,

a little to this sensibility that Miriam appeared to have come somewhat

before her time. The incident promised, however, to pass off in a fine

florid way. Before he knew it both the ladies had taken possession of

Biddy, who looked at them with comparative coldness, tempered indeed by

a faint glow of apprehension, and Miriam had broken out:

"We know you, we know you; we saw you in Paris, and you came to my

theatre a short time ago with Mr. Sherringham!"

"We know your mother, Lady Agnes Dormer. I hope her ladyship's very

well," said Mrs. Rooth, who had never struck Peter as a more

objectionable old woman.

"You offered to do a head of me or something or other: didn't you tell

me you work in clay? I daresay you've forgotten all about it, but I

should be delighted," Miriam pursued with the richest urbanity. Peter

was not concerned with her mother's pervasiveness, though he didn't like

Biddy to see even that; but he hoped his companion would take the

overcharged benevolence of the young actress in the spirit in which,

rather to his surprise, it evidently was offered. "I've sat to your

clever brother many times," said Miriam; "I'm going to sit again. I

daresay you've seen what we've done--he's too delightful. \_Si vous

saviez comme cela me repose\_!" she added, turning for a moment to Peter.

Then she continued, smiling at Biddy; "Only he oughtn't to have thrown

up such prospects, you know. I've an idea I wasn't nice to you that day

in Paris--I was nervous and scared and perverse. I remember perfectly; I

\_was\_ odious. But I'm better now--you'd see if you were to know me. I'm

not a bad sort--really I'm not. But you must have your own friends.

Happy they--you look so charming! Immensely like Mr. Dormer, especially

about the eyes; isn't she, mamma?"

"She comes of a beautiful Norman race--the finest, purest strain," the

old woman simpered. "Mr. Dormer's sometimes so good as to come and see

us--we're always at home on Sunday; and if some day you found courage to

come with him you might perhaps find it pleasant, though very different

of course from the circle in which you habitually move."

Biddy murmured a vague recognition of these wonderful civilities, and

Miriam commented: "Different, yes; but we're all right, you know. Do

come," she added. Then turning to Sherringham: "Remember what I told

you--I don't expect you to-night."

"Oh I understand; I shall come,"--and Peter knew he grew red.

"It will be idiotic. Keep him, keep him away--don't let him," Miriam

insisted to Biddy; with which, as Nick's portals now were gaping, she

drew her mother away.

Peter, at this, walked off briskly with Biddy, dropping as he did so:

"She's too fantastic!"

"Yes, but so tremendously good-looking. I shall ask Nick to take me

there," the girl said after a moment.

"Well, she'll do you no harm. They're all right, as she says. It's the

world of art--you were standing up so for art just now."

"Oh I wasn't thinking so much of that kind," she demurred.

"There's only one kind--it's all the same thing. If one sort's good the

other is."

Biddy walked along a moment. "Is she serious? Is she conscientious?"

"She has the makings of a great artist," Peter opined.

"I'm glad to hear you think a woman can be one."

"In that line there has never been any doubt about it."

"And only in that line?"

"I mean on the stage in general, dramatic or lyric. It's as the actress

that the woman produces the most complete and satisfactory artistic

results."

"And only as the actress?"

He weighed it. "Yes, there's another art in which she's not bad."

"Which one do you mean?" asked Biddy.

"That of being charming and good, that of being indispensable to man."

"Oh that isn't an art."

"Then you leave her only the stage. Take it if you like in the widest

sense."

Biddy appeared to reflect a moment, as to judge what sense this might

be. But she found none that was wide enough, for she cried the next

minute: "Do you mean to say there's nothing for a woman but to be an

actress?"

"Never in my life. I only say that that's the best thing for a woman to

be who finds herself irresistibly carried into the practice of the arts;

for there her capacity for them has most application and her incapacity

for them least. But at the same time I strongly recommend her not to be

an artist if she can possibly help it. It's a devil of a life."

"Oh I know; men want women not to be anything."

"It's a poor little refuge they try to take from the overwhelming

consciousness that you're in very fact everything."

"Everything?" And the girl gave a toss. "That's the kind of thing you

say to keep us quiet."

"Dear Biddy, you see how well we succeed!" laughed Peter.

To which she replied by asking irrelevantly: "Why is it so necessary for

you to go to the theatre to-night if Miss Rooth doesn't want you to?"

"My dear child, she does want me to. But that has nothing to do with

it."

"Why then did she say that she doesn't?"

"Oh because she meant just the contrary."

"Is she so false then--is she so vulgar?"

"She speaks a special language; practically it isn't false, because it

renders her thought and those who know her understand it."

"But she doesn't use it only to those who know her," Biddy returned,

"since she asked me, who have so little the honour of her acquaintance,

to keep you away to-night. How am I to know that she meant by that that

I'm to urge you on to go?"

He was on the point of replying, "Because you've my word for it"; but he

shrank in fact from giving his word--he had some fine scruples--and

sought to relieve his embarrassment by a general tribute. "Dear Biddy,

you're delightfully acute: you're quite as clever as Miss Rooth." He

felt, however, that this was scarcely adequate and he continued: "The

truth is that its being important for me to go is a matter quite

independent of that young lady's wishing it or not wishing it. There

happens to be a definite intrinsic propriety in it which determines the

thing and which it would take me long to explain."

"I see. But fancy your 'explaining' to me: you make me feel so

indiscreet!" the girl cried quickly--an exclamation which touched him

because he was not aware that, quick as it had been, she had still had

time to be struck first--though she wouldn't for the world have

expressed it--with the oddity of such a duty at such a season. In fact

that oddity, during a silence of some minutes, came back to Peter

himself: the note had been forced--it sounded almost ignobly frivolous

from a man on the eve of proceeding to a high diplomatic post. The

effect of this, none the less, was not to make him break out with "Hang

it, I \_will\_ keep my engagement to your mother!" but to fill him with

the wish to shorten his present strain by taking Biddy the rest of the

way in a cab. He was uncomfortable, and there were hansoms about that he

looked at wistfully. While he was so occupied his companion took up the

talk by an abrupt appeal.

"Why did she say that Nick oughtn't to have resigned his seat?"

"Oh I don't know. It struck her so. It doesn't matter much."

But Biddy kept it up. "If she's an artist herself why doesn't she like

people to go in for art, especially when Nick has given his time to

painting her so beautifully? Why does she come there so often if she

disapproves of what he has done?"

"Oh Miriam's disapproval--it doesn't count; it's a manner of speaking."

"Of speaking untruths, do you mean? Does she think just the reverse--is

that the way she talks about everything?"

"We always admire most what we can do least," Peter brought forth; "and

Miriam of course isn't political. She ranks painters more or less with

her own profession, about which already, new as she is to it, she has no

illusions. They're all artists; it's the same general sort of thing. She

prefers men of the world--men of action."

"Is that the reason she likes you?" Biddy mildly mocked.

"Ah she doesn't like me--couldn't you see it?"

The girl at first said nothing; then she asked: "Is that why she lets

you call her 'Miriam'?"

"Oh I don't, to her face."

"Ah only to mine!" laughed Biddy.

"One says that as one says 'Rachel' of her great predecessor."

"Except that she isn't so great, quite yet, is she?"

"Far from it; she's the freshest of novices--she has scarcely been four

months on the stage. But no novice has ever been such an adept. She'll

go very fast," Peter pursued, "and I daresay that before long she'll be

magnificent."

"What a pity you'll not see that!" Biddy sighed after a pause.

"Not see it?"

"If you're thousands of miles away."

"It is a pity," Peter said; "and since you mention it I don't mind

frankly telling you--throwing myself on your mercy, as it were--that

that's why I make such a point of a rare occasion like to-night. I've a

weakness for the drama that, as you perhaps know, I've never concealed,

and this impression will probably have to last me in some barren spot

for many, many years."

"I understand--I understand. I hope therefore it will be charming." And

the girl walked faster.

"Just as some other charming impressions will have to last," Peter

added, conscious of keeping up with her by some effort. She seemed

almost to be running away from him, an impression that led him to

suggest, after they had proceeded a little further without more words,

that if she were in a hurry they had perhaps better take a cab. Her face

was strange and touching to him as she turned it to make answer:

"Oh I'm not in the least in a hurry and I really think I had better

walk."

"We'll walk then by all means!" Peter said with slightly exaggerated

gaiety; in pursuance of which they went on a hundred yards. Biddy kept

the same pace; yet it was scarcely a surprise to him that she should

suddenly stop with the exclamation:

"After all, though I'm not in a hurry I'm tired! I had better have a

cab; please call that one," she added, looking about her.

They were in a straight, blank, ugly street, where the small, cheap,

grey-faced houses had no expression save that of a rueful, unconsoled

acknowledgment of the universal want of identity. They would have

constituted a "terrace" if they could, but they had dolefully given it

up. Even a hansom that loitered across the end of the vista turned a

sceptical back upon it, so that Sherringham had to lift his voice in a

loud appeal. He stood with Biddy watching the cab approach them. "This

is one of the charming things you'll remember," she said, turning her

eyes to the general dreariness from the particular figure of the

vehicle, which was antiquated and clumsy. Before he could reply she had

lightly stepped into the cab; but as he answered, "Most assuredly it

is," and prepared to follow her she quickly closed the apron.

"I must go alone; you've lots of things to do--it's all right"; and

through the aperture in the roof she gave the driver her address. She

had spoken with decision, and Peter fully felt now that she wished to

get away from him. Her eyes betrayed it, as well as her voice, in a

look, a strange, wandering ray that as he stood there with his hand on

the cab he had time to take from her. "Good-bye, Peter," she smiled; and

as the thing began to rumble away he uttered the same tepid, ridiculous

farewell.

XLIV

At the entrance of Miriam and her mother Nick, in the studio, had

stopped whistling, but he was still gay enough to receive them with

every appearance of warmth. He thought it a poor place, ungarnished,

untapestried, a bare, almost grim workshop, with all its revelations and

honours still to come. But his visitors smiled on it a good deal in the

same way in which they had smiled on Bridget Dormer when they met her at

the door: Mrs. Rooth because vague, prudent approbation was the habit of

her foolish face--it was ever the least danger; and Miriam because, as

seemed, she was genuinely glad to find herself within the walls of which

she spoke now as her asylum. She broke out in this strain to her host

almost as soon as she had crossed the threshold, commending his

circumstances, his conditions of work, as infinitely happier than her

own. He was quiet, independent, absolute, free to do what he liked as he

liked it, shut up in his little temple with his altar and his divinity;

not hustled about in a mob of people, having to posture and grin to pit

and gallery, to square himself at every step with insufferable

conventions and with the ignorance and vanity of others. He was

blissfully alone.

"Mercy, how you do abuse your fine profession! I'm sure I never urged

you to adopt it!" Mrs. Rooth cried, in real bewilderment, to her

daughter.

"She was abusing mine still more the other day," joked Nick--"telling me

I ought to be ashamed of it and of myself."

"Oh I never know from one moment to the other--I live with my heart in

my mouth," sighed the old woman.

"Aren't you quiet about the great thing--about my personal behaviour?"

Miriam smiled. "My improprieties are all of the mind."

"I don't know what you \_call\_ your personal behaviour," her mother

objected.

"You would very soon if it were not what it is."

"And I don't know why you should wish to have it thought you've a wicked

mind," Mrs. Rooth agreeably grumbled.

"Yes, but I don't see very well how I can make you understand that. At

any rate," Miriam pursued with her grand eyes on Nick, "I retract what I

said the other day about Mr. Dormer. I've no wish to quarrel with him on

the way he has determined to dispose of his life, because after all it

does suit me very well. It rests me, this little devoted corner; oh it

rests me! It's out of the row and the dust, it's deliciously still and

they can't get at me. Ah when art's like this, \_Ã  la bonne heure\_!" And

she looked round on such a presentment of "art" in a splendid way that

produced amusement on the young man's part at its contrast with the

humble fact. Miriam shone upon him as if she liked to be the cause of

his mirth and went on appealing to him: "You'll always let me come here

for an hour, won't you, to take breath--to let the whirlwind pass? You

needn't trouble yourself about me; I don't mean to impose on you in the

least the necessity of painting me, though if that's a manner of helping

you to get on you may be sure it will always be open to you. Do what you

like with me in that respect; only let me sit here on a high stool,

keeping well out of your way, and see what you happen to be doing. I'll

tell you my own adventures when you want to hear them."

"The fewer adventures you have to tell the better, my dear," said Mrs.

Rooth; "and if Mr. Dormer keeps you quiet he'll add ten years to my

life."

"It all makes an interesting comment on Mr. Dormer's own quietness, on

his independence and sweet solitude," Nick observed. "Miss Rooth has to

work with others, which is after all only what Mr. Dormer has to do when

he works with Miss Rooth. What do you make of the inevitable sitter?"

"Oh," answered Miriam, "you can say to the inevitable sitter, 'Hold your

tongue, you brute!'"

"Isn't it a good deal in that manner that I've heard you address your

comrades at the theatre?" Mrs. Rooth inquired. "That's why my heart's in

my mouth."

"Yes, but they hit me back; they reply to me--\_comme de raison\_--as I

should never think of replying to Mr. Dormer. It's a great advantage to

him that when he's peremptory with his model it only makes her better,

adds to her expression of gloomy grandeur."

"We did the gloomy grandeur in the other picture: suppose therefore we

try something different in this," Nick threw off.

"It \_is\_ serious, it \_is\_ grand," murmured Mrs. Rooth, who had taken up

a rapt attitude before the portrait of her daughter. "It makes one

wonder what she's thinking of. Beautiful, commendable things--that's

what it seems to say."

"What can I be thinking of but the tremendous wisdom of my mother?"

Miriam returned. "I brought her this morning to see that thing--she had

only seen it in its earliest stage--and not to presume to advise you

about anything else you may be so good as to embark on. She wanted, or

professed she wanted, terribly to know what you had finally arrived at.

She was too impatient to wait till you should send it home."

"Ah send it home--send it home; let us have it always with us!" Mrs.

Rooth engagingly said. "It will keep us up, up, and up on the heights,

near the stars--be always for us a symbol and a reminder!"

"You see I was right," Miriam went on; "for she appreciates thoroughly,

in her own way, and almost understands. But if she worries or distracts

you I'll send her directly home--I've kept the carriage there on

purpose. I must add that I don't feel quite safe to-day in letting her

out of my sight. She's liable to make dashes at the theatre and play

unconscionable tricks there. I shall never again accuse mamma of a want

of interest in my profession. Her interest to-day exceeds even my own.

She's all over the place and she has ideas--ah but ideas! She's capable

of turning up at the theatre at five o'clock this afternoon to demand

the repainting of the set in the third act. For myself I've not a word

more to say on the subject--I've accepted every danger, I've swallowed

my fate. Everything's no doubt wrong, but nothing can possibly be right.

Let us eat and drink, for to-night we die. If you say so mamma shall go

and sit in the carriage, and as there's no means of fastening the doors

(is there?) your servant shall keep guard over her."

"Just as you are now--be so good as to remain so; sitting just that

way--leaning back with a smile in your eyes and one hand on the sofa

beside you and supporting you a little. I shall stick a flower into the

other hand--let it lie in your lap just as it is. Keep that thing on

your head--it's admirably uncovered: do you call such an unconsidered

trifle a bonnet?--and let your head fall back a little. There it

is--it's found. This time I shall really do something, and it will be as

different as you like from that other crazy job. Here we go!" It was in

these irrelevant but earnest words that Nick responded to his sitter's

uttered vagaries, of which her charming tone and countenance diminished

the superficial acerbity. He held up his hands a moment, to fix her in

her limits, and in a few minutes had a happy sense of having begun to

work.

"The smile in her eyes--don't forget the smile in her eyes!" Mrs. Rooth

softly chanted, turning away and creeping about the room. "That will

make it so different from the other picture and show the two sides of

her genius, the wonderful range between them. They'll be splendid mates,

and though I daresay I shall strike you as greedy you must let me hope

you'll send this one home too."

She explored the place discreetly and on tiptoe, talking twaddle as she

went and bending her head and her eyeglass over various objects with an

air of imperfect comprehension that didn't prevent Nick's private recall

of the story of her underhand, commercial habits told by Gabriel Nash at

the exhibition in Paris the first time her name had fallen on his ear. A

queer old woman from whom, if you approached her in the right way, you

could buy old pots--it was in this character that she had originally

been introduced to him. He had lost sight of it afterwards, but it

revived again as his observant eyes, at the same time that they followed

his active hand, became aware of her instinctive, appraising gestures.

There was a moment when he frankly laughed out--there was so little in

his poor studio to appraise. Mrs. Rooth's wandering eyeglass and vague,

polite, disappointed, bent back and head made a subject for a sketch on

the instant: they gave such a sudden pictorial glimpse of the element of

race. He found himself seeing the immemorial Jewess in her hold up a

candle in a crammed back shop. There was no candle indeed and his studio

was not crammed, and it had never occurred to him before that she was a

grand-daughter of Israel save on the general theory, so stoutly held by

several clever people, that few of us are not under suspicion. The late

Rudolf Roth had at least been, and his daughter was visibly her father's

child; so that, flanked by such a pair, good Semitic presumptions

sufficiently crowned the mother. Receiving Miriam's sharp, satiric

shower without shaking her shoulders she might at any rate have been the

descendant of a tribe long persecuted. Her blandness was beyond all

baiting; she professed she could be as still as a mouse. Miriam, on the

other side of the room, in the tranquil beauty of her attitude--"found"

indeed, as Nick had said--watched her a little and then declared she had

best have been locked up at home. Putting aside her free account of the

dangers to which her mother exposed her, it wasn't whimsical to imagine

that within the limits of that repose from which the Neville-Nugents

never wholly departed the elder lady might indeed be a trifle fidgety

and have something on her mind. Nick presently mentioned that it

wouldn't be possible for him to "send home" his second performance; and

he added, in the exuberance of having already got a little into relation

with his work, that perhaps this didn't matter, inasmuch as--if Miriam

would give him his time, to say nothing of her own--a third and a fourth

masterpiece might also some day very well struggle into the light. His

model rose to this without conditions, assuring him he might count upon

her till she grew too old and too ugly and that nothing would make her

so happy as that he should paint her as often as Romney had painted the

celebrated Lady Hamilton. "Ah Lady Hamilton!" deprecated Mrs. Rooth;

while Miriam, who had on occasion the candour of a fine acquisitiveness,

wished to know what particular reason there might be for his not letting

them have the picture he was now beginning.

"Why I've promised it to Peter Sherringham--he has offered me money for

it," Nick replied. "However, he's welcome to it for nothing, poor chap,

and I shall be delighted to do the best I can for him."

Mrs. Rooth, still prowling, stopped in the middle of the room at this,

while her daughter echoed: "He offered you money--just as we came in?"

"You met him then at the door with my sister? I supposed you had--he's

taking her home," Nick explained.

"Your sister's a lovely girl--such an aristocratic type!" breathed Mrs.

Rooth. Then she added: "I've a tremendous confession to make to you."

"Mamma's confessions have to be tremendous to correspond with her

crimes," said Miriam. "She asked Miss Dormer to come and see us,

suggested even that you might bring her some Sunday. I don't like the

way mamma does such things--too much humility, too many \_simagrÃ©es\_,

after all; but I also said what I could to be nice to her. Your sister

\_is\_ charming--awfully pretty and modest. If you were to press me I

should tell you frankly that it seems to me rather a social muddle, this

rubbing shoulders of 'nice girls' and \_filles de thÃ©Ã¢tre\_: I shouldn't

think it would do your poor young things much good. However, it's their

own affair, and no doubt there's no more need of their thinking we're

worse than we are than of their thinking we're better. The people they

live with don't seem to know the difference--I sometimes make my

reflexions about the public one works for."

"Ah if you go in for the public's knowing differences you're far too

particular," Nick laughed. "\_D'oÃ¹ tombez-vous\_? as you affected French

people say. If you've anything at stake on that you had simply better

not play."

"Dear Mr. Dormer, don't encourage her to be so dreadful; for it \_is\_

dreadful, the way she talks," Mrs. Rooth broke in. "One would think we

weren't respectable--one would think I had never known what I've known

and been what I've been."

"What one would think, beloved mother, is that you're a still greater

humbug than you are. It's you, on the contrary, who go down on your

knees, who pour forth apologies about our being vagabonds."

"Vagabonds--listen to her!--after the education I've given her and our

magnificent prospects!" wailed Mrs. Rooth, sinking with clasped hands

upon the nearest ottoman.

"Not after our prospects, if prospects they be: a good deal before them.

Yes, you've taught me tongues and I'm greatly obliged to you--they no

doubt give variety as well as incoherency to my conversation; and that

of people in our line is for the most part notoriously monotonous and

shoppy. The gift of tongues is in general the sign of your true

adventurer. Dear mamma, I've no low standard--that's the last thing,"

Miriam went on. "My weakness is my exalted conception of respectability.

Ah \_parlez-moi de Ã§a\_ and of the way I understand it! If I were to go in

for being respectable you'd see something fine. I'm awfully conservative

and I know what respectability is, even when I meet people of society on

the accidental middle ground of either glowering or smirking. I know

also what it isn't--it isn't the sweet union of well-bred little girls

('carefully-nurtured,' don't they call them?) and painted she-mummers. I

should carry it much further than any of these people: I should never

look at the likes of us! Every hour I live I see that the wisdom of the

ages was in the experience of dear old Madame CarrÃ©--was in a hundred

things she told me. She's founded on a rock. After that," Miriam went on

to her host, "I can assure you that if you were so good as to bring Miss

Dormer to see us we should be angelically careful of her and surround

her with every attention and precaution."

"The likes of us--the likes of us!" Mrs. Rooth repeated plaintively and

with a resentment as vain as a failure to sneeze. "I don't know what

you're talking about and I decline to be turned upside down, I've my

ideas as well as you, and I repudiate the charge of false humility. I've

been through too many troubles to be proud, and a pleasant, polite

manner was the rule of my life even in the days when, God knows, I had

everything. I've never changed and if with God's help I had a civil

tongue then, I've a civil tongue now. It's more than you always have, my

poor, perverse, passionate child. Once a lady always a lady--all the

footlights in the world, turn them up as high as you will, make no

difference there. And I think people know it, people who know

anything--if I may use such an expression--and it's because they know it

that I'm not afraid to address them in a pleasant way. So I must

say--and I call Mr. Dormer to witness, for if he could reason with you a

bit about it he might render several people a service--your conduct to

Mr. Sherringham simply breaks my heart," Mrs. Rooth concluded, taking a

jump of several steps in the fine modern avenue of her argument.

Nick was appealed to, but he hung back, drawing with a free hand, and

while he forbore Miriam took it up. "Mother's good--mother's very good;

but it's only little by little that you discover how good she is." This

seemed to leave him at ease to ask their companion, with the

preliminary intimation that what she had just said was very striking,

what she meant by her daughter's conduct to old Peter. Before Mrs. Rooth

could answer this question, however, Miriam broke across with one of her

own. "Do you mind telling me if you made your sister go off with Mr.

Sherringham because you knew it was about time for me to turn up? Poor

Mr. Dormer, I get you into trouble, don't I?" she added quite with

tenderness.

"Into trouble?" echoed Nick, looking at her head but not at her eyes.

"Well, we won't talk about that!" she returned with a rich laugh.

He now hastened to say that he had nothing to do with his sister's

leaving the studio--she had only come, as it happened, for a moment. She

had walked away with Peter Sherringham because they were cousins and old

friends: he was to leave England immediately, for a long time, and he

had offered her his company going home. Mrs. Rooth shook her head very

knowingly over the "long time" Mr. Sherringham would be absent--she

plainly had her ideas about that; and she conscientiously related that

in the course of the short conversation they had all had at the door of

the house her daughter had reminded Miss Dormer of something that had

passed between them in Paris on the question of the charming young

lady's modelling her head.

"I did it to make the idea of our meeting less absurd--to put it on the

footing of our both being artists. I don't ask you if she has talent,"

said Miriam.

"Then I needn't tell you," laughed Nick.

"I'm sure she has talent and a very refined inspiration. I see something

in that corner, covered with a mysterious veil," Mrs. Rooth insinuated;

which led Miriam to go on immediately:

"Has she been trying her hand at Mr. Sherringham?"

"When should she try her hand, poor dear young lady? He's always sitting

with us," said Mrs. Rooth.

"Dear mamma, you exaggerate. He has his moments--when he seems to say

his prayers to me; but we've had some success in cutting them down. \_Il

s'est bien dÃ©tachÃ© ces jours-ci\_, and I'm very happy for him. Of course

it's an impertinent allusion for me to make; but I should be so

delighted if I could think of him as a little in love with Miss Dormer,"

the girl pursued, addressing Nick.

"He is, I think, just a little--just a tiny bit," her artist allowed,

working away; while Mrs. Rooth ejaculated to her daughter

simultaneously:

"How can you ask such fantastic questions when you know he's dying for

\_you\_?"

"Oh dying!--he's dying very hard!" cried Miriam. "Mr. Sherringham's a

man of whom I can't speak with too much esteem and affection and who may

be destined to perish by some horrid fever (which God forbid!) in the

unpleasant country he's going to. But he won't have caught his fever

from your humble servant."

"You may kill him even while you remain in perfect health yourself,"

said Nick; "and since we're talking of the matter I don't see the harm

of my confessing that he strikes me as far gone--oh as very bad indeed."

"And yet he's in love with your sister?--\_je n'y suis plus\_."

"He tries to be, for he sees that as regards you there are difficulties.

He'd like to put his hand on some nice girl who'd be an antidote to his

poison."

"Difficulties are a mild name for them; poison even is a mild name for

the ill he suffers from. The principal difficulty is that he doesn't

know what the devil he wants. The next is that I don't either--or what

the devil I want myself. I only know what I don't want," Miriam kept on

brightly and as if uttering some happy, beneficent truth. "I don't want

a person who takes things even less simply than I do myself. Mr.

Sherringham, poor man, must be very uncomfortable, for one side of him's

in a perpetual row with the other side. He's trying to serve God and

Mammon, and I don't know how God will come off. What I like in you is

that you've definitely let Mammon go--it's the only decent way. That's

my earnest conviction, and yet they call us people light. Dear Mr.

Sherringham has tremendous ambitions--tremendous \_riguardi\_, as we used

to say in Italy. He wants to enjoy every comfort and to save every

appearance, and all without making a scrap of a sacrifice. He expects

others--me, for instance--to make all the sacrifices. \_Merci\_, much as I

esteem him and much as I owe him! I don't know how he ever came to stray

at all into our bold, bad, downright Bohemia: it was a cruel trick for

fortune to play him. He can't keep out of it, he's perpetually making

dashes across the border, and yet as soon as he gets here he's on pins

and needles. There's another in whose position--if I were in it--I

wouldn't look at the likes of us!"

"I don't know much about the matter," Nick brought out after some intent

smudging, "but I've an idea Peter thinks he has made or at least is

making sacrifices."

"So much the better--you must encourage him, you must help him."

"I don't know what my daughter's talking about," Mrs. Rooth

contributed--"she's much too paradoxical for my plain mind. But there's

one way to encourage Mr. Sherringham--there's one way to help him; and

perhaps it won't be a worse way for a gentleman of your good nature that

it will help me at the same time. Can't I look to you, dear Mr. Dormer,

to see that he does come to the theatre to-night--that he doesn't feel

himself obliged to stay away?"

"What danger is there of his staying away?" Nick asked.

"If he's bent on sacrifices that's a very good one to begin with,"

Miriam observed.

"That's the mad, bad way she talks to him--she has forbidden the dear

unhappy gentleman the house!" her mother cried. "She brought it up to

him just now at the door--before Miss Dormer: such very odd form! She

pretends to impose her commands upon him."

"Oh he'll be there--we're going to dine together," said Nick. And when

Miriam asked him what that had to do with it he went on: "Why we've

arranged it; I'm going, and he won't let me go alone."

"You're going? I sent you no places," his sitter objected.

"Yes, but I've got one. Why didn't you, after all I've done for you?"

She beautifully thought of it. "Because I'm so good. No matter," she

added, "if Mr. Sherringham comes I won't act."

"Won't you act for me?"

"She'll act like an angel," Mrs. Rooth protested. "She might do, she

might be, anything in all the world; but she won't take common pains."

"Of one thing there's no doubt," said Miriam: "that compared with the

rest of us--poor passionless creatures--mamma does know what she wants."

"And what's that?" Nick inquired, chalking on.

"She wants everything."

"Never, never--I'm much more humble," retorted the old woman; upon

which her daughter requested her to give then to Mr. Dormer, who was a

reasonable man and an excellent judge, a general idea of the scope of

her desires.

As, however, Mrs. Rooth, sighing and deprecating, was not quick to

acquit herself, the girl tried a short cut to the truth with the abrupt

demand: "Do you believe for a single moment he'd marry me?"

"Why he has proposed to you--you've told me yourself--a dozen times."

"Proposed what to me?" Miriam rang out. "I've told you \_that\_ neither a

dozen times nor once, because I've never understood. He has made

wonderful speeches, but has never been serious."

"You told me he had been in the seventh heaven of devotion, especially

that night we went to the foyer of the FranÃ§ais," Mrs. Rooth insisted.

"Do you call the seventh heaven of devotion serious? He's in love with

me, \_je le veux bien\_; he's so poisoned--Mr. Dormer vividly puts it--as

to require a strong antidote; but he has never spoken to me as if he

really expected me to listen to him, and he's the more of a gentleman

from that fact. He knows we haven't a square foot of common ground--that

a grasshopper can't set up a house with a fish. So he has taken care to

say to me only more than he can possibly mean. That makes it stand just

for nothing."

"Did he say more than he can possibly mean when he took formal leave of

you yesterday--for ever and ever?" the old woman cried.

On which Nick re-enforced her. "And don't you call that--his taking

formal leave--a sacrifice?"

"Oh he took it all back, his sacrifice, before he left the house."

"Then has that no meaning?" demanded Mrs. Rooth.

"None that I can make out," said her daughter.

"Ah I've no patience with you: you can be stupid when you will--you can

be even that too!" the poor lady groaned.

"What mamma wishes me to understand and to practise is the particular

way to be artful with Mr. Sherringham," said Miriam. "There are

doubtless depths of wisdom and virtue in it. But I see only one

art--that of being perfectly honest."

"I like to hear you talk--it makes you live, brings you out," Nick

contentedly dropped. "And you sit beautifully still. All I want to say

is please continue to do so: remain exactly as you are--it's rather

important--for the next ten minutes."

"We're washing our dirty linen before you, but it's all right," the girl

returned, "because it shows you what sort of people we are, and that's

what you need to know. Don't make me vague and arranged and fine in this

new view," she continued: "make me characteristic and real; make life,

with all its horrid facts and truths, stick out of me. I wish you could

put mother in too; make us live there side by side and tell our little

story. 'The wonderful actress and her still more wonderful mamma'--don't

you think that's an awfully good subject?"

Mrs. Rooth, at this, cried shame on her daughter's wanton humour,

professing that she herself would never accept so much from Nick's good

nature, and Miriam settled it that at any rate he was some day and in

some way to do her mother, \_really\_ do her, and so make her, as one of

the funniest persons that ever was, live on through the ages.

"She doesn't believe Mr. Sherringham wants to marry me any more than you

do," the girl, taking up her dispute again after a moment, represented

to Nick; "but she believes--how indeed can I tell you what she

believes?--that I can work it so well, if you understand, that in the

fulness of time I shall hold him in a vice. I'm to keep him along for

the present, but not to listen to him, for if I listen to him I shall

lose him. It's ingenious, it's complicated; but I daresay you follow

me."

"Don't move--don't move," said Nick. "Pardon a poor clumsy beginner."

"No, I shall explain quietly. Somehow--here it's \_very\_ complicated and

you mustn't lose the thread--I shall be an actress and make a tremendous

lot of money, and somehow too (I suppose a little later) I shall become

an ambassadress and be the favourite of courts. So you see it will all

be delightful. Only I shall have to go very straight. Mamma reminds me

of a story I once heard about the mother of a young lady who was in

receipt of much civility from the pretender to a crown, which indeed he,

and the young lady too, afterwards more or less wore. The old countess

watched the course of events and gave her daughter the cleverest advice:

'\_Tiens bon, ma fille\_, and you shall sit upon a throne.' Mamma wishes

me to \_tenir bon\_--she apparently thinks there's a danger I mayn't--so

that if I don't sit upon a throne I shall at least parade at the foot of

one. And if before that, for ten years, I pile up the money, they'll

forgive me the way I've made it. I should hope so, if I've \_tenu bon\_!

Only ten years is a good while to hold out, isn't it? If it isn't Mr.

Sherringham it will be some one else. Mr. Sherringham has the great

merit of being a bird in the hand. I'm to keep him along, I'm to be

still more diplomatic than even he can be."

Mrs. Rooth listened to her daughter with an air of assumed reprobation

which melted, before the girl had done, into a diverted, complacent

smile--the gratification of finding herself the proprietress of so much

wit and irony and grace. Miriam's account of her mother's views was a

scene of comedy, and there was instinctive art in the way she added

touch to touch and made point upon point. She was so quiet, to oblige

her painter, that only her fine lips moved--all her expression was in

their charming utterance. Mrs. Rooth, after the first flutter of a less

cynical spirit, consented to be sacrificed to an effect of the really

high order she had now been educated to recognise; so that she scarce

hesitated, when Miriam had ceased speaking, before she tittered out with

the fondest indulgence: '\_ComÃ©dienne\_!' And she seemed to appeal to

their companion. "Ain't she fascinating? That's the way she does for

you!"

"It's rather cruel, isn't it," said Miriam, "to deprive people of the

luxury of calling one an actress as they'd call one a liar? I represent,

but I represent truly."

"Mr. Sherringham would marry you to-morrow--there's no question of ten

years!" cried Mrs. Rooth with a comicality of plainness.

Miriam smiled at Nick, deprecating his horror of such talk. "Isn't it

droll, the way she can't get it out of her head?" Then turning almost

coaxingly to the old woman: "\_Voyons\_, look about you: they don't marry

us like that."

"But they do--\_cela se voit tous les jours\_. Ask Mr. Dormer."

"Oh never! It would be as if I asked him to give us a practical proof."

"I shall never prove anything by marrying any one," Nick said. "For me

that question's over."

Miriam rested kind eyes on him. "Dear me, how you must hate me!" And

before he had time to reply she went on to her mother: "People marry

them to make them leave the stage; which proves exactly what I say."

"Ah they offer them the finest positions," reasoned Mrs. Rooth.

"Do you want me to leave it then?"

"Oh you can manage if you will!"

"The only managing I know anything about is to do my work. If I manage

that decently I shall pull through."

"But, dearest, may our work not be of many sorts?"

"I only know one," said Miriam.

At this her mother got up with a sigh. "I see you do wish to drive me

into the street."

"Mamma's bewildered--there are so many paths she wants to follow, there

are so many bundles of hay. As I told you, she wishes to gobble them

all," the girl pursued. Then she added: "Yes, go and take the carriage;

take a turn round the Park--you always delight in that--and come back

for me in an hour."

"I'm too vexed with you; the air will do me good," said Mrs. Rooth. But

before she went she addressed Nick: "I've your assurance that you'll

bring him then to-night?"

"Bring Peter? I don't think I shall have to drag him," Nick returned.

"But you must do me the justice to remember that if I should resort to

force I should do something that's not particularly in my interest--I

should be magnanimous."

"We must always be that, mustn't we?" moralised Mrs. Rooth.

"How could it affect your interest?" Miriam asked less abstractedly.

"Yes, as you say," her mother mused at their host, "the question of

marriage has ceased to exist for you."

"Mamma goes straight at it!" laughed the girl, getting up while Nick

rubbed his canvas before answering. Miriam went to mamma and settled

her bonnet and mantle in preparation for her drive, then stood a moment

with a filial arm about her and as if waiting for their friend's

explanation. This, however, when it came halted visibly.

"Why you said a while ago that if Peter was there you wouldn't act."

"I'll act for \_him\_," smiled Miriam, inconsequently caressing her

mother.

"It doesn't matter whom it's for!" Mrs. Rooth declared sagaciously.

"Take your drive and relax your mind," said the girl, kissing her. "Come

for me in an hour; not later--but not sooner." She went with her to the

door, bundled her out, closed it behind her and came back to the

position she had quitted. "\_This\_ is the peace I want!" she gratefully

cried as she settled into it.

XLV

Peter Sherringham said so little during the performance that his

companion was struck by his dumbness, especially as Miriam's acting

seemed to Nick magnificent. He held his breath while she was on the

stage--she gave the whole thing, including the spectator's emotion, such

a lift. She had not carried out her fantastic menace of not exerting

herself, and, as Mrs. Rooth had said, it little mattered for whom she

acted. Nick was conscious in watching her that she went through it all

for herself, for the idea that possessed her and that she rendered with

extraordinary breadth. She couldn't open the door a part of the way to

it and let it simply peep in; if it entered at all it must enter in full

procession and occupy the premises in state.

This was what had happened on an occasion which, as the less tormented

of our young men felt in his stall, grew larger with each throb of the

responsive house; till by the time the play was half over it appeared to

stretch out wide arms to the future. Nick had often heard more applause,

but had never heard more attention, since they were all charmed and

hushed together and success seemed to be sitting down with them. There

had been of course plenty of announcement--the newspapers had abounded

and the arts of the manager had taken the freest license; but it was

easy to feel a fine, universal consensus and to recognise everywhere

the light spring of hope. People snatched their eyes from the stage an

instant to look at each other, all eager to hand on the torch passed to

them by the actress over the footlights. It was a part of the impression

that she was now only showing to the full, for this time she had verse

to deal with and she made it unexpectedly exquisite. She was beauty,

melody, truth; she was passion and persuasion and tenderness. She caught

up the obstreperous play in soothing, entwining arms and, seeming to

tread the air in the flutter of her robe, carried it into the high

places of poetry, of art, of style. And she had such tones of nature,

such concealments of art, such effusions of life, that the whole scene

glowed with the colour she communicated, and the house, pervaded with

rosy fire, glowed back at the scene. Nick looked round in the intervals;

he felt excited and flushed--the night had turned to a feast of

fraternity and he expected to see people embrace each other. The crowd,

the agitation, the triumph, the surprise, the signals and rumours, the

heated air, his associates, near him, pointing out other figures who

presumably were celebrated but whom he had never heard of, all amused

him and banished every impulse to question or to compare. Miriam was as

happy as some right sensation--she would have fed the memory with deep

draughts.

One of the things that amused him or at least helped to fill his

attention was Peter's attitude, which apparently didn't exclude

criticism--rather indeed mainly implied it. This admirer never took his

eyes off the actress, but he made no remark about her and never stirred

out of his chair. Nick had had from the first a plan of going round to

speak to her, but as his companion evidently meant not to move he

scrupled at being more forward. During their brief dinner together--they

were determined not to be late--Peter had been silent, quite recklessly

grave, but also, his kinsman judged, full of the wish to make it clear

he was calm. In his seat he was calmer than ever and had an air even of

trying to suggest that his attendance, preoccupied as he was with deeper

solemnities, was more or less mechanical, the result of a conception of

duty, a habit of courtesy. When during a scene in the second act--a

scene from which Miriam was absent--Nick observed to him that one might

judge from his reserve that he wasn't pleased he replied after a moment:

"I've been looking for her mistakes." And when Nick made answer to this

that he certainly wouldn't find them he said again in an odd tone: "No,

I shan't find them--I shan't find them." It might have seemed that since

the girl's performance was a dazzling success he regarded his evening as

rather a failure.

After the third act Nick said candidly: "My dear fellow, how can you sit

here? Aren't you going to speak to her?"

To which Peter replied inscrutably: "Lord, no, never again. I bade her

good-bye yesterday. She knows what I think of her form. It's very good,

but she carries it a little too far. Besides, she didn't want me to

come, and it's therefore more discreet to keep away from her."

"Surely it isn't an hour for discretion!" Nick cried. "Excuse me at any

rate for five minutes."

He went behind and reappeared only as the curtain was rising on the

fourth act; and in the interval between the fourth and the fifth he went

again for a shorter time. Peter was personally detached, but he

consented to listen to his companion's vivid account of the state of

things on the stage, where the elation of victory had lighted up the

place. The strain was over, the ship in port--they were all wiping their

faces and grinning. Miriam--yes, positively--was grinning too, and she

hadn't asked a question about Peter nor sent him a message. They were

kissing all round and dancing for joy. They were on the eve, worse luck,

of a tremendous run. Peter groaned irrepressibly for this; it was, save

for a slight sign a moment later, the only vibration caused in him by

his cousin's report. There was but one voice of regret that they hadn't

put on the piece earlier, as the end of the season would interrupt the

run. There was but one voice too about the fourth act--it was believed

all London would rush to see the fourth act. The crowd about her was a

dozen deep and Miriam in the midst of it all charming; she was receiving

in the ugly place after the fashion of royalty, almost as hedged with

the famous "divinity," yet with a smile and a word for each. She was

really like a young queen on her accession. When she saw him, Nick, she

had kissed her hand to him over the heads of the courtiers. Nick's

artless comment on this was that she had such pretty manners. It made

Peter laugh--apparently at his friend's conception of the manners of a

young queen. Mrs. Rooth, with a dozen shawls on her arm, was as red as

the kitchen-fire, but you couldn't tell if Miriam were red or pale: she

was so cleverly, finely made up--perhaps a little too much. Dashwood of

course was greatly to the fore, but you hadn't to mention his own

performance to him: he took it all handsomely and wouldn't hear of

anything but that \_her\_ fortune was made. He didn't say much indeed, but

evidently had ideas about her fortune; he nodded significant things and

whistled inimitable sounds--"Heuh, heuh!" He was perfectly satisfied;

moreover, he looked further ahead than any one.

It was on coming back to his place after the fourth act that Nick put

in, for his companion's benefit, most of these touches in his sketch of

the situation. If Peter had continued to look for Miriam's mistakes he

hadn't yet found them: the fourth act, bristling with dangers, putting a

premium on every sort of cheap effect, had rounded itself without a

flaw. Sitting there alone while Nick was away he had leisure to meditate

on the wonder of this--on the art with which the girl had separated

passion from violence, filling the whole place and never screaming; for

it had often seemed to him in London of old that the yell of theatrical

emotion rang through the shrinking night like the voice of the Sunday

newsboy. Miriam had never been more present to him than at this hour;

but she was inextricably transmuted--present essentially as the romantic

heroine she represented. His state of mind was of the strangest and he

was conscious of its strangeness, just as he was conscious in his very

person of a lapse of resistance which likened itself absurdly to

liberation. He felt weak at the same time that he felt inspired, and he

felt inspired at the same time that he knew, or believed he knew, that

his face was a blank. He saw things as a shining confusion, and yet

somehow something monstrously definite kept surging out of them. Miriam

was a beautiful, actual, fictive, impossible young woman of a past age,

an undiscoverable country, who spoke in blank verse and overflowed with

metaphor, who was exalted and heroic beyond all human convenience and

who yet was irresistibly real and related to one's own affairs. But that

reality was a part of her spectator's joy, and she was not changed back

to the common by his perception of the magnificent trick of art with

which it was connected. Before his kinsman rejoined him Peter, taking a

visiting-card from his pocket, had written on it in pencil a few words

in a foreign tongue; but as at that moment he saw Nick coming in he

immediately put it out of view.

The last thing before the curtain rose on the fifth act that young man

mentioned his having brought a message from Basil Dashwood, who hoped

they both, on leaving the theatre, would come to supper with him in

company with Miriam and her mother and several others: he had prepared a

little informal banquet in honour of so famous a night. At this, while

the curtain was about to rise, Peter immediately took out his card again

and added something--he wrote the finest small hand you could see. Nick

asked him what he was doing, and he waited but an instant. "It's a word

to say I can't come."

"To Dashwood? Oh I shall go," said Nick.

"Well, I hope you'll enjoy it!" his companion replied in a tone which

came back to him afterwards.

When the curtain fell on the last act the people stayed, standing up in

their places for acclamation. The applause shook the house--the recall

became a clamour, the relief from a long tension. This was in any

performance a moment Peter detested, but he stood for an instant beside

Nick, who clapped, to his cousin's diplomatic sense, after the fashion

of a school-boy at the pantomime. There was a veritable roar while the

curtain drew back at the side most removed from our pair. Peter could

see Basil Dashwood holding it, making a passage for the male "juvenile

lead," who had Miriam in tow. Nick redoubled his efforts; heard the

plaudits swell; saw the bows of the leading gentleman, who was hot and

fat; saw Miriam, personally conducted and closer to the footlights, grow

brighter and bigger and more swaying; and then became aware that his own

comrade had with extreme agility slipped out of the stalls. Nick had

already lost sight of him--he had apparently taken but a minute to

escape from the house; and wondered at his quitting him without a

farewell if he was to leave England on the morrow and they were not to

meet at the hospitable Dashwood's. He wondered even what Peter was "up

to," since, as he had assured him, there was no question of his going

round to Miriam. He waited to see this young lady reappear three times,

dragging Dashwood behind her at the second with a friendly arm, to whom,

in turn, was hooked Miss Fanny Rover, the actress entrusted in the piece

with the inevitable comic relief. He went out slowly with the crowd and

at the door looked again for Peter, who struck him as deficient for once

in finish. He couldn't know that in another direction and while he was

helping the house to "rise" at its heroine, his kinsman had been

particularly explicit.

On reaching the lobby Peter had pounced on a small boy in buttons, who

seemed superfluously connected with a desolate refreshment-room and,

from the tips of his toes, was peeping at the stage through the glazed

hole in the door of a box. Into one of the child's hands he thrust the

card he had drawn again from his waistcoat and into the other the

largest silver coin he could find in the same receptacle, while he bent

over him with words of adjuration--words the little page tried to help

himself to apprehend by instantly attempting to peruse the other words

written on the card.

"That's no use--it's Italian," said Peter; "only carry it round to Miss

Rooth without a minute's delay. Place it in her hand and she'll give you

some object--a bracelet, a glove, or a flower--to bring me back as a

sign that she has received it. I shall be outside; bring me there what

she gives you and you shall have another shilling--only fly!"

His small messenger sounded him a moment with the sharp face of London

wage-earning, and still more of London tip-earning, infancy, and

vanished as swiftly as a slave of the Arabian Nights. While he waited in

the lobby the audience began to pour out, and before the urchin had

come back to him he was clapped on the shoulder by Nick.

"I'm glad I haven't lost you, but why didn't you stay to give her a

hand?"

"Give her a hand? I hated it."

"My dear man, I don't follow you," Nick said. "If you won't come to

Dashwood's supper I fear our ways don't lie together."

"Thank him very much; say I've to get up at an unnatural hour." To this

Peter added: "I think I ought to tell you she may not be there."

"Miss Rooth? Why it's all \_for\_ her."

"I'm waiting for a word from her--she may change her mind."

Nick showed his interest. "For you? What then have you proposed?"

"I've proposed marriage," said Peter in a strange voice.

"I say--!" Nick broke out; and at the same moment Peter's messenger

squeezed through the press and stood before him.

"She has given me nothing, sir," the boy announced; "but she says I'm to

say 'All right!'"

Nick's stare widened. "You've proposed through \_him\_?"

"Aye, and she accepts. Good-night!"--on which, turning away, Peter

bounded into a hansom. He said something to the driver through the roof,

and Nick's eyes followed the cab as it started off. This young man was

mystified, was even amused; especially when the youth in buttons,

planted there and wondering too, brought forth:

"Please sir, he told me he'd give me a shilling and he've forgot it."

"Oh I can't pay you for \_that\_!" Nick laughed. But he fished out a dole,

though he was vexed at the injury to the supper.

XLVI

Peter meanwhile rolled away through the summer night to Saint John's

Wood. He had put the pressure of strong words on his young friend,

entreating her to drive home immediately, return there without any one,

without even her mother. He wished to see her alone and for a purpose he

would fully and satisfactorily explain--couldn't she trust him? He

besought her to remember his own situation and throw over her supper,

throw over everything. He would wait for her with unspeakable impatience

in Balaklava Place.

He did so, when he got there, but it had taken half an hour.

Interminable seemed his lonely vigil in Miss Lumley's drawing-room,

where the character of the original proprietress came out to him more

than ever before in a kind of afterglow of old sociabilities, a vulgar,

ghostly reference. The numerous candles had been lighted for him, and

Mrs. Rooth's familiar fictions lay about; but his nerves forbade him the

solace of a chair and a book. He walked up and down, thinking and

listening, and as the long window, the balmy air permitting, stood open

to the garden, he passed several times in and out. A carriage appeared

to stop at the gate--then there was nothing; he heard the rare rattle of

wheels and the far-off hum of London. His impatience was overwrought,

and though he knew this it persisted; it would have been no easy matter

for Miriam to break away from the flock of her felicitators. Still less

simple was it doubtless for her to leave poor Dashwood with his supper

on his hands. Perhaps she would bring Dashwood with her, bring him to

time her; she was capable of playing him--that is, of playing Her

Majesty's new representative to the small far-off State, or even of

playing them both--that trick. Perhaps the little wretch in

buttons--Peter remembered now the neglected shilling--only pretending to

go round with his card, had come back with an invented answer. But how

could he know, since presumably he couldn't read Italian, that his

answer would fit the message? Peter was sorry now that he himself had

not gone round, not snatched Miriam bodily away, made sure of her and of

what he wanted of her.

When forty minutes had elapsed he regarded it as proved that she

wouldn't come, and, asking himself what he should do, determined to

drive off again and seize her at her comrade's feast. Then he remembered

how Nick had mentioned that this entertainment was not to be held at the

young actor's lodgings but at some tavern or restaurant the name of

which he had not heeded. Suddenly, however, Peter became aware with joy

that this name didn't matter, for there was something at the garden door

at last. He rushed out before she had had time to ring, and saw as she

stepped from the carriage that she was alone. Now that she was there,

that he had this evidence she had listened to him and trusted him, all

his impatience and bitterness gave way and a flood of pleading

tenderness took their place in the first words he spoke to her. It was

far "dearer" of her than he had any right to dream, but she was the best

and kindest creature--this showed it--as well as the most wonderful. He

was really not off his head with his contradictory ways; no, before

heaven he wasn't, and he would explain, he would make everything clear.

Everything was changed.

She stopped short in the little dusky garden, looking at him in the

light of the open window. Then she called back to the coachman--they had

left the garden door open--"Wait for me, mind; I shall want you again."

"What's the matter--won't you stay?" Peter asked. "Are you going out

again at this absurd hour? I won't hurt you," he gently urged. And he

went back and closed the garden door. He wanted to say to the coachman,

"It's no matter--please drive away." At the same time he wouldn't for

the world have done anything offensive to her.

"I've come because I thought it better to-night, as things have turned

out, to do the thing you ask me, whatever it may be," she had already

begun. "That's probably what you calculated I would think, eh? What this

evening has been you've seen, and I must allow that your hand's in it.

That you know for yourself--that you doubtless felt as you sat there.

But I confess I don't imagine what you want of me here now," she added.

She had remained standing in the path.

Peter felt the irony of her "now" and how it made a fool of him, but he

had been prepared for this and for much worse. He had begged her not to

think him a fool, but in truth at present he cared little if she did.

Very likely he was--in spite of his plea that everything was changed: he

cared little even himself. However, he spoke in the tone of intense

reason and of the fullest disposition to satisfy her. This lucidity only

took still more from the dignity of his change of front: his separation

from her the day before had had such pretensions to being lucid. But the

explanation and the justification were in the very fact, the fact that

had complete possession of him. He named it when he replied to her:

"I've simply overrated my strength."

"Oh I knew--I knew! That's why I entreated you not to come!" Miriam

groaned. She turned away lamenting, and for a moment he thought she

would retreat to her carriage. But he passed his hand into her arm, to

draw her forward, and after an instant felt her yield.

"The fact is we must have this thing out," he said. Then he added as he

made her go into the house, bending over her, "The failure of my

strength--that was just the reason of my coming."

She broke into her laugh at these words, as she entered the

drawing-room, and it made them sound pompous in their false wisdom. She

flung off, as a good-natured tribute to the image of their having the

thing out, a white shawl that had been wrapped round her. She was still

painted and bedizened, in the splendid dress of her climax, so that she

seemed protected and alienated by the character she had been acting.

"Whatever it is you want--when I understand--you'll be very brief, won't

you? Do you know I've given up a charming supper for you? Mamma has gone

there. I've promised to go back to them."

"You're an angel not to have let her come with you. I'm sure she wanted

to," Peter made reply.

"Oh she's all right, but she's nervous." Then the girl added: "Couldn't

she keep you away after all?"

"Whom are you talking about?" Biddy Dormer was as absent from his mind

as if she had never existed.

"The charming thing you were with this morning. Is she so afraid of

obliging me? Oh she'd be so good for you!"

"Don't speak of that," Peter gravely said. "I was in perfect good faith

yesterday when I took leave of you. I was--I was. But I can't--I can't:

you're too unutterably dear to me."

"Oh don't--\_please\_ don't!" Miriam wailed at this. She stood before the

fireless chimney-piece with one of her hands on it. "If it's only to say

that, don't you know, what's the use?"

"It isn't only to say that. I've a plan, a perfect plan: the whole thing

lies clear before me."

"And what's the whole thing?"

He had to make an effort. "You say your mother's nervous. Ah if you knew

how nervous I am!"

"Well, I'm not. Go on."

"Give it up--give it up!" Peter stammered.

"Give it up?" She fixed him like a mild Medusa.

"I'll marry you to-morrow if you'll renounce; and in return for the

sacrifice you make for me I'll do more for you than ever was done for a

woman before."

"Renounce after to-night? Do you call that a plan?" she asked. "Those

are old words and very foolish ones--you wanted something of that sort a

year ago."

"Oh I fluttered round the idea at that time; we were talking in the air.

I didn't really believe I could make you see it then, and certainly you

didn't see it. My own future, moreover, wasn't definite to me. I didn't

know what I could offer you. But these last months have made a

difference--I do know now. Now what I say is deliberate--It's deeply

meditated. I simply can't live without you, and I hold that together we

may do great things."

She seemed to wonder. "What sort of things?"

"The things of my profession, of my life, the things one does for one's

country, the responsibility and the honour of great affairs; deeply

fascinating when one's immersed in them, and more exciting really--put

them even at that--than the excitements of the theatre. Care for me only

a little and you'll see what they are, they'll take hold of you. Believe

me, believe me," Peter pleaded; "every fibre of my being trembles in

what I say to you."

"You admitted yesterday it wouldn't do," she made answer. "Where were

the fibres of your being then?"

"They throbbed in me even more than now, and I was trying, like an ass,

not to feel them. Where was this evening yesterday--where were the

maddening hours I've just spent? Ah you're the perfection of

perfections, and as I sat there to-night you taught me what I really

want."

"The perfection of perfections?" the girl echoed with the strangest

smile.

"I needn't try to tell you: you must have felt to-night with such

rapture what you are, what you can do. How can I give that up?" he

piteously went on.

"How can \_I\_, my poor friend? I like your plans and your

responsibilities and your great affairs, as you call them. \_Voyons\_,

they're infantile. I've just shown that I'm a perfection of perfections:

therefore it's just the moment to 'renounce,' as you gracefully say? Oh

I was sure, I was sure!" And Miriam paused, resting eyes at once lighted

and troubled on him as in the effort to think of some arrangement that

would help him out of his absurdity. "I was sure, I mean, that if you

did come your poor, dear, doting brain would be quite confused," she

presently pursued. "I can't be a muff in public just for you,

\_pourtant\_. Dear me, why do you like us so much?"

"Like you? I loathe you!"

"\_Je le vois parbleu bien\_!" she lightly returned. "I mean why do you

feel us, judge us, understand us so well? I please you because you see,

because you know; and then for that very reason of my pleasing you must

adapt me to your convenience, you must take me over, as they say. You

admire me as an artist and therefore want to put me into a box in which

the artist will breathe her last. Ah be reasonable; you must let her

live!"

"Let her live? As if I could prevent her living!" Peter cried with

unmistakable conviction. "Even if I did wish how could I prevent a

spirit like yours from expressing itself? Don't talk about my putting

you in a box, for, dearest child, I'm taking you out of one," he all

persuasively explained. "The artist is irrepressible, eternal; she'll be

in everything you are and in everything you do, and you'll go about with

her triumphantly exerting your powers, charming the world, carrying

everything before you."

Miriam's colour rose, through all her artificial surfaces, at this all

but convincing appeal, and she asked whimsically: "Shall you like that?"

"Like my wife to be the most brilliant woman in Europe? I think I can do

with it."

"Aren't you afraid of me?"

"Not a bit."

"Bravely said. How little you know me after all!" sighed the girl.

"I tell the truth," Peter ardently went on; "and you must do me the

justice to admit that I've taken the time to dig deep into my feelings.

I'm not an infatuated boy; I've lived, I've had experience, I've

observed; in short I know what I mean and what I want. It isn't a thing

to reason about; it's simply a need that consumes me. I've put it on

starvation diet, but that's no use--really, it's no use, Miriam," the

young man declared with a ring that spoke enough of his sincerity. "It

is no question of my trusting you; it's simply a question of your

trusting me. You're all right, as I've heard you say yourself; you're

frank, spontaneous, generous; you're a magnificent creature. Just

quietly marry me and I'll manage you."

"'Manage' me?" The girl's inflexion was droll; it made him change

colour.

"I mean I'll give you a larger life than the largest you can get in any

other way. The stage is great, no doubt, but the world's greater. It's a

bigger theatre than any of those places in the Strand. We'll go in for

realities instead of fables, and you'll do them far better than you do

the fables."

Miriam had listened attentively, but her face that could so show things

showed her despair at his perverted ingenuity. "Pardon my saying it

after your delightful tributes to my worth," she returned in a moment,

"but I've never listened to anything quite so grandly unreal. You think

so well of me that humility itself ought to keep me silent; nevertheless

I \_must\_ utter a few shabby words of sense. I'm a magnificent creature

on the stage--well and good; it's what I want to be and it's charming to

see such evidence that I succeed. But off the stage, woe betide us both,

I should lose all my advantages. The fact's so patent that it seems to

me I'm very good-natured even to discuss it with you."

"Are you on the stage now, pray? Ah Miriam, if it weren't for the

respect I owe you!" her companion wailed.

"If it weren't for that I shouldn't have come here to meet you. My gift

is the thing that takes you: could there be a better proof than that

it's to-night's display of it that has brought you to this unreason?

It's indeed a misfortune that you're so sensitive to our poor arts,

since they play such tricks with your power to see things as they are.

Without my share of them I should be a dull, empty, third-rate woman,

and yet that's the fate you ask me to face and insanely pretend you're

ready to face yourself."

"Without it--without it?" Sherringham cried. "Your own sophistry's

infinitely worse than mine. I should like to see you without it for the

fiftieth part of a second. What I ask you to give up is the dusty boards

of the play-house and the flaring footlights, but not the very essence

of your being. Your 'gift,' your genius, is yourself, and it's because

it's yourself that I yearn for you. If it had been a thing you could

leave behind by the easy dodge of stepping off the stage I would never

have looked at you a second time. Don't talk to me as if I were a

simpleton--with your own false simplifications! You were made to charm

and console, to represent beauty and harmony and variety to miserable

human beings; and the daily life of man is the theatre for that--not a

vulgar shop with a turnstile that's open only once in the twenty-four

hours. 'Without it,' verily!" Peter proceeded with a still, deep heat

that kept down in a manner his rising scorn and exasperated passion.

"Please let me know the first time you're without your face, without

your voice, your step, your exquisite spirit, the turn of your head and

the wonder of your look!"

Miriam at this moved away from him with a port that resembled what she

sometimes showed on the stage when she turned her young back upon the

footlights and then after a few steps grandly swept round again. This

evolution she performed--it was over in an instant--on the present

occasion; even to stopping short with her eyes upon him and her head

admirably erect. "Surely it's strange," she said, "the way the other

solution never occurs to you."

"The other solution?"

"That \_you\_ should stay on the stage."

"I don't understand you," her friend gloomed.

"Stay on \_my\_ stage. Come off your own."

For a little he said nothing; then: "You mean that if I'll do that

you'll have me?"

"I mean that if it were to occur to you to offer me a little sacrifice

on your own side it might place the matter in a slightly more attractive

light."

"Continue to let you act--as my wife?" he appealed. "Is it a real

condition? Am I to understand that those are your terms?"

"I may say so without fear, because you'll never accept them."

"Would you accept them \_from\_ me?" he demanded; "accept the manly, the

professional sacrifice, see me throw up my work, my prospects--of course

I should have to do that--and simply become your appendage?"

She raised her arms for a prodigious fall. "My dear fellow, you invite

me with the best conscience in the world to become yours."

"The cases are not equal. You'd make of me the husband of an actress. I

should make of you the wife of an ambassador."

"The husband of an actress, \_c'est bientÃ´t dit\_, in that tone of scorn!

If you're consistent," said Miriam, all lucid and hard, "it ought to be

a proud position for you."

"What do you mean, if I'm consistent?"

"Haven't you always insisted on the beauty and interest of our art and

the greatness of our mission? Haven't you almost come to blows with poor

Gabriel Nash about it? What did all that mean if you won't face the

first consequences of your theory? Either it was an enlightened

conviction or it was an empty pretence. If you were only talking

against time I'm glad to know it," she rolled out with a darkening eye.

"The better the cause, it seems to me, the better the deed; and if the

theatre \_is\_ important to the 'human spirit,' as you used to say so

charmingly, and if into the bargain you've the pull of being so fond of

me, I don't see why it should be monstrous of you to give us your

services in an intelligent, indirect way. Of course if you're not

serious we needn't talk at all; but if you are, with your conception of

what the actor can do, why is it so base to come to the actor's aid,

taking one devotion with another? If I'm so fine I'm worth looking after

a bit, and the place where I'm finest is the place to look after me!"

He had a long pause again, taking her in as it seemed to him he had

never done. "You were never finer than at this minute, in the deepest

domesticity of private life. I've no conception whatever of what the

actor can do, and no theory whatever about the importance of the

theatre. Any infatuation of that sort has completely dropped from me,

and for all I care the theatre may go to the dogs--which I judge it

altogether probably will!"

"You're dishonest, you're ungrateful, you're false!" Miriam flashed. "It

was the theatre brought you here--if it hadn't been for the theatre I

never would have looked at you. It was in the name of the theatre you

first made love to me; it's to the theatre you owe every advantage that,

so far as I'm concerned, you possess."

"I seem to possess a great many!" poor Peter derisively groaned.

"You might avail yourself better of those you have! You make me angry,

but I want to be fair," said the shining creature, "and I can't be

unless you are. You're not fair, nor candid, nor honourable, when you

swallow your words and abjure your faith, when you throw over old

friends and old memories for a selfish purpose."

"'Selfish purpose' is, in your own convenient idiom, \_bientÃ´t dit\_,"

Peter promptly answered. "I suppose you consider that if I truly

esteemed you I should be ashamed to deprive the world of the light of

your genius. Perhaps my esteem isn't of the right quality--there are

different kinds, aren't there? At any rate I've explained to you that I

propose to deprive the world of nothing at all. You shall be celebrated,

\_allez\_!"

"Vain words, vain words, my dear!" and she turned off again in her

impatience. "I know of course," she added quickly, "that to befool

yourself with such twaddle you must be pretty bad."

"Yes, I'm pretty bad," he admitted, looking at her dismally. "What do

you do with the declaration you made me the other day--the day I found

my cousin here--that you'd take me if I should come to you as one who

had risen high?"

Miriam thought of it. "I remember--the chaff about the honours, the

orders, the stars and garters. My poor foolish friend, don't be so

painfully literal. Don't you know a joke when you see it? It was to

worry your cousin, wasn't it? But it didn't in the least succeed."

"Why should you wish to worry my cousin?"

"Because he's so provoking!" she instantly answered; after which she

laughed as if for her falling too simply into the trap he had laid.

"Surely, at all events, I had my freedom no less than I have it now.

Pray what explanations should I have owed you and in what fear of you

should I have gone? However, that has nothing to do with it. Say I did

tell you that we might arrange it on the day you should come to me

covered with glory in the shape of little tinkling medals: why should

you anticipate that transaction by so many years and knock me down such

a long time in advance? Where's the glory, please, and where are the

medals?"

"Dearest girl, am I not going to strange parts--a capital

promotion--next month," he insistently demanded, "and can't you trust me

enough to believe I speak with a real appreciation of the facts (that

I'm not lying to you in short) when I tell you I've my foot in the

stirrup? The glory's dawning. \_I\_'m all right too."

"What you propose to me, then, is to accompany you \_tout bonnement\_ to

your new post. What you propose to me is to pack up and start?"

"You put it in a nutshell." But Peter's smile was strained.

"You're touching--it has its charm. But you can't get anything in any of

the Americas, you know. I'm assured there are no medals to be picked up

in those parts--which are therefore 'strange' indeed. That's why the

diplomatic body hate them all."

"They're on the way, they're on the way!"--he could only feverishly

hammer. "The people here don't keep us long in disagreeable places

unless we want to stay. There's one thing you can get anywhere if you've

ability, and nowhere if you've not, and in the disagreeable places

generally more than in the others; and that--since it's the element of

the question we're discussing--is simply success. It's odious to be put

on one's swagger, but I protest against being treated as if I had

nothing to offer--to offer a person who has such glories of her own. I'm

not a little presumptuous ass; I'm a man accomplished and determined,

and the omens are on my side." Peter faltered a moment and then with a

queer expression went on: "Remember, after all, that, strictly speaking,

your glories are also still in the future." An exclamation at these

words burst from Miriam's lips, but her companion resumed quickly: "Ask

my official superiors, ask any of my colleagues, if they consider I've

nothing to offer."

He had an idea as he ceased speaking that she was on the point of

breaking out with some strong word of resentment at his allusion to the

contingent nature of her prospects. But it only deepened his wound to

hear her say with extraordinary mildness: "It's perfectly true that my

glories are still to come, that I may fizzle out and that my little

success of to-day is perhaps a mere flash in the pan. Stranger things

have been--something of that sort happens every day. But don't we talk

too much of that part of it?" she asked with a weary patience that was

noble in its effect. "Surely it's vulgar to think only of the noise

one's going to make--especially when one remembers how utterly \_bÃªtes\_

most of the people will be among whom one makes it. It isn't to my

possible glories I cling; it's simply to my idea, even if it's destined

to betray me and sink me. I like it better than anything else--a

thousand times better (I'm sorry to have to put it in such a way) than

tossing up my head as the fine lady of a little coterie."

"A little coterie? I don't know what you're talking about!"--for this at

least Peter could fight.

"A big coterie, then! It's only that at the best. A nasty, prim,

'official' woman who's perched on her little local pedestal and thinks

she's a queen for ever because she's ridiculous for an hour! Oh you

needn't tell me, I've seen them abroad--the dreariest females--and could

imitate them here. I could do one for you on the spot if I weren't so

tired. It's scarcely worth mentioning perhaps all this while--but I'm

ready to drop." She picked up the white mantle she had tossed off,

flinging it round her with her usual amplitude of gesture. "They're

waiting for me and I confess I'm hungry. If I don't hurry they'll eat up

all the nice things. Don't say I haven't been obliging, and come back

when you're better. Good-night."

"I quite agree with you that we've talked too much about the vulgar side

of our question," Peter returned, walking round to get between her and

the French window by which she apparently had a view of leaving the

room. "That's because I've wanted to bribe you. Bribery's almost always

vulgar."

"Yes, you should do better. \_Merci\_! There's a cab: some of them have

come for me. I must go," she added, listening for a sound that reached

her from the road.

Peter listened too, making out no cab. "Believe me, it isn't wise to

turn your back on such an affection as mine and on such a confidence,"

he broke out again, speaking almost in a warning tone--there was a touch

of superior sternness in it, as of a rebuke for real folly, but it was

meant to be tender--and stopping her within a few feet of the window.

"Such things are the most precious that life has to give us," he added

all but didactically.

She had listened once more for a little; then she appeared to give up

the idea of the cab. The reader need hardly be told that at this stage

of her youthful history the right way for her lover to take her wouldn't

have been to picture himself as acting for her highest good. "I like

your calling the feeling with which I inspire you confidence," she

presently said; and the deep note of the few words had something of the

distant mutter of thunder.

"What is it, then, when I offer you everything I have, everything I am,

everything I shall ever be?"

She seemed to measure him as for the possible success of an attempt to

pass him. But she remained where she was. "I'm sorry for you, yes, but

I'm also rather ashamed."

"Ashamed of \_me\_?"

"A brave offer to see me through--that's what I should call confidence.

You say to-day that you hate the theatre--and do you know what has made

you do it? The fact that it has too large a place in your mind to let

you disown it and throw it over with a good conscience. It has a deep

fascination for you, and yet you're not strong enough to do so

enlightened and public a thing as take up with it in my person. You're

ashamed of yourself for that, as all your constant high claims for it

are on record; so you blaspheme against it to try and cover your retreat

and your treachery and straighten out your personal situation. But it

won't do, dear Mr. Sherringham--it won't do at all," Miriam proceeded

with a triumphant, almost judicial lucidity which made her companion

stare; "you haven't the smallest excuse of stupidity, and your

perversity is no excuse whatever. Leave her alone altogether--a poor

girl who's making her way--or else come frankly to help her, to give her

the benefit of your wisdom. Don't lock her up for life under the

pretence of doing her good. What does one most good is to see a little

honesty. You're the best judge, the best critic, the best observer, the

best \_believer\_, that I've ever come across: you're committed to it by

everything you've said to me for a twelvemonth, by the whole turn of

your mind, by the way you've followed us up, all of us, from far back.

If an art's noble and beneficent one shouldn't be afraid to offer it

one's arm. Your cousin isn't: he can make sacrifices."

"My cousin?" Peter amazedly echoed. "Why, wasn't it only the other day

you were throwing his sacrifices in his teeth?"

Under this imputation on her straightness Miriam flinched but for an

instant. "I did that to worry \_you\_," she smiled.

"Why should you wish to worry me if you care so little about me?"

"Care little about you? Haven't I told you often, didn't I tell you

yesterday, how much I care? Ain't I showing it now by spending half the

night here with you--giving myself away to all those cynics--taking all

this trouble to persuade you to hold up your head and have the courage

of your opinions?"

"You invent my opinions for your convenience," said Peter all undaunted.

"As long ago as the night I introduced you, in Paris, to Mademoiselle

Voisin, you accused me of looking down on those who practise your art. I

remember how you came down on me because I didn't take your friend

Dashwood seriously enough. Perhaps I didn't; but if already at that time

I was so wide of the mark you can scarcely accuse me of treachery now."

"I don't remember, but I daresay you're right," Miriam coldly meditated.

"What I accused you of then was probably simply what I reproach you with

now--the germ at least of your deplorable weakness. You consider that we

do awfully valuable work, and yet you wouldn't for the world let people

suppose you really take our side. If your position was even at that time

so false, so much the worse for you, that's all. Oh it's refreshing,"

his formidable friend exclaimed after a pause during which Peter seemed

to himself to taste the full bitterness of despair, so baffled and

cheapened he intimately felt--"oh it's refreshing to see a man burn his

ships in a cause that appeals to him, give up something precious for it

and break with horrid timidities and snobberies! It's the most beautiful

sight in the world."

Poor Peter, sore as he was, and with the cold breath of failure in his

face, nevertheless burst out laughing at this fine irony. "You're

magnificent, you give me at this moment the finest possible illustration

of what you mean by burning one's ships. Verily, verily there's no one

like you: talk of timidity, talk of refreshment! If I had any talent for

it I'd go on the stage to-morrow, so as to spend my life with you the

better."

"If you'll do that I'll be your wife the day after your first

appearance. That would be really respectable," Miriam said.

"Unfortunately I've no talent."

"That would only make it the more respectable."

"You're just like poor Nick," Peter returned--"you've taken to imitating

Gabriel Nash. Don't you see that it's only if it were a question of my

going on the stage myself that there would be a certain fitness in your

contrasting me invidiously with Nick and in my giving up one career for

another? But simply to stand in the wing and hold your shawl and your

smelling-bottle--!" he concluded mournfully, as if he had ceased to

debate.

"Holding my shawl and my smelling-bottle is a mere detail, representing

a very small part of the whole precious service, the protection and

encouragement, for which a woman in my position might be indebted to a

man interested in her work and as accomplished and determined as you

very justly describe yourself."

"And would it be your idea that such a man should live on the money

earned by an exhibition of the person of his still more accomplished and

still more determined wife?"

"Why not if they work together--if there's something of his spirit and

his support in everything she does?" Miriam demanded. "\_Je vous

attendais\_ with the famous 'person'; of course that's the great stick

they beat us with. Yes, we show it for money, those of us who have

anything decent to show, and some no doubt who haven't, which is the

real scandal. What will you have? It's only the envelope of the idea,

it's only our machinery, which ought to be conceded to us; and in

proportion as the idea takes hold of us do we become unconscious of the

clumsy body. Poor old 'person'--if you knew what \_we\_ think of it! If

you don't forget it that's your own affair: it shows you're dense before

the idea."

"That \_I\_'m dense?"--and Peter appealed to their lamplit solitude, the

favouring, intimate night that only witnessed his defeat, as if this

outrage had been all that was wanting.

"I mean the public is--the public who pays us. After all, they expect us

to look at \_them\_ too, who are not half so well worth it. If you should

see some of the creatures who have the face to plant themselves there in

the stalls before one for three mortal hours! I daresay it would be

simpler to have no bodies, but we're all in the same box, and it would

be a great injustice to the idea, and we're all showing ourselves all

the while; only some of us are not worth paying."

"You're extraordinarily droll, but somehow I can't laugh at you," he

said, his handsome face drawn by his pain to a contraction sufficiently

attesting the fact. "Do you remember the second time I ever saw you--the

day you recited at my place?" he abruptly asked; a good deal as if he

were taking from his quiver an arrow which, if it was the last, was also

one of the sharpest.

"Perfectly, and what an idiot I was, though it was only yesterday!"

"You expressed to me then a deep detestation of the sort of

self-exposure to which the profession you were taking up would commit

you. If you compared yourself to a contortionist at a country fair I'm

only taking my cue from you."

"I don't know what I may have said then," replied Miriam, whose steady

flight was not arrested by this ineffectual bolt; "I was no doubt

already wonderful for talking of things I know nothing about. I was only

on the brink of the stream and I perhaps thought the water colder than

it is. One warms it a bit one's self when once one's in. Of course I'm a

contortionist and of course there's a hateful side, but don't you see

how that very fact puts a price on every compensation, on the help of

those who are ready to insist on the \_other\_ side, the grand one, and

especially on the sympathy of the person who's ready to insist most and

to keep before us the great thing, the element that makes up for

everything?"

"The element--?" Peter questioned with a vagueness that was pardonably

exaggerated. "Do you mean your success?"

"I mean what you've so often been eloquent about," she returned with an

indulgent shrug--"the way we simply stir people's souls. Ah there's

where life can help us," she broke out with a change of tone, "there's

where human relations and affections can help us; love and faith and joy

and suffering and experience--I don't know what to call 'em! They

suggest things, they light them up and sanctify them, as you may say;

they make them appear worth doing." She became radiant a while, as if

with a splendid vision; then melting into still another accent, which

seemed all nature and harmony and charity, she proceeded: "I must tell

you that in the matter of what we can do for each other I have a

tremendously high ideal. I go in for closeness of union, for identity of

interest. A true marriage, as they call it, must do one a lot of good!"

He stood there looking at her for a time during which her eyes

sustained his penetration without a relenting gleam, some lapse of

cruelty or of paradox. But with a passionate, inarticulate sound he

turned away, to remain, on the edge of the window, his hands in his

pockets, gazing defeatedly, doggedly, into the featureless night, into

the little black garden which had nothing to give him but a familiar

smell of damp. The warm darkness had no relief for him, and Miriam's

histrionic hardness flung him back against a fifth-rate world, against a

bedimmed, star-punctured nature which had no consolation--the bleared,

irresponsive eyes of the London firmament. For the brief space of his

glaring at these things he dumbly and helplessly raged. What he wanted

was something that was not in \_that\_ thick prospect. What was the

meaning of this sudden, offensive importunity of "art," this senseless,

mocking catch, like some irritating chorus of conspirators in a bad

opera, in which her voice was so incongruously conjoined with Nick's and

in which Biddy's sweet little pipe had not scrupled still more

bewilderingly to mingle? Art might yield to damnation: what commission

after all had he ever given it to better him or bother him? If the

pointless groan in which Peter exhaled a part of his humiliation had

been translated into words, these words would have been as heavily

charged with a genuine British mistrust of the uncanny principle as if

the poor fellow speaking them had never quitted his island. Several

acquired perceptions had struck a deep root in him, but an immemorial,

compact formation lay deeper still. He tried at the present hour to rest

on it spiritually, but found it inelastic; and at the very moment when

most conscious of this absence of the rebound or of any tolerable ease

he felt his vision solicited by an object which, as he immediately

guessed, could only add to the complication of things.

An undefined shape hovered before him in the garden, halfway between the

gate and the house; it remained outside of the broad shaft of lamplight

projected from the window. It wavered for a moment after it had become

aware of his observation and then whisked round the corner of the lodge.

This characteristic movement so effectually dispelled the mystery--it

could only be Mrs. Rooth who resorted to such conspicuous

secrecies--that, to feel the game up and his interview over, he had no

need to see the figure reappear on second thoughts and dodge about in

the dusk with a sportive, vexatious vagueness. Evidently Miriam's

warning of a few minutes before had been founded: a cab had deposited

her anxious mother at the garden door. Mrs. Rooth had entered with

precautions; she had approached the house and retreated; she had effaced

herself--had peered and waited and listened. Maternal solicitude and

muddled calculations had drawn her from a feast as yet too imperfectly

commemorative. The heroine of the occasion of course had been

intolerably missed, so that the old woman had both obliged the company

and quieted her own nerves by jumping insistently into a hansom and

rattling up to Saint John's Wood to reclaim the absentee. But if she had

wished to be in time she had also desired not to be impertinent, and

would have been still more embarrassed to say what she aspired to

promote than to phrase what she had proposed to hinder. She wanted to

abstain tastefully, to interfere felicitously, and, more generally and

justifiably--the small hours having come--to see what her young charges

were "up to." She would probably have gathered that they were

quarrelling, and she appeared now to be motioning to Peter to know if it

were over. He took no notice of her signals, if signals they were; he

only felt that before he made way for the poor, odious lady there was

one small spark he might strike from Miriam's flint.

Without letting her guess that her mother was on the premises he turned

again to his companion, half-expecting she would have taken her chance

to regard their discussion as more than terminated and by the other

egress flit away from him in silence. But she was still there; she was

in the act of approaching him with a manifest intention of kindness, and

she looked indeed, to his surprise, like an angel of mercy.

"Don't let us part so harshly," she said--"with your trying to make me

feel as if I were merely disobliging. It's no use talking--we only hurt

each other. Let us hold our tongues like decent people and go about our

business. It isn't as if you hadn't any cure--when you've such a capital

one. Try it, try it, my dear friend--you'll see! I wish you the highest

promotion and the quickest--every success and every reward. When you've

got them all, some day, and I've become a great swell too, we'll meet on

that solid basis and you'll be glad I've been dreadful now."

"Surely before I leave you I've a right to ask you this," he answered,

holding fast in both his own the cool hand of farewell she had chosen

finally to torment him with. "Are you ready to follow up by a definite

promise your implied assurance that I've a remedy?"

"A definite promise?" Miriam benignly gazed--it was the perfection of

indirectness. "I don't 'imply' that you've a remedy. I declare it on the

house-tops. That delightful girl--"

"I'm not talking of any delightful girl but you!" he broke in with a

voice that, as he afterwards learned, struck Mrs. Rooth's ears in the

garden with affright. "I simply hold you, under pain of being convicted

of the grossest prevarication, to the strict sense of what you said ten

minutes ago."

"Ah I've said so many things! One has to do that to get rid of you. You

rather hurt my hand," she added--and jerked it away in a manner showing

that if she was an angel of mercy her mercy was partly for herself.

"As I understand you, then, I may have some hope if I do renounce my

profession?" Peter pursued. "If I break with everything, my prospects,

my studies, my training, my emoluments, my past and my future, the

service of my country and the ambition of my life, and engage to take up

instead the business of watching your interests so far as I may learn

how and ministering to your triumphs so far as may in me lie--if after

further reflexion I decide to go through these preliminaries, have I

your word that I may definitely look to you to reward me with your

precious hand?"

"I don't think you've any right to put the question to me now," she

returned with a promptitude partly produced perhaps by the clear-cut

form his solemn speech had given--there was a charm in the sound of

it--to each item of his enumeration. "The case is so very contingent, so

dependent on what you ingeniously call your further reflexion. While you

really reserve everything you ask me to commit myself. If it's a

question of further reflexion why did you drag me up here? And then,"

she added, "I'm so far from wishing you to take any such monstrous

step."

"Monstrous you call it? Just now you said it would be sublime."

"Sublime if it's done with spontaneity, with passion; ridiculous if it's

done 'after further reflexion.' As you said, perfectly, a while ago, it

isn't a thing to reason about."

"Ah what a help you'd be to me in diplomacy!" Peter yearningly cried.

"Will you give me a year to consider?"

"Would you trust \_me\_ for a year?"

"Why not, if I'm ready to trust you for life?"

"Oh I shouldn't be free then, worse luck. And how much you seem to take

for granted one must like you!"

"Remember," he could immediately say, "that you've made a great point of

your liking me. Wouldn't you do so still more if I were heroic?"

She showed him, for all her high impatience now, the interest of a long

look. "I think I should pity you in such a cause. Give it all to \_her\_;

don't throw away a real happiness!"

"Ah you can't back out of your position with a few vague and even rather

impertinent words!" Peter protested. "You accuse me of swallowing my

opinions, but you swallow your pledges. You've painted in heavenly

colours the sacrifice I'm talking of, and now you must take the

consequences."

"The consequences?"

"Why my coming back in a year to square you."

"Ah you're a bore!"--she let him have it at last. "Come back when you

like. I don't wonder you've grown desperate, but fancy \_me\_ then!" she

added as she looked past him at a new interlocutor.

"Yes, but if he'll square you!" Peter heard Mrs. Rooth's voice respond

all persuasively behind him. She had stolen up to the window now, had

passed the threshold, was in the room, but her daughter had not been

startled. "What is it he wants to do, dear?" she continued to Miriam.

"To induce me to marry him if he'll go upon the stage. He'll practise

over there--where he's going--and then come back and appear. Isn't it

too dreadful? Talk him out of it, stay with him, soothe him!" the girl

hurried on. "You'll find some drinks and some biscuits in the

cupboard--keep him with you, pacify him, give him \_his\_ little supper.

Meanwhile I'll go to mine; I'll take the brougham; don't follow!"

With which words Miriam bounded into the garden, her white drapery

shining for an instant in the darkness before she disappeared. Peter

looked about him to pick up his hat, but while he did so heard the bang

of the gate and the quick carriage get into motion. Mrs. Rooth appeared

to sway violently and in opposed directions: that of the impulse to rush

after Miriam and that of the extraordinary possibility to which the

young lady had alluded. She was in doubt, yet at a venture, detaining

him with a maternal touch, she twinkled up at their visitor like an

insinuating glow-worm. "I'm so glad you came."

"I'm not. I've got nothing by it," Peter said as he found his hat.

"Oh it was so beautiful!" she declared.

"The play--yes, wonderful. I'm afraid it's too late for me to avail

myself of the privilege your daughter offers me. Good-night."

"Ah it's a pity; won't you take \_anything\_?" asked Mrs. Rooth. "When I

heard your voice so high I was scared and hung back." But before he

could reply she added: "Are you really thinking of the stage?"

"It comes to the same thing."

"Do you mean you've proposed?"

"Oh unmistakably."

"And what does she say?"

"Why you heard: she says I'm an ass."

"Ah the little wretch!" laughed Mrs. Rooth. "Leave her to me. I'll help

you. But you are mad. Give up nothing--least of all your advantages."

"I won't give up your daughter," said Peter, reflecting that if this was

cheap it was at any rate good enough for Mrs. Rooth. He mended it a

little indeed by adding darkly: "But you can't make her take me."

"I can prevent her taking any one else."

"Oh \_can\_ you?" Peter cried with more scepticism than ceremony.

"You'll see--you'll see." He passed into the garden, but, after she had

blown out the candles and drawn the window to, Mrs. Rooth went with him.

"All you've got to do is to be yourself--to be true to your fine

position," she explained as they proceeded. "Trust me with the

rest--trust me and be quiet."

"How can one be quiet after this magnificent evening?"

"Yes, but it's just that!" panted the eager old woman. "It has launched

her so on this sea of dangers that to make up for the loss of the old

security (don't you know?) we must take a still firmer hold."

"Aye, of what?" Peter asked as Mrs. Rooth's comfort became vague while

she stopped with him at the garden door.

"Ah you know: of the \_real\_ life, of the true anchor!" Her hansom was

waiting for her and she added: "I kept it, you see; but a little

extravagance on the night one's fortune has come!--"

Peter stared. Yes, there were people whose fortune had come; but he

managed to stammer: "Are you following her again?"

"For you--for you!" And she clambered into the vehicle. From the seat,

enticingly, she offered him the place beside her. "Won't you come too? I

know he invited you." Peter declined with a quick gesture and as he

turned away he heard her call after him, to cheer him on his lonely

walk: "I shall keep this up; I shall never lose sight of her!"

BOOK EIGHTH

XLVII

When Mrs. Dallow returned to London just before London broke up the fact

was immediately known in Calcutta Gardens and was promptly communicated

to Nick Dormer by his sister Bridget. He had learnt it in no other

way--he had had no correspondence with Julia during her absence. He

gathered that his mother and sisters were not ignorant of her

whereabouts--he never mentioned her name to them--but as to this he was

not sure if the source of their information had been the \_Morning Post\_

or a casual letter received by the inscrutable Biddy. He knew Biddy had

some epistolary commerce with Julia; he had an impression Grace

occasionally exchanged letters with Mrs. Gresham. Biddy, however, who,

as he was also well aware, was always studying what he would like,

forbore to talk to him about the absent mistress of Harsh beyond once

dropping the remark that she had gone from Florence to Venice and was

enjoying gondolas and sunsets too much to leave them. Nick's comment on

this was that she was a happy woman to have such a go at Titian and

Tintoret: as he spoke, and for some time afterwards, the sense of how he

himself should enjoy a like "go" made him ache with ineffectual longing.

He had forbidden himself at the present to think of absence, not only

because it would be inconvenient and expensive, but because it would be

a kind of retreat from the enemy, a concession to difficulty. The enemy

was no particular person and no particular body of persons: not his

mother; not Mr. Carteret, who, as he heard from the doctor at Beauclere,

lingered on, sinking and sinking till his vitality appeared to have the

vertical depth of a gold-mine; not his pacified constituents, who had

found a healthy diversion in returning another Liberal wholly without

Mrs. Dallow's aid (she had not participated even to the extent of a

responsive telegram in the election); not his late colleagues in the

House, nor the biting satirists of the newspapers, nor the brilliant

women he took down at dinner-parties--there was only one sense in which

he ever took them down; not in short his friends, his foes, his private

thoughts, the periodical phantom of his shocked father: the enemy was

simply the general awkwardness of his situation. This awkwardness was

connected with the sense of responsibility so greatly deprecated by

Gabriel Nash, Gabriel who had ceased to roam of late on purpose to miss

as few scenes as possible of the drama, rapidly growing dull alas, of

his friend's destiny; but that compromising relation scarcely drew the

soreness from it. The public flurry produced by his collapse had only

been large enough to mark the flatness of our young man's position when

it was over. To have had a few jokes cracked audibly at your expense

wasn't an ordeal worth talking of; the hardest thing about it was merely

that there had not been enough of them to yield a proportion of good

ones. Nick had felt in fine the benefit of living in an age and in a

society where number and pressure have, for the individual figure,

especially when it's a zero, compensations almost equal to their

cruelties.

No, the pinch for his conscience after a few weeks had passed was simply

an acute mistrust of the superficiality of performance into which the

desire to justify himself might hurry him. That desire was passionate

as regards Julia Dallow; it was ardent also as regards his mother; and,

to make it absolutely uncomfortable, it was complicated with the

conviction that neither of them would know his justification even when

she should see it. They probably couldn't know it if they would, and

very certainly wouldn't if they could. He assured himself, however, that

this limitation wouldn't matter; it was their affair--his own was simply

to have the right sort of thing to show. The work he was now attempting

wasn't the right sort of thing, though doubtless Julia, for instance,

would dislike it almost as much as if it were. The two portraits of

Miriam, after the first exhilaration of his finding himself at large,

filled him with no private glee; they were not in the direction in which

he wished for the present really to move. There were moments when he

felt almost angry, though of course he held his tongue, when by the few

persons who saw them they were pronounced wonderfully clever. That they

were wonderfully clever was just the detestable thing in them, so active

had that cleverness been in making them seem better than they were.

There were people to whom he would have been ashamed to show them, and

these were the people whom it would give him most pleasure some day to

please. Not only had he many an hour of disgust at his actual work, but

he thought he saw as in an ugly revelation that nature had cursed him

with an odious facility and that the lesson of his life, the sternest

and wholesomest, would be to keep out of the trap it had laid for him.

He had fallen into this trap on the threshold and had only scrambled out

with his honour. He had a talent for appearance, and that was the fatal

thing; he had a damnable suppleness and a gift of immediate response, a

readiness to oblige, that made him seem to take up causes which he

really left lying, enabled him to learn enough about them in an hour to

have all the air of having converted them to his use. Many people used

them--that was the only thing to be said--who had taken them in much

less. He was at all events too clever by half, since this pernicious

overflow had wrecked most of his attempts. He had assumed a virtue and

enjoyed assuming it, and the assumption had cheated his father and his

mother and his affianced wife and his rich benefactor and the candid

burgesses of Harsh and the cynical reporters of the newspapers. His

enthusiasms had been but young curiosity, his speeches had been young

agility, his professions and adhesions had been like postage-stamps

without glue: the head was all right, but they wouldn't stick. He stood

ready now to wring the neck of the irrepressible vice that certainly

would tend to nothing so much as to get him into further trouble. His

only real justification would be to turn patience--his own of

course--inside out; yet if there should be a way to misread that recipe

his humbugging genius could be trusted infallibly to discover it. Cheap

and easy results would dangle before him, little amateurish

conspicuities at exhibitions helped by his history; putting it in his

power to triumph with a quick "What do you say to that?" over those he

had wounded. The fear of this danger was corrosive; it poisoned even

lawful joys. If he should have a striking picture at the Academy next

year it wouldn't be a crime; yet he couldn't help suspecting any

conditions that would enable him to be striking so soon. In this way he

felt quite enough how Gabriel Nash had "had" him whenever railing at his

fever for proof, and how inferior as a productive force the desire to

win over the ill-disposed might be to the principle of quiet growth.

Nash had a foreign manner of lifting up his finger and waving it before

him, as if to put an end to everything, whenever it became, in

conversation or discussion, to any extent a question whether any one

would "like" anything.

It was presumably in some degree at least a due respect for the

principle of quiet growth that kept Nick on the spot at present, made

him stick fast to Rosedale Road and Calcutta Gardens and deny himself

the simplifications of absence. Do what he would he couldn't despoil

himself of the impression that the disagreeable was somehow connected

with the salutary, and the "quiet" with the disagreeable, when

stubbornly borne; so he resisted a hundred impulses to run away to Paris

or to Florence, coarse forms of the temptation to persuade himself by

material motion that he was launched. He stayed in London because it

seemed to him he was there more conscious of what he had undertaken, and

he had a horror of shirking the consciousness. One element in it indeed

was his noting how little convenience he could have found in a foreign

journey even had his judgement approved such a subterfuge. The stoppage

of his supplies from Beauclere had now become an historic fact, with

something of the majesty of its class about it: he had had time to see

what a difference this would make in his life. His means were small and

he had several old debts, the number of which, as he believed, loomed

large to his mother's imagination. He could never tell her she

exaggerated, because he told her nothing of that sort in these days:

they had no intimate talk, for an impenetrable partition, a tall,

bristling hedge of untrimmed misconceptions, had sprung up between them.

Poor Biddy had made a hole in it through which she squeezed from side to

side, to keep up communications, at the cost of many rents and

scratches; but Lady Agnes walked straight and stiff, never turning her

head, never stopping to pluck the least little daisy of consolation. It

was in this manner she wished to signify that she had accepted her

wrongs. She draped herself in them as in a Roman mantle and had never

looked so proud and wasted and handsome as now that her eyes rested only

on ruins.

Nick was extremely sorry for her, though he marked as a dreadful want of

grace her never setting a foot in Rosedale Road--she mentioned his

studio no more than if it had been a private gambling-house or something

worse; sorry because he was well aware that for the hour everything must

appear to her to have crumbled. The luxury of Broadwood would have to

crumble: his mind was very clear about that. Biddy's prospects had

withered to the finest, dreariest dust, and Biddy indeed, taking a

lesson from her brother's perversities, seemed little disposed to better

a bad business. She professed the most peace-making sentiments, but when

it came really to doing something to brighten up the scene she showed

herself portentously corrupt. After Peter Sherringham's heartless flight

she had wantonly slighted an excellent opportunity to repair her

misfortune. Lady Agnes had reason to infer, about the end of June, that

young Mr. Grindon, the only son--the other children being girls--of an

immensely rich industrial and political baronet in the north, was

literally waiting for the faintest sign. This reason she promptly

imparted to her younger daughter, whose intelligence had to take it in

but who had shown it no other consideration. Biddy had set her charming

face as a stone; she would have nothing to do with signs, and she,

practically speaking, wilfully, wickedly refused a magnificent offer, so

that the young man carried his high expectations elsewhere. How much in

earnest he had been was proved by the fact that before Goodwood had come

and gone he was captured by Lady Muriel Macpherson. It was superfluous

to insist on the frantic determination to get married written on such an

accident as that. Nick knew of this episode only through Grace, and he

deplored its having occurred in the midst of other disasters.

He knew or he suspected something more as well--something about his

brother Percival which, should it come to light, no phase of their

common history would be genial enough to gloss over. It had usually been

supposed that Percy's store of comfort against the ills of life was

confined to the infallibility of his rifle. He was not sensitive, and

his use of that weapon represented a resource against which common

visitations might have spent themselves. It had suddenly come to Nick's

ears, however, that he cultivated a concurrent support in the person of

a robust countrywoman, housed in an ivied corner of Warwickshire, in

whom he had long been interested and whom, without any flourish of

magnanimity, he had ended by making his wife. The situation of the

latest born of the pledges of this affection, a blooming boy--there had

been two or three previously--was therefore perfectly regular and of a

nature to make a difference in the worldly position, as the phrase ran,

of his moneyless uncle. If there be degrees in the absolute and Percy

had an heir--others, moreover, supposedly following--Nick would have to

regard himself as still more moneyless than before. His brother's last

step was doubtless, given the case, to be commended; but such

discoveries were enlivening only when made in other families, and Lady

Agnes would scarcely enjoy learning to what tune she had become a

grandmother.

Nick forbore from delicacy to intimate to Biddy that he thought it a

pity she couldn't care for Mr. Grindon; but he had a private sense that

if she had been capable of such a feat it would have lightened a little

the weight he himself had to carry. He bore her a slight grudge, which

lasted till Julia Dallow came back; when the circumstance of the girl's

being summoned immediately down to Harsh created a diversion that was

perhaps after all only fanciful. Biddy, as we know, entertained a

theory, which Nick had found occasion to combat, that Mrs. Dallow had

not treated him perfectly well; therefore in going to Harsh the very

first time that relative held out a hand to her so jealous a little

sister must have recognised a special inducement. The inducement might

have been that the relative had comfort for her, that she was acting by

her cousin's direct advice, that they were still in close communion on

the question of the offers Biddy was not to accept, that in short

Peter's sister had taken upon herself to see that their young friend

should remain free for the day of the fugitive's inevitable return. Once

or twice indeed Nick wondered if Julia had herself been visited, in a

larger sense, by the thought of retracing her steps--if she wished to

draw out her young friend's opinion as to how she might do that

gracefully. During the few days she was in town Nick had seen her twice

in Great Stanhope Street, but neither time alone. She had said to him on

one of these occasions in her odd, explosive way: "I should have thought

you'd have gone away somewhere--it must be such a bore." Of course she

firmly believed he was staying for Miriam, which he really was not; and

probably she had written this false impression off to Peter, who, still

more probably, would prefer to regard it as just. Nick was staying for

Miriam only in the sense that he should very glad of the money he might

receive for the portrait he was engaged in painting. That money would be

a great convenience to him in spite of the obstructive ground Miriam had

taken in pretending--she had blown half a gale about it--that he had

had no right to dispose of such a production without her consent. His

answer to this was simply that the purchaser was so little of a stranger

that it didn't go, so to speak, out of the family, out of hers. It

didn't matter, Miriam's retort that if Mr. Sherringham had formerly been

no stranger he was utterly one now, so that nothing would ever less

delight him than to see her hated image on his wall. He would back out

of the bargain and Nick be left with the picture on his hands. Nick

jeered at this shallow theory and when she came to sit the question

served as well as another to sprinkle their familiar silences with

chaff. He already knew something, as we have seen, of the conditions in

which his distracted kinsman had left England; and this connected

itself, in casual meditation, with some of the calculations imputable to

Julia and to Biddy. There had naturally been a sequel to the queer

behaviour perceptible in Peter, at the theatre, on the eve of his

departure--a sequel lighted by a word of Miriam's in the course of her

first sitting to Nick after her great night. "Fancy"--so this

observation ran--"fancy the dear man finding time in the press of all

his last duties to ask me to marry him!"

"He told me you had found time in the press of all yours to say you

would," Nick replied. And this was pretty much all that had passed on

the subject between them--save of course her immediately making clear

that Peter had grossly misinformed him. What had happened was that she

had said she would do nothing of the sort. She professed a desire not to

be confronted again with this obnoxious theme, and Nick easily fell in

with it--quite from his own settled inclination not to handle that kind

of subject with her. If Julia had false ideas about him, and if Peter

had them too, his part of the business was to take the simplest course

to establish the falsity. There were difficulties indeed attached even

to the simplest course, but there would be a difficulty the less if one

should forbear to meddle in promiscuous talk with the general,

suggestive topic of intimate unions. It is certain that in these days

Nick cultivated the practice of forbearances for which he didn't

receive, for which perhaps he never would receive, due credit.

He had been convinced for some time that one of the next things he

should hear would be that Julia Dallow had arranged to marry either Mr.

Macgeorge or some other master of multitudes. He could think of that

now, he found--think of it with resignation even when Julia, before his

eyes, looked so handsomely forgetful that her appearance had to be taken

as referring still more to their original intimacy than to his

comparatively superficial offence. What made this accomplishment of his

own remarkable was that there was something else he thought of quite as

much--the fact that he had only to see her again to feel by how great a

charm she had in the old days taken possession of him. This charm

operated apparently in a very direct, primitive way: her presence

diffused it and fully established it, but her absence left comparatively

little of it behind. It dwelt in the very facts of her person--it was

something she happened physically to be; yet--considering that the

question was of something very like loveliness--its envelope of

associations, of memories and recurrences, had no great destiny. She

packed it up and took it away with her quite as if she had been a woman

who had come to sell a set of laces. The laces were as wonderful as ever

when taken out of the box, but to admire again their rarity you had to

send for the woman. What was above all remarkable for our young man was

that Miriam Rooth fetched a fellow, vulgarly speaking, very much less

than Julia at the times when, being on the spot, Julia did fetch. He

could paint Miriam day after day without any agitating blur of vision;

in fact the more he saw of her the clearer grew the atmosphere through

which she blazed, the more her richness became one with that of the

flowering work. There are reciprocities and special sympathies in such a

relation; mysterious affinities they used to be called, divinations of

private congruity. Nick had an unexpressed conviction that if, according

to his defeated desire, he had embarked with Mrs. Dallow in this

particular quest of a great prize, disaster would have overtaken them on

the deep waters. Even with the limited risk indeed disaster had come;

but it was of a different kind and it had the advantage for him that now

she couldn't reproach and denounce him as the cause of it--couldn't do

so at least on any ground he was obliged to recognise. She would never

know how much he had cared for her, how much he cared for her still;

inasmuch as the conclusive proof for himself was his conscious

reluctance to care for another woman--evidence she positively misread.

Some day he would doubtless try to do that; but such a day seemed as yet

far off, and he had meanwhile no spite, no vindictive impulse, to help

him. The soreness that mingled with his liberation, the sense of

indignity even, as of a full cup suddenly dashed by a blundering hand

from his lips, demanded certainly a balm; but it found the balm, for the

time, in another passion, not in a rancorous exercise of the same--a

passion strong enough to make him forget what a pity it was he was not

so formed as to care for two women at once.

As soon as Julia returned to England he broke ground to his mother on

the subject of her making the mistress of Broadwood understand that she

and the girls now regarded their occupancy of that estate as absolutely

over. He had already, several weeks before, picked a little at the arid

tract of that indicated surrender, but in the interval the soil appeared

to have formed again to a considerable thickness. It was disagreeable to

him to call his parent's attention to the becoming course, and

especially disagreeable to have to emphasise it and discuss it and

perhaps clamour for it. He would have liked the whole business to be

tacit--a little triumph of silent delicacy. But he found reasons to

suspect that what in fact would be most tacit was Julia's certain

endurance of any chance failure of that charm. Lady Agnes had a theory

that they had virtually--"practically" as she said--given up the place,

so that there was no need of making a splash about it; but Nick

discovered in the course of an exploration of Biddy's view more rigorous

perhaps than any to which he had ever subjected her, that none of their

property had been removed from the delightful house--none of the things

(there were ever so many things) heavily planted there when their mother

took possession. Lady Agnes was the proprietor of innumerable articles

of furniture, relics and survivals of her former greatness, and moved

about the world with a train of heterogeneous baggage; so that her quiet

overflow into the spaciousness of Broadwood had had all the luxury of a

final subsidence. What Nick had to propose to her now was a dreadful

combination, a relapse into the conditions she most hated--seaside

lodgings, bald storehouses in the Marylebone Road, little London rooms

crammed with objects that caught the dirt and made them stuffy. He was

afraid he should really finish her, and he himself was surprised in a

degree at his insistence. He wouldn't have supposed he should have cared

so much, but he found he did care intensely. He cared enough--it says

everything--to explain to his mother that her retention of Broadwood

would show "practically" (since that was her great word) for the

violation of an agreement. Julia had given them the place on the

understanding that he was to marry her, and once he was definitely not

to marry her they had no right to keep the place. "Yes, you make the

mess and \_we\_ pay the penalty!" the poor lady flashed out; but this was

the only overt protest she made--except indeed to contend that their

withdrawal would be an act ungracious and offensive to Julia. She looked

as she had looked during the months that succeeded his father's death,

but she gave a general, a final grim assent to the proposition that, let

their kinswoman take it as she would, their own duty was unmistakably

clear.

It was Grace who was principal representative of the idea that Julia

would be outraged by such a step; she never ceased to repeat that she

had never heard of anything so "nasty." Nick would have expected this of

Grace, but he felt rather bereft and betrayed when Biddy murmured to him

that \_she\_ knew--that there was really no need of their sacrificing

their mother's comfort to an extravagant scruple. She intimated that if

Nick would only consent to their going on with Broadwood as if nothing

had happened--or rather as if everything had happened--she would answer

for the feelings of the owner. For almost the first time in his life

Nick disliked what Biddy said to him, and he gave her a sharp rejoinder,

a taste of the general opinion that they all had enough to do to answer

for themselves. He remembered afterwards the way she looked at

him--startled, even frightened and with rising tears--before turning

away. He held that they should judge better how Julia would take it

after they had thrown up the place; and he made it his duty to arrange

that his mother should formally advise her, by letter, of their

intending to depart at once. Julia could then protest to her heart's

content. Nick was aware that for the most part he didn't pass for

practical; he could imagine why, from his early years, people should

have joked him about it. But this time he was determined to rest on a

rigid view of things as they were. He didn't sec his mother's letter,

but he knew that it went. He felt she would have been more loyal if she

had shown it to him, though of course there could be but little question

of loyalty now. That it had really been written, however, very much on

the lines he dictated was clear to him from the subsequent surprise

which Lady Agnes's blankness didn't prevent his divining.

Julia acknowledged the offered news, but in unexpected terms: she had

apparently neither resisted nor protested; she had simply been very glad

to get her house back again and had not accused any of them of

nastiness. Nick saw no more of her letter than he had seen of his

mother's, but he was able to say to Grace--to their parent he was

studiously mute--"My poor child, you see after all that we haven't

kicked up such a row." Grace shook her head and looked gloomy and deeply

wise, replying that he had no cause to triumph--they were so far from

having seen the end of it yet. Thus he guessed that his mother had

complied with his wish on the calculation that it would be a mere form,

that Julia would entreat them not to be so fantastic and that he himself

would then, in the presence of her wounded surprise, consent to a quiet

continuance, so much in the interest--the air of Broadwood had a

purity!--of the health of all of them. But since Julia jumped at their

sacrifice he had no chance to be mollified: he had all grossly to

persist in having been right.

At bottom probably he was a little surprised at Julia's so prompt

assent. Literally speaking, it was not perfectly graceful. He was sorry

his mother had been so deceived, but was sorrier still for Biddy's

mistake--it showed she might be mistaken about other things. Nothing was

left now but for Lady Agnes to say, as she did substantially whenever

she saw him: "We're to prepare to spend the autumn at Worthing then or

some other horrible place? I don't know their names: it's the only thing

we can afford." There was an implication in this that if he expected her

to drag her girls about to country-houses in a continuance of the

fidgety effort to work them off he must understand at once that she was

now too weary and too sad and too sick. She had done her best for them

and it had all been vain and cruel--now therefore the poor creatures

must look out for themselves. To the grossness of Biddy's misconduct she

needn't refer, nor to the golden opportunity that young woman had

forfeited by her odious treatment of Mr. Grindon. It was clear that this

time Lady Agnes was incurably discouraged; so much so as to fail to

glean the dimmest light from the fact that the girl was really making a

long stay at Harsh. Biddy went to and fro two or three times and then in

August fairly settled there; and what her mother mainly saw in her

absence was the desire to keep out of the way of household reminders of

her depravity. In fact, as turned out, Lady Agnes and Grace gathered

themselves together in the first days of that month for another visit to

the very old lady who had been Sir Nicholas's godmother; after which

they went somewhere else--so that the question of Worthing had not

immediately to be faced.

Nick stayed on in London with the obsession of work humming in his ears;

he was joyfully conscious that for three or four months, in the empty

Babylon, he would have ample stores of time. But toward the end of

August he got a letter from Grace in which she spoke of her situation

and of her mother's in a manner that seemed to impose on him the doing

of something tactful. They were paying a third visit--he knew that in

Calcutta Gardens lady's-maids had been to and fro with boxes,

replenishments of wardrobes--and yet somehow the outlook for the autumn

was dark. Grace didn't say it in so many words, but what he read between

the lines was that they had no more invitations. What, therefore, in

pity's name was to become of them? People liked them well enough when

Biddy was with them, but they didn't care for her mother and her, that

prospect \_tout pur\_, and Biddy was cooped up indefinitely with Julia.

This was not the manner in which Grace had anciently alluded to her

sister's happy visits at Harsh, and the change of tone made Nick wince

with a sense of all that had collapsed. Biddy was a little fish worth

landing in short, scantly as she seemed disposed to bite, and Grace's

rude probity could admit that she herself was not.

Nick had an inspiration: by way of doing something tactful he went down

to Brighton and took lodgings, for several weeks, in the general

interest, the very quietest and sunniest he could find. This he intended

as a kindly surprise, a reminder of how he had his mother's and sisters'

comfort at heart, how he could exert himself and save them trouble. But

he had no sooner concluded his bargain--it was a more costly one than he

had at first calculated--than he was bewildered and befogged to learn

that the persons on whose behalf he had so exerted himself were to pass

the autumn at Broadwood with Julia. That daughter of privilege had taken

the place into familiar use again and was now correcting their former

surprise at her crude indifference--this was infinitely characteristic

of Julia--by inviting them to share it with her. Nick wondered vaguely

what she was "up to"; but when his mother treated herself to the line

irony of addressing him an elaborately humble request for his consent to

their accepting the merciful refuge--she repeated this expression three

times--he replied that she might do exactly as she liked: he would only

mention that he shouldn't feel himself at liberty to come and see her

there. This condition proved apparently to Lady Agnes's mind no

hindrance, and she and her daughters were presently reinstated in the

very apartments they had learned so to love. This time in fact it was

even better than before--they had still fewer expenses. The expenses

were Nick's: he had to pay a forfeit to the landlady at Brighton for

backing out of his contract. He said nothing to his mother about that

bungled business--he was literally afraid; but a sad event just then

reminded him afresh how little it was the moment for squandering money.

Mr. Carteret drew his last breath; quite painlessly it seemed, as the

closing scene was described at Beauclere when the young man went down to

the funeral. Two or three weeks later the contents of his will were made

public in the \_Illustrated London News\_, where it definitely appeared

that he left a very large fortune, not a penny of which was to go to

Nick. The provision for Mr. Chayter's declining years was remarkably

handsome.

XLVIII

Miriam had mounted at a bound, in her new part, several steps in the

ladder of fame, and at the climax of the London season this fact was

brought home to her from hour to hour. It produced a thousand

solicitations and entanglements, and she rapidly learned that to be

celebrated takes up almost as much of one's own time as of other

people's. Even though, as she boasted, she had reduced to a science the

practice of "working" her mother--she made use of the good lady socially

to the utmost, pushing her perpetually into the breach--there was many a

juncture at which it was clear that she couldn't too much disoblige

without hurting her cause. She made almost an income out of the

photographers--their appreciation of her as a subject knew no

bounds--and she supplied the newspapers with columns of characteristic

copy. To the gentlemen who sought speech of her on behalf of these

organs she poured forth, vindictively, floods of unscrupulous romance;

she told them all different tales, and, as her mother told them others

more marvellous yet, publicity was cleverly caught by rival versions,

which surpassed each other in authenticity. The whole case was

remarkable, was unique; for if the girl was advertised by the

bewilderment of her readers she seemed to every sceptic, on his going to

see her, as fine as if he had discovered her for himself. She was still

accommodating enough, however, from time to time, to find an hour to

come and sit to Nick Dormer, and he helped himself further by going to

her theatre whenever he could. He was conscious Julia Dallow would

probably hear of this and triumph with a fresh sense of how right she

had been; but the reflexion only made him sigh resignedly, so true it

struck him as being that there are some things explanation can never

better, can never touch.

Miriam brought Basil Dashwood once to see her portrait, and Basil, who

commended it in general, directed his criticism mainly to two

points--its not yet being finished and its not having gone into that

year's Academy. The young actor audibly panted; he felt the short breath

of Miriam's rapidity, the quick beat of her success, and, looking at

everything now from the standpoint of that speculation, could scarcely

contain his impatience at the painter's clumsy slowness. He thought the

latter's second attempt much better than his first, but somehow it ought

by that time to be shining in the eye of the public. He put it to their

friend with an air of acuteness--he had those felicities--that in every

great crisis there is nothing like striking while the iron is hot. He

even betrayed the conviction that by putting on a spurt Nick might wind

up the job and still get the Academy people to take him in. Basil knew

some of them; he all but offered to speak to them--the case was so

exceptional; he had no doubt he could get something done. Against the

appropriation of the work by Peter Sherringham he explicitly and loudly

protested, in spite of the homeliest recommendations of silence from

Miriam; and it was indeed easy to guess how such an arrangement would

interfere with his own conception of the eventual right place for the

two portraits--the vestibule of the theatre, where every one going in

and out would see them suspended face to face and surrounded by

photographs, artistically disposed, of the young actress in a variety of

characters. Dashwood showed superiority in his jump to the contention

that so exhibited the pictures would really help to draw. Considering

the virtue he attributed to Miriam the idea was exempt from narrow

prejudice.

Moreover, though a trifle feverish, he was really genial; he repeated

more than once, "Yes, my dear sir, you've done it this time." This was a

favourite formula with him; when some allusion was made to the girl's

success he greeted it also with a comfortable "This time she \_has\_ done

it." There was ever a hint of fine judgement and far calculation in his

tone. It appeared before he went that this time even he himself had done

it--he had taken up something that would really answer. He told Nick

more about Miriam, more certainly about her outlook at that moment, than

she herself had communicated, contributing strongly to our young man's

impression that one by one every gage of a great career was being

dropped into her cup. Nick himself tasted of success vicariously for the

hour. Miriam let her comrade talk only to contradict him, and

contradicted him only to show how indifferently she could do it. She

treated him as if she had nothing more to learn about his folly, but as

if it had taken intimate friendship to reveal to her the full extent of

it. Nick didn't mind her intimate friendships, but he ended by disliking

Dashwood, who gave on his nerves--a circumstance poor Julia, had it come

to her knowledge, would doubtless have found deplorably significant.

Miriam was more pleased with herself than ever: she now made no scruple

of admitting that she enjoyed all her advantages. She had a fuller

vision of how successful success could be; she took everything as it

came--dined out every Sunday and even went into the country till the

Monday morning; kept a hundred distinguished names on her lips and

abounded in strange tales of the people who were making up to her. She

struck Nick as less strenuous than she had been hitherto, as making even

an aggressive show of inevitable laxities; but he was conscious of no

obligation to rebuke her for it--the less as he had a dim vision that

some effect of that sort, some irritation of his curiosity, was what she

desired to produce. She would perhaps have liked, for reasons best known

to herself, to look as if she were throwing herself away, not being able

to do anything else. He couldn't talk to her as if he took a deep

interest in her career, because in fact he didn't; she remained to him

primarily and essentially a pictorial object, with the nature of whose

vicissitudes he was concerned--putting common charity and his personal

good nature of course aside--only so far as they had something to say in

her face. How could he know in advance what turn of her experience,

twist of her life, would say most?--so possible was it even that

complete failure or some incalculable perversion (innumerable were the

queer traps that might be set for her) would only make her for his

particular purpose more precious.

When she had left him at any rate, the day she came with Basil Dashwood,

and still more on a later occasion, that of his turning back to his work

after putting her into her carriage, and otherwise bare-headedly

manifesting, the last time, for that year apparently, that he was to see

her--when she had left him it occurred to him in the light of her quick

distinction that there were deep differences in the famous artistic

life. Miriam was already in a glow of glory--which, moreover, was

probably but a faint spark in relation to the blaze to come; and as he

closed the door on her and took up his palette to rub it with a dirty

cloth the little room in which his own battle was practically to be

fought looked woefully cold and grey and mean. It was lonely and yet at

the same time was peopled with unfriendly shadows--so thick he foresaw

them gather in winter twilights to come--the duller conditions, the

longer patiences, the less immediate and less personal joys. His late

beginning was there and his wasted youth, the mistakes that would still

bring forth children after their image, the sedentary solitude, the grey

mediocrity, the poor explanations, the effect of foolishness he dreaded

even from afar of in having to ask people to wait, and wait longer, and

wait again, for a fruition which to their sense at least might well

prove a grotesque anti-climax. He yearned enough over it, however it

should figure, to feel that this possible pertinacity might enter into

comparison even with such a productive force as Miriam's. That was after

all in his bare studio the most collective dim presence, the one that

kept him company best as he sat there and that made it the right place,

however wrong--the sense that it was to the thing in itself he was

attached. This was Miriam's case too, but the sharp contrast, which she

showed him she also felt, was in the number of other things she got with

the thing in itself.

I hasten to add that our young man had hours when this last mystic value

struck him as requiring for its full operation no adjunct whatever--as

being in its own splendour a summary of all adjuncts and apologies. I

have related that the great collections, the National Gallery and the

Museum, were sometimes rather a series of dead surfaces to him; but the

sketch I have attempted of him will have been inadequate if it fails to

suggest that there were other days when, as he strolled through them, he

plucked right and left perfect nosegays of reassurance. Bent as he was

on working in the modern, which spoke to him with a thousand voices, he

judged it better for long periods not to haunt the earlier masters,

whose conditions had been so different--later he came to see that it

didn't matter much, especially if one kept away; but he was liable to

accidental deflexions from this theory, liable in particular to feel the

sanctity of the great portraits of the past. These were the things the

most inspiring, in the sense that while generations, while worlds had

come and gone, they seemed far most to prevail and survive and testify.

As he stood before them the perfection of their survival often struck

him as the supreme eloquence, the virtue that included all others,

thanks to the language of art, the richest and most universal. Empires

and systems and conquests had rolled over the globe and every kind of

greatness had risen and passed away, but the beauty of the great

pictures had known nothing of death or change, and the tragic centuries

had only sweetened their freshness. The same faces, the same figures

looked out at different worlds, knowing so many secrets the particular

world didn't, and when they joined hands they made the indestructible

thread on which the pearls of history were strung.

Miriam notified her artist that her theatre was to close on the tenth of

August, immediately after which she was to start, with the company, on a

tremendous tour of the provinces. They were to make a lot of money, but

they were to have no holiday, and she didn't want one; she only wanted

to keep at it and make the most of her limited opportunities for

practice; inasmuch as at that rate, playing but two parts a year--and

such parts: she despised them!--she shouldn't have mastered the

rudiments of her trade before decrepitude would compel her to lay it by.

The first time she came to the studio after her visit with Dashwood she

sprang up abruptly at the end of half an hour, saying she could sit no

more--she had had enough and to spare of it. She was visibly restless

and preoccupied, and though Nick had not waited till now to note that

she had more moods in her list than he had tints on his palette he had

never yet seen her sensibility at this particular pitch. It struck him

rather as a waste of passion, but he was ready to let her go. She looked

round the place as if suddenly tired of it and then said mechanically,

in a heartless London way, while she smoothed down her gloves, "So

you're just going to stay on?" After he had confessed that this was his

dark purpose she continued in the same casual, talk-making manner: "I

daresay it's the best thing for you. You're just going to grind, eh?"

"I see before me an eternity of grinding."

"All alone by yourself in this dull little hole? You \_will\_ be

conscientious, you \_will\_ be virtuous."

"Oh my solitude will be mitigated--I shall have models and people."

"What people--what models?" Miriam asked as she arranged her hat before

the glass.

"Well, no one so good as you."

"That's a prospect!" the girl laughed--"for all the good you've got out

of me!"

"You're no judge of that quantity," said Nick, "and even I can't measure

it just yet. Have I been rather a bore and a brute? I can easily believe

it; I haven't talked to you--I haven't amused you as I might. The truth

is that taking people's likenesses is a very absorbing, inhuman

occupation. You can't do much to them besides."

"Yes, it's a cruel honour to pay them."

"Cruel--that's too much," he objected.

"I mean it's one you shouldn't confer on those you like, for when it's

over it's over: it kills your interest in them. After you've finished

them you don't like them any more at all."

"Surely I like \_you\_," Nick returned, sitting tilted back before his

picture with his hands in his pockets.

"We've done very well: it's something not to have quarrelled"--and she

smiled at him now, seeming more "in" it. "I wouldn't have had you slight

your work--I wouldn't have had you do it badly. But there's no fear of

that for you," she went on. "You're the real thing and the rare bird. I

haven't lived with you this way without seeing that: you're the sincere

artist so much more than I. No, no, don't protest," she added with one

of her sudden, fine transitions to a deeper tone. "You'll do things that

will hand on your name when my screeching is happily over. Only you do

seem to me, I confess, rather high and dry here--I speak from the point

of view of your comfort and of my personal interest in you. You strike

me as kind of lonely, as the Americans say--rather cut off and isolated

in your grandeur. Haven't you any confrÃ¨res--fellow-artists and people

of that sort? Don't they come near you?"

"I don't know them much," Nick humbly confessed. "I've always been

afraid of them, and how can they take me seriously?"

"Well, \_I\_'ve got confrÃ¨res, and sometimes I wish I hadn't! But does

your sister never come near you any more," she asked, "or is it only the

fear of meeting me?"

He was aware of his mother's theory that Biddy was constantly bundled

home from Rosedale Road at the approach of improper persons: she was as

angry at this as if she wouldn't have been more so had her child

suffered exposure; but the explanation he gave his present visitor was

nearer the truth. He reminded her that he had already told her--he had

been careful to do this, so as not to let it appear she was

avoided--that his sister was now most of the time in the country,

staying with an hospitable relation.

"Oh yes," the girl rejoined to this, "with Mr. Sherringham's sister,

Mrs.--what's her name? I always forget." And when he had pronounced the

word with a reluctance he doubtless failed sufficiently to conceal--he

hated to talk of Julia by any name and didn't know what business Miriam

had with her--she went on: "That's the one--the beauty, the wonderful

beauty. I shall never forget how handsome she looked the day she found

me here. I don't in the least resemble her, but I should like to have a

try at that type some day in a comedy of manners. But who the devil will

write me a comedy of manners? There it is! The danger would be, no

doubt, that I should push her \_Ã  la charge\_."

Nick listened to these remarks in silence, saying to himself that if she

should have the bad taste--which she seemed trembling on the brink

of--to make an allusion to what had passed between the lady in question

and himself he should dislike her beyond remedy. It would show him she

was a coarse creature after all. Her good genius interposed, however, as

against this hard penalty, and she quickly, for the moment at least,

whisked away from the topic, demanding, since they spoke of comrades and

visitors, what had become of Gabriel Nash, whom she hadn't heard of for

so many days.

"I think he's tired of me," said Nick; "he hasn't been near me either.

But after all it's natural--he has seen me through."

"Seen you through? Do you mean," she laughed, "seen through you? Why

you've only just begun."

"Precisely, and at bottom he doesn't like to see me begin. He's afraid I

shall do something."

She wondered--as with the interest of that. "Do you mean he's jealous?"

"Not in the least, for from the moment one does anything one ceases to

compete with him. It leaves him the field more clear. But that's just

the discomfort for him--he feels, as you said just now, kind of lonely:

he feels rather abandoned and even, I think, a little betrayed. So far

from being jealous he yearns for me and regrets me. The only thing he

really takes seriously is to speculate and understand, to talk about the

reasons and the essence of things: the people who do that are the

highest. The applications, the consequences, the vulgar little effects,

belong to a lower plane, for which one must doubtless be tolerant and

indulgent, but which is after all an affair of comparative accidents and

trifles. Indeed he'll probably tell me frankly the next time I see him

that he can't but feel that to come down to small questions of

action--to the small prudences and compromises and simplifications of

practice--is for the superior person really a fatal descent. One may be

inoffensive and even commendable after it, but one can scarcely pretend

to be interesting. '\_Il en faut comme Ã§a\_,' but one doesn't haunt them.

He'll do his best for me; he'll come back again, but he'll come back

sad, and finally he'll fade away altogether. Hell go off to Granada or

somewhere."

"The simplifications of practice?" cried Miriam. "Why they're just

precisely the most blessed things on earth. What should we do without

them?"

"What indeed?" Nick echoed. "But if we need them it's because we're not

superior persons. We're awful Philistines."

"I'll be one with \_you\_," the girl smiled. "Poor Nash isn't worth

talking about. What was it but a small question of action when he

preached to you, as I know he did, to give up your seat?"

"Yes, he has a weakness for giving up--he'll go with you as far as that.

But I'm not giving up any more, you see. I'm pegging away, and that's

gross."

"He's an idiot--\_n'en parlons plus\_!" she dropped, gathering up her

parasol but lingering.

"Ah I stick to him," Nick said. "He helped me at a difficult time."

"You ought to be ashamed to confess it."

"Oh you \_are\_ a Philistine!" Nick returned.

"Certainly I am," she declared, going toward the door--"if it makes me

one to be sorry, awfully sorry and even rather angry, that I haven't

before me a period of the same sort of unsociable pegging away that you

have. For want of it I shall never really be good. However, if you don't

tell people I've said so they'll never know. Your conditions are far

better than mine and far more respectable: you can do as many things as

you like in patient obscurity while I'm pitchforked into the \_mÃªlÃ©e\_ and

into the most improbable fame--all on the back of a solitary \_cheval de

bataille\_, a poor broken-winded screw. I read it clear that I shall be

condemned for the greater part of the rest of my days--do you see

that?--to play the stuff I'm acting now. I'm studying Juliet and I want

awfully to do her, but really I'm mortally afraid lest, making a success

of her, I should find myself in such a box. Perhaps the brutes would

want Juliet for ever instead of my present part. You see amid what

delightful alternatives one moves. What I long for most I never shall

have had--five quiet years of hard all-round work in a perfect company,

with a manager more perfect still, playing five hundred things and never

being heard of at all. I may be too particular, but that's what I should

have liked. I think I'm disgusting with my successful crudities. It's

discouraging; it makes one not care much what happens. What's the use,

in such an age, of being good?"

"Good? Your haughty claim," Nick laughed, "is that you're bad."

"I mean \_good\_, you know--there are other ways. Don't be stupid." And

Miriam tapped him--he was near her at the door--with her parasol.

"I scarcely know what to say to you," he logically pleaded, "for

certainly it's your fault if you get on so fast."

"I'm too clever--I'm a humbug."

"That's the way I used to be," said Nick.

She rested her brave eyes on him, then turned them over the room slowly;

after which she attached them again, kindly, musingly--rather as if he

had been a fine view or an interesting object--to his face. "Ah, the

pride of that--the sense of purification! He 'used' to be forsooth! Poor

me! Of course you'll say, 'Look at the sort of thing I've undertaken to

produce compared with the rot you have.' So it's all right. Become great

in the proper way and don't expose me." She glanced back once more at

the studio as if to leave it for ever, and gave another last look at the

unfinished canvas on the easel. She shook her head sadly, "Poor Mr.

Sherringham--with \_that\_!" she wailed.

"Oh I'll finish it--it will be very decent," Nick said.

"Finish it by yourself?"

"Not necessarily. You'll come back and sit when you return to London."

"Never, never, never again."

He wondered. "Why you've made me the most profuse offers and promises."

"Yes, but they were made in ignorance and I've backed out of them. I'm

capricious too--\_faites la part de Ã§a\_. I see it wouldn't do--I didn't

know it then. We're too far apart--I \_am\_, as you say, a Philistine."

And as he protested with vehemence against this unscrupulous bad faith

she added: "You'll find other models. Paint Gabriel Nash."

"Gabriel Nash--as a substitute for you?"

"It will be a good way to get rid of him. Paint Mrs. Dallow too," Miriam

went on as she passed out of the door he had opened for her--"paint Mrs.

Dallow if you wish to eradicate the last possibility of a throb."

It was strange that, since only a moment before he had been in a state

of mind to which the superfluity of this reference would have been the

clearest thing about it, he should now have been moved to receive it

quickly, naturally, irreflectively, receive it with the question: "The

last possibility? Do you mean in her or in me?"

"Oh in you. I don't know anything about 'her.'"

"But that wouldn't be the effect," he argued with the same supervening

candour. "I believe that if she were to sit to me the usual law would be

reversed."

"The usual law?"

"Which you cited a while since and of which I recognised the general

truth. In the case you speak of," he said, "I should probably make a

shocking picture."

"And fall in love with her again? Then for God's sake risk the daub!"

Miriam laughed out as she floated away to her victoria.

XLIX

She had guessed happily in saying to him that to offer to paint Gabriel

Nash would be the way to get rid of that visitant. It was with no such

invidious purpose indeed that our young man proposed to his intermittent

friend to sit; rather, as August was dusty in the London streets, he had

too little hope that Nash would remain in town at such a time to oblige

him. Nick had no wish to get rid of his private philosopher; he liked

his philosophy, and though of course premeditated paradox was the light

to read him by he yet had frequently and incidentally an inspired

unexpectedness. He remained in Rosedale Road the man who most produced

by his presence the effect of company. All the other men of Nick's

acquaintance, all his political friends, represented, often very

communicatively, their own affairs, their own affairs alone; which when

they did it well was the most their host could ask of them. But Nash had

the rare distinction that he seemed somehow to figure \_his\_ affairs, the

said host's, and to show an interest in them unaffected by the ordinary

social limitations of capacity. This relegated him to the class of high

luxuries, and Nick was well aware that we hold our luxuries by a fitful

and precarious tenure. If a friend without personal eagerness was one of

the greatest of these it would be evident to the simplest mind that by

the law of distribution of earthly boons such a convenience should be

expected to forfeit in duration what it displayed in intensity. He had

never been without a suspicion that Nash was too good to last, though

for that matter nothing had yet confirmed a vague apprehension that his

particular manner of breaking up or breaking down would be by his

wishing to put so fresh a recruit in relation with other disciples.

That would practically amount to a catastrophe, Nick felt; for it was

odd that one could both have a great kindness for him and not in the

least, when it came to the point, yearn for a view of his personal

extensions. His originality had always been that he appeared to have

none; and if in the first instance he had introduced his bright, young,

political prodigy to Miriam and her mother, that was an exception for

which Peter Sherringham's interference had been mainly responsible. All

the same, however, it was some time before Nick ceased to view it as

perhaps on the awkward books that, to complete his education as it were,

Gabriel would wish him to converse a little with spirits formed by a

like tonic discipline. Nick had an instinct, in which there was no

consciousness of detriment to Nash, that the pupils, possibly even the

imitators, of such a genius would be, as he mentally phrased it,

something awful. He could be sure, even Gabriel himself could be sure,

of his own reservations, but how could either of them be sure of those

of others? Imitation is a fortunate homage only in proportion as it

rests on measurements, and there was an indefinable something in Nash's

doctrine that would have been discredited by exaggeration or by zeal.

Providence happily appeared to have spared it this ordeal; so that Nick

had after months still to remind himself how his friend had never

pressed on his attention the least little group of fellow-mystics, never

offered to produce them for his edification. It scarcely mattered now

that he was just the man to whom the superficial would attribute that

sort of tail: it would probably have been hard, for example, to persuade

Lady Agnes or Julia Dallow or Peter Sherringham that he was not most at

home in some dusky, untidy, dimly-imagined suburb of "culture," a region

peopled by unpleasant phrasemongers who thought him a gentleman and who

had no human use but to be held up in the comic press--which was,

moreover, probably restrained by decorum from touching upon the worst of

their aberrations.

Nick at any rate never ran his academy to earth nor so much as skirted

the suburb in question; never caught from the impenetrable background of

his life the least reverberation of flitting or of flirting, the

fainting esthetic ululation. There had been moments when he was even

moved to anxiety by the silence that poor Gabriel's own faculty of sound

made all about him--when at least it reduced to plainer elements (the

mere bald terms of lonely singleness and thrift, of the lean philosophic

life) the mystery he could never wholly dissociate from him, the air as

of the transient and occasional, the likeness to curling vapour or

murmuring wind or shifting light. It was, for instance, a symbol of this

unclassified state, the lack of all position as a name in cited lists,

that Nick in point of fact had no idea where he lived, would not have

known how to go and see him or send him a doctor if he had heard he was

ill. He had never walked with him to any door of Gabriel's own, even to

pause at the threshold, though indeed Nash had a club, the Anonymous, in

some improbable square, of which he might be suspected of being the only

member--one had never heard of another--where it was vaguely understood

letters would some day or other find him. Fortunately he pressed with

no sharpness the spring of pity--his whole "form" was so easy a grasp

of the helm of consciousness, which he would never let go. He would

never consent to any deformity, but would steer his course straight

through the eventual narrow pass and simply go down over the horizon.

He in any case turned up Rosedale Road one day after Miriam had left

London; he had just come back from a fortnight in Brittany, where he had

drawn refreshment from the tragic sweetness of--well, of everything. He

was on his way somewhere else--was going abroad for the autumn but was

not particular what he did, professing that he had come back just to get

Nick utterly off his mind. "It's very nice, it's very nice; yes, yes, I

see," he remarked, giving a little, general, assenting sigh as his eyes

wandered over the simple scene--a sigh which for a suspicious ear would

have testified to an insidious reaction.

Nick's ear, as we know, was already suspicious; a fact accounting for

the expectant smile--it indicated the pleasant apprehension of a theory

confirmed--with which he returned: "Do you mean my pictures are nice?"

"Yes, yes, your pictures and the whole thing."

"The whole thing?"

"Your existence in this little, remote, independent corner of the great

city. The disinterestedness of your attitude, the persistence of your

effort, the piety, the beauty, in short the edification, of the whole

spectacle."

Nick laughed a little ruefully. "How near to having had enough of me you

must be when you speak of me as edifying!" Nash changed colour slightly

at this; it was the first time in his friend's remembrance that he had

given a sign of embarrassment. "\_Vous allez me lÃ¢cher\_, I see it coming;

and who can blame you?--for I've ceased to be in the least spectacular.

I had my little hour; it was a great deal, for some people don't even

have that. I've given you your curious case and I've been generous; I

made the drama last for you as long as I could. You'll 'slope,' my dear

fellow--you'll quietly slope; and it will be all right and inevitable,

though I shall miss you greatly at first. Who knows whether without you

I shouldn't still have been 'representing' Harsh, heaven help me? You

rescued me; you converted me from a representative into an

example--that's a shade better. But don't I know where you must be when

you're reduced to praising my piety?"

"Don't turn me away," said Nash plaintively; "give me a cigarette."

"I shall never dream of turning you away; I shall cherish you till the

latest possible hour. I'm only trying to keep myself in tune with the

logic of things. The proof of how I cling is that precisely I want you

to sit to me."

"To sit to you?" With which Nick could fancy his visitor a little blank.

"Certainly, for after all it isn't much to ask. Here we are and the

hour's peculiarly propitious--long light days with no one coming near

me, so that I've plenty of time. I had a hope I should have some orders:

my younger sister, whom you know and who's a great optimist, plied me

with that vision. In fact we invented together a charming little sordid

theory that there might be rather a 'run' on me from the chatter (such

as it was) produced by my taking up this line. My sister struck out the

idea that a good many of the pretty ladies would think me interesting

and would want to be done. Perhaps they do, but they've controlled

themselves, for I can't say the run has commenced. They haven't even

come to look, but I daresay they don't yet quite take it in. Of course

it's a bad time--with every one out of town; though you know they might

send for me to come and do them at home. Perhaps they will when they

settle down. A portrait-tour of a dozen country-houses for the autumn

and winter--what do you say to that for the ardent life? I know I

excruciate you," Nick added, "but don't you see how it's in my interest

to try how much you'll still stand?"

Gabriel puffed his cigarette with a serenity so perfect that it might

have been assumed to falsify these words. "Mrs. Dallow will send for

you--\_vous allez voir Ã§a\_," he said in a moment, brushing aside all

vagueness.

"She'll send for me?"

"To paint her portrait; she'll recapture you on that basis. She'll get

you down to one of the country-houses, and it will all go off as

charmingly--with sketching in the morning, on days you can't hunt, and

anything you like in the afternoon, and fifteen courses in the evening;

there'll be bishops and ambassadors staying--as if you were a

'well-known,' awfully clever amateur. Take care, take care, for, fickle

as you may think me, I can read the future: don't imagine you've come to

the end of me yet. Mrs. Dallow and your sister, of both of whom I speak

with the greatest respect, are capable of hatching together the most

conscientious, delightful plan for you. Your differences with the

beautiful lady will be patched up and you'll each come round a little

and meet the other halfway. The beautiful lady will swallow your

profession if you'll swallow hers. She'll put up with the palette if

you'll put up with the country-house. It will be a very unusual one in

which you won't find a good north room where you can paint. You'll go

about with her and do all her friends, all the bishops and ambassadors,

and you'll eat your cake and have it, and every one, beginning with your

wife, will forget there's anything queer about you, and everything will

be for the best in the best of worlds; so that, together--you and

she--you'll become a great social institution and every one will think

she has a delightful husband; to say nothing of course of your having a

delightful wife. Ah my dear fellow, you turn pale, and with reason!"

Nash went lucidly on: "that's to pay you for having tried to make me let

you have it. You have it then there! I may be a bore"--the emphasis of

this, though a mere shade, testified to the first personal resentment

Nick had ever heard his visitor express--"I may be a bore, but once in a

while I strike a light, I make things out. Then I venture to repeat,

'Take care, take care.' If, as I say, I respect \_ces dames\_ infinitely

it's because they will be acting according to the highest wisdom of

their sex. That's the sort of thing women do for a man--the sort of

thing they invent when they're exceptionally good and clever. When

they're not they don't do so well; but it's not for want of trying.

There's only one thing in the world better than their incomparable

charm: it's their abysmal conscience. Deep calleth unto deep--the one's

indeed a part of the other. And when they club together, when they

earnestly consider, as in the case we're supposing," Nash continued,

"then the whole thing takes a lift; for it's no longer the virtue of the

individual, it's that of the wondrous sex."

"You're so remarkable that, more than ever, I must paint you," Nick

returned, "though I'm so agitated by your prophetic words that my hand

trembles and I shall doubtless scarcely be able to hold my brush. Look

how I rattle my easel trying to put it into position. I see it all there

just as you show it. Yes, it will be a droll day, and more modern than

anything yet, when the conscience of women makes out good reasons for

men's not being in love with them. You talk of their goodness and

cleverness, and it's certainly much to the point. I don't know what else

they themselves might do with those graces, but I don't see what man can

do with them but be fond of them where he finds them."

"Oh you'll do it--you'll do it!" cried Nash, brightly jubilant.

"What is it I shall do?"

"Exactly what I just said; if not next year then the year after, or the

year after that. You'll go halfway to meet her and she'll drag you about

and pass you off. You'll paint the bishops and become a social

institution. That is, you'll do it if you don't take great care."

"I shall, no doubt, and that's why I cling to you. You must still look

after me," Nick went on. "Don't melt away into a mere improbable

reminiscence, a delightful, symbolic fable--don't if you can possibly

help it. The trouble is, you see, that you can't really keep hold very

tight, because at bottom it will amuse you much more to see me in

another pickle than to find me simply jogging down the vista of the

years on the straight course. Let me at any rate have some sort of

sketch of you as a kind of feather from the angel's wing or a photograph

of the ghost--to prove to me in the future that you were once a solid

sociable fact, that I didn't invent you, didn't launch you as a deadly

hoax. Of course I shall be able to say to myself that you can't have

been a fable--otherwise you'd have a moral; but that won't be enough,

because I'm not sure you won't have had one. Some day you'll peep in

here languidly and find me in such an attitude of piety--presenting my

bent back to you as I niggle over some interminable botch--that I shall

give cruelly on your nerves and you'll just draw away, closing the door

softly. You'll be gentle and considerate about it and spare me, you

won't even make me look round. You'll steal off on tiptoe, never, never

to return."

Gabriel consented to sit; he professed he should enjoy it and be glad to

give up for it his immediate foreign commerce, so vague to Nick, so

definite apparently to himself; and he came back three times for the

purpose. Nick promised himself a deal of interest from this experiment,

for with the first hour of it he began to feel that really as yet, given

the conditions under which he now studied him, he had never at all

thoroughly explored his friend. His impression had been that Nash had a

head quite fine enough to be a challenge, and that as he sat there day

by day all sorts of pleasant and paintable things would come out in his

face. This impression was not gainsaid, but the whole tangle grew

denser. It struck our young man that he had never \_seen\_ his subject

before, and yet somehow this revelation was not produced by the sense of

actually seeing it. What was revealed was the difficulty--what he saw

was not the measurable mask but the ambiguous meaning. He had taken

things for granted which literally were not there, and he found things

there--except that he couldn't catch them--which he had not hitherto

counted in or presumed to handle. This baffling effect, eminently in the

line of the mystifying, so familiar to Nash, might have been the result

of his whimsical volition, had it not appeared to our artist, after a

few hours of the job, that his sitter was not the one who enjoyed it

most. He was uncomfortable, at first vaguely and then definitely

so--silent, restless, gloomy, dim, as if on the test the homage of a

directer attention than he had ever had gave him less pleasure than he

would have supposed. He had been willing to judge of this in good

faith; but frankly he rather suffered. He wasn't cross, but was clearly

unhappy, and Nick had never before felt him contract instead of

expanding.

It was all accordingly as if a trap had been laid for him, and our young

man asked himself if it were really fair. At the same time there was

something richly rare in such a relation between the subject and the

artist, and Nick was disposed to go on till he should have to stop for

pity or for shame. He caught eventually a glimmer of the truth

underlying the strangeness, guessed that what upset his friend was

simply the reversal, in such a combination, of his usual terms of

intercourse. He was so accustomed to living upon irony and the

interpretation of things that it was new to him to be himself

interpreted and--as a gentleman who sits for his portrait is always

liable to be--interpreted all ironically. From being outside of the

universe he was suddenly brought into it, and from the position of a

free commentator and critic, an easy amateurish editor of the whole

affair, reduced to that of humble ingredient and contributor. It

occurred afterwards to Nick that he had perhaps brought on a catastrophe

by having happened to throw off as they gossiped or languished, and not

alone without a cruel intention, but with an impulse of genuine

solicitude: "But, my dear fellow, what will you do when you're old?"

"Old? What do you call old?" Nash had replied bravely enough, but with

another perceptible tinge of irritation. "Must I really remind you at

this time of day that that term has no application to such a condition

as mine? It only belongs to you wretched people who have the incurable

superstition of 'doing'; it's the ignoble collapse you prepare for

yourselves when you cease to be able to do. For me there'll be no

collapse, no transition, no clumsy readjustment of attitude; for I

shall only \_be\_, more and more, with all the accumulations of

experience, the longer I live."

"Oh I'm not particular about the term," said Nick. "If you don't call it

old, the ultimate state, call it weary--call it final. The accumulations

of experience are practically accumulations of fatigue."

"I don't know anything about weariness. I live freshly--it doesn't

fatigue me."

"Then you need never die," Nick declared.

"Certainly; I daresay I'm indestructible, immortal."

Nick laughed out at this--it would be such fine news to some people. But

it was uttered with perfect gravity, and it might very well have been in

the spirit of that gravity that Nash failed to observe his agreement to

sit again the next day. The next and the next and the next passed, but

he never came back.

True enough, punctuality was not important for a man who felt that he

had the command of all time. Nevertheless his disappearance "without a

trace," that of a personage in a fairy-tale or a melodrama, made a

considerable impression on his friend as the months went on; so that,

though he had never before had the least difficulty about entering into

the play of Gabriel's humour, Nick now recalled with a certain fanciful

awe the special accent with which he had ranked himself among

imperishable things. He wondered a little if he hadn't at last,

balancing always on the stretched tight-rope of his wit, fallen over on

the wrong side. He had never before, of a truth, been so nearly witless,

and would have to have gone mad in short to become so singularly simple.

Perhaps indeed he was acting only more than usual in his customary

spirit--thoughtfully contributing, for Nick's enlivenment, a purple rim

of mystery to an horizon now so dreadfully let down. The mystery at any

rate remained; another shade of purple in fact was virtually added to

it. Nick had the prospect, for the future, of waiting to see, all

curiously, when Nash would turn up, if ever, and the further

diversion--it almost consoled him for the annoyance of being left with a

second unfinished thing on his hands--of imagining in the portrait he

had begun an odd tendency to fade gradually from the canvas. He couldn't

catch it in the act, but he could have ever a suspicion on glancing at

it that the hand of time was rubbing it away little by little--for all

the world as in some delicate Hawthorne tale--and making the surface

indistinct and bare of all resemblance to the model. Of course the moral

of the Hawthorne tale would be that his personage would come back in

quaint confidence on the day his last projected shadow should have

vanished.

L

One day toward the end of March of the following year, in other words

more than six months after Mr. Nash's disappearance, Bridget Dormer came

into her brother's studio and greeted him with the effusion that

accompanies a return from an absence. She had been staying at

Broadwood--she had been staying at Harsh. She had various things to tell

him about these episodes, about his mother, about Grace, about her small

subterraneous self, and about Percy's having come, just before, over to

Broadwood for two days; the longest visit with which, almost since they

could remember, the head of the family had honoured their common parent.

Nick noted indeed that this demonstration had apparently been taken as a

great favour, and Biddy loyally testified to the fact that her elder

brother was awfully jolly and that his presence had been a pretext for

tremendous fun. Nick accordingly asked her what had passed about his

marriage--what their mother had said to him.

"Oh nothing," she replied; and Percy had said nothing to Lady Agnes and

not a word to herself. This partly explained, for his junior, the

consequent beatitude--none but cheerful topics had been produced; but he

questioned the girl further--to a point which led her to say: "Oh I

daresay that before long she'll write to her."

"Who'll write to whom?"

"Mamma'll write to Percy's wife. I'm sure he'd like it. Of course we

shall end by going to see her. He was awfully disappointed at what he

found in Spain--he didn't find anything."

Biddy spoke of his disappointment almost with commiseration, for she was

evidently inclined this morning to a fresh and kindly view of things.

Nick could share her feeling but so far as was permitted by a

recognition merely general of what his brother must have looked for. It

might have been snipe and it might have been bristling boars. Biddy was

indeed brief at first about everything, in spite of all the weeks that

had gone since their last meeting; for he quickly enough saw she had

something behind--something that made her gay and that she wanted to

come to quickly. He was vaguely vexed at her being, fresh from

Broadwood, so gay as that; for--it was impossible to shut one's eyes to

the fact--what had practically come to pass in regard to that rural

retreat was exactly what he had desired to avert. All winter, while it

had been taken for granted his mother and sisters were doing what he

wished, they had been doing precisely what he hated. He held Biddy

perhaps least responsible, and there was no one he could exclusively

blame. He washed his hands of the matter and succeeded fairly well, for

the most part, in forgetting he was not pleased. Julia herself in truth

appeared to have been the most active member of the little group united

to make light of his decencies. There had been a formal restitution of

Broadwood, but the three ladies were there more than ever, with the

slight difference that they were mainly there with its mistress. Mahomet

had declined to go any more to the mountain, so the mountain had

virtually come to Mahomet.

After their long visit in the autumn Lady Agnes and her girls had come

back to town; but they had gone down again for Christmas and Julia had

taken this occasion to write to Nick that she hoped very much he

wouldn't refuse them all his own company for just a little scrap of the

supremely sociable time. Nick, after reflexion, judged it best not to

refuse, so that he passed, in the event, four days under his cousin's

roof. The "all" proved a great many people, for she had taken care to

fill the house. She took the largest view of hospitality and Nick had

never seen her so splendid, so free-handed, so gracefully active. She

was a perfect mistress of the revels; she had arranged some ancient

bravery for every day and for every night. The Dormers were so much in

it, as the phrase was, that after all their discomfiture their fortune

seemed in an hour to have come back. There had been a moment when, in

extemporised charades, Lady Agnes, an elderly figure being required,

appeared on the point of undertaking the part of the housekeeper at a

castle, who, dropping her \_h\_'s, showed sheeplike tourists about; but

she waived the opportunity in favour of her daughter Grace. Even Grace

had a great success; Grace dropped her \_h\_'s as with the crash of

empires. Nick of course was in the charades and in everything, but Julia

was not; she only invented, directed, led the applause. When nothing

else was forward Nick "sketched" the whole company: they followed him

about, they waylaid him on staircases, clamouring to be allowed to sit.

He obliged them so far as he could, all save Julia, who didn't clamour;

and, growing rather red, he thought of Gabriel Nash while he bent over

the paper. Early in the new year he went abroad for six weeks, but only

as far as Paris. It was a new Paris for him then; a Paris of the Rue

Bonaparte and three or four professional friends--he had more of these

there than in London; a Paris of studios and studies and models, of

researches and revelations, comparisons and contrasts, of strong

impressions and long discussions and rather uncomfortable economies,

small cafÃ©s, bad fires and the general sense of being twenty again.

While he was away his mother and sisters--Lady Agnes now sometimes wrote

to him--returned to London for a month, and before he was again

established in Rosedale Road they went back for a third course of

Broadwood. After they had been there five days--and this was the salt of

the whole feast--Julia took herself off to Harsh, leaving them in

undisturbed possession. They had remained so--they wouldn't come up to

town till after Easter. The trick was played, and Biddy, as I have

mentioned, was now very content. Her brother presently learned, however,

that the reason of this was not wholly the success of the trick; unless

indeed her further ground were only a continuation of it. She was not in

London as a forerunner of her mother; she was not even as yet in

Calcutta Gardens. She had come to spend a week with Florry Tressilian,

who had lately taken the dearest little flat in a charming new place,

just put up, on the other side of the Park, with all kinds of lifts and

tubes and electricities. Florry had been awfully nice to her--had been

with them ever so long at Broadwood while the flat was being painted and

prepared--and mamma had then let her, let Biddy, promise to come to her,

when everything was ready, so that they might have a happy old maids'

(for they \_were\_, old maids now!) house-warming together. If Florry

could by this time do without a chaperon--she had two latchkeys and went

alone on the top of omnibuses, and her name was in the Red Book--she was

enough of a duenna for another girl. Biddy referred with sweet cynical

eyes to the fine happy stride she had thus taken in the direction of

enlightened spinsterhood; and Nick hung his head, immensely abashed and

humiliated, for, modern as he had fatuously supposed himself, there were

evidently currents more modern yet.

It so happened that on this particular morning he had drawn out of a

corner his interrupted study of Gabriel Nash; on no further

curiosity--he had only been looking round the room in a rummaging

spirit--than to see how much or how little of it remained. It had become

to his view so dim an adumbration--he was sure of this, and it pressed

some spring of melancholy mirth--that it didn't seem worth putting away,

and he left it leaning against a table as if it had been a blank canvas

or a "preparation" to be painted over. In this posture it attracted

Biddy's attention, for on a second glance it showed distinguishable

features. She had not seen it before and now asked whom it might

represent, remarking also that she could almost guess, yet not quite:

she had known the original but couldn't name him.

"Six months ago, for a few days, it represented Gabriel Nash," Nick

replied. "But it isn't anybody or anything now."

"Six months ago? What's the matter with it and why don't you go on?"

"What's the matter with it is more than I can tell you. But I can't go

on because I've lost my model."

She had an almost hopeful stare. "Is he beautifully dead?"

Her brother laughed out at the candid cheerfulness, hopefulness almost,

with which this inquiry broke from her. "He's only dead to me. He has

gone away."

"Where has he gone?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"Why, have you quarrelled?"--Biddy shone again.

"Quarrelled? For what do you take us? Docs the nightingale quarrel with

the moon?"

"I needn't ask which of you is the moon," she said.

"Of course I'm the nightingale. But, more literally," Nick continued,

"Nash has melted back into the elements--he's part of the great air of

the world." And then as even with this lucidity he saw the girl still

mystified: "I've a notion he has gone to India and at the present moment

is reclining on a bank of flowers in the vale of Cashmere."

Biddy had a pause, after which she dropped: "Julia will be glad--she

dislikes him so."

"If she dislikes him why should she be glad he's so enviably placed?"

"I mean about his going away. She'll be glad of that."

"My poor incorrigible child," Nick cried, "what has Julia to do with

it?"

"She has more to do with things than you think," Biddy returned with all

her bravery. Yet she had no sooner uttered the words than she

perceptibly blushed. Hereupon, to attenuate the foolishness of her

blush--only it had the opposite effect--she added: "She thinks he has

been a bad element in your life."

Nick emitted a long strange sound. "She thinks perhaps, but she doesn't

think enough; otherwise she'd arrive at this better thought--that she

knows nothing whatever about my life."

"Ah brother," the girl pleaded with solemn eyes, "you don't imagine what

an interest she takes in it. She has told me many times--she has talked

lots to me about it." Biddy paused and then went on, an anxious little

smile shining through her gravity as if from a cautious wonder as to how

much he would take: "She has a conviction it was Mr. Nash who made

trouble between you."

"Best of little sisters," Nick pronounced, "those are thoroughly

second-rate ideas, the result of a perfectly superficial view. Excuse my

possibly priggish tone, but they really attribute to my dear detached

friend a part he's quite incapable of playing. He can neither make

trouble nor take trouble; no trouble could ever either have come out of

him or have got into him. Moreover," our young man continued, "if Julia

has talked to you so much about the matter there's no harm in my talking

to you a little. When she threw me over in an hour it was on a perfectly

definite occasion. That occasion was the presence in my studio of a

dishevelled, an abandoned actress."

"Oh Nick, she has not thrown you over!" Biddy protested. "She has

not--I've proof."

He felt at this direct denial a certain stir of indignation and looked

at the girl with momentary sternness. "Has she sent you here to tell me

this? What do you mean by proof?"

Biddy's eyes, at these questions, met her brother's with a strange

expression, and for a few seconds, while she looked entreatingly into

them, she wavered there with parted lips and vaguely stretched out her

hands. The next minute she had burst into tears--she was sobbing on his

breast. He said "Hallo!" and soothed her; but it was very quickly over.

Then she told him what she meant by her proof and what she had had on

her mind ever since her present arrival. It was a message from Julia,

but not to say--not to say what he had questioned her about just before;

though indeed, more familiar now that he had his arm round her, she

boldly expressed the hope it might in the end come to the same thing.

Julia simply wanted to know--- she had instructed her to sound him

discreetly--if Nick would undertake her portrait; and she wound up this

experiment in "sounding" by the statement that their beautiful kinswoman

was dying to sit.

"Dying to sit?" echoed Nick, whose turn it was this time to feel his

colour rise.

"At any moment you like after Easter, when she comes up. She wants a

full-length and your very best, your most splendid work."

Nick stared, not caring that he had blushed. "Is she serious?"

"Ah Nick--serious!" Biddy reasoned tenderly. She came nearer again and

he thought her again about to weep. He took her by the shoulders,

looking into her eyes.

"It's all right if she knows \_I\_ am. But why doesn't she come like any

one else? I don't refuse people!"

"Nick, dearest Nick!" she went on, her eyes conscious and pleading. He

looked into them intently--as well as she could he play at sounding--and

for a moment, between these young persons, the air was lighted by the

glimmer of mutual searchings and suppressed confessions. Nick read deep

and then, suddenly releasing his sister, turned away. She didn't see his

face in that movement, but an observer to whom it had been presented

might have fancied it denoted a foreboding that was not exactly a dread,

yet was not exclusively a joy.

The first thing he made out in the room, when he could distinguish, was

Gabriel Nash's portrait, which suddenly filled him with an unreasoning

rancour. He seized it and turned it about, jammed it back into its

corner with its face against the wall. This small diversion might have

served to carry off the embarrassment with which he had finally averted

himself from Biddy. The embarrassment, however, was all his own; none of

it was reflected in the way she resumed, after a silence in which she

had followed his disposal of the picture:

"If she's so eager to come here--for it's here she wants to sit, not in

Great Stanhope Street, never!--how can she prove better that she doesn't

care a bit if she meets Miss Rooth?"

"She won't meet Miss Rooth," Nick replied rather dryly.

"Oh I'm sorry!" said Biddy. She was as frank as if she had achieved a

virtual victory, and seemed to regret the loss of a chance for Julia to

show an equal mildness. Her tone made her brother laugh, but she went on

with confidence: "She thought it was Mr. Nash who made Miss Rooth come."

"So he did, by the way," said Nick.

"Well then, wasn't that making trouble?"

"I thought you admitted there was no harm in her being here."

"Yes, but \_he\_ hoped there'd be."

"Poor Nash's hopes!" Nick laughed. "My dear child, it would take a

cleverer head than you or me, or even Julia, who must have invented that

wise theory, to say what they were. However, let us agree that even if

they were perfectly fiendish my good sense has been a match for them."

"Oh Nick, that's delightful!" chanted Biddy. Then she added: "Do you

mean she doesn't come any more?"

"The dishevelled actress? She hasn't been near me for months."

"But she's in London--she's always acting? I've been away so much I've

scarcely observed," Biddy explained with a slight change of note.

"The same silly part, poor creature, for nearly a year. It appears that

that's 'success'--in her profession. I saw her in the character several

times last summer, but haven't set foot in her theatre since."

Biddy took this in; then she suggested; "Peter wouldn't have liked

that."

"Oh Peter's likes--!" Nick at his easel, beginning to work, conveniently

sighed.

"I mean her acting the same part for a year."

"I'm sure I don't know; he has never written me a word."

"Nor me either," Biddy returned.

There was another short silence, during which Nick brushed at a panel.

It ended in his presently saying: "There's one thing certainly Peter

\_would\_ like--that is simply to be here to-night. It's a great

night--another great night--for the abandoned one. She's to act Juliet

for the first time."

"Ah how I should like to see her!" the girl cried.

Nick glanced at her; she sat watching him. "She has sent me a stall; I

wish she had sent me two. I should have been delighted to take you."

"Don't you think you could get another?" Biddy quavered.

"They must be in tremendous demand. But who knows after all?" Nick

added, at the same moment looking round. "Here's a chance--here's quite

an extraordinary chance!"

His servant had opened the door and was ushering in a lady whose

identity was indeed justly reflected in those words. "Miss Rooth!" the

man announced; but he was caught up by a gentleman who came next and who

exclaimed, laughing and with a gesture gracefully corrective: "No,

no--no longer Miss Rooth!"

Miriam entered the place with her charming familiar grandeur--entered

very much as she might have appeared, as she appeared every night, early

in her first act, at the back of the stage, by the immemorial middle

door. She might exactly now have been presenting herself to the house,

taking easy possession, repeating old movements, looking from one to the

other of the actors before the footlights. The rich "Good-morning" she

threw into the air, holding out her right hand to Biddy and then giving

her left to Nick--as she might have given it to her own brother--had

nothing to tell of intervals or alienations. She struck Biddy as still

more terrible in her splendid practice than when she had seen her

before--the practice and the splendour had now something almost royal.

The girl had had occasion to make her curtsey to majesties and

highnesses, but the flutter those effigies produced was nothing to the

way in which at the approach of this young lady the agitated air seemed

to recognise something supreme. So the deep mild eyes she bent on Biddy

were not soothing, though for that matter evidently intended to soothe.

Biddy wondered Nick could have got so used to her--he joked at her as

she loomed--and later in the day, still under the great impression of

this incident, she even wondered that Peter could have full an impunity.

It was true that Peter apparently didn't quite feel one.

"You never came--you never came," Miriam said to her kindly and sadly;

and Biddy, recognising the allusion, the invitation to visit the actress

at home, had to explain how much she had been absent from London and

then even that her brother hadn't proposed to take her.

"Very true--he hasn't come himself. What's he doing now?" asked Miss

Rooth, standing near her young friend but looking at Nick, who had

immediately engaged in conversation with his other visitor, a gentleman

whose face came back to the girl. She had seen this gentleman on the

stage with the great performer--that was it, the night Peter took her to

the theatre with Florry Tressilian. Oh that Nick would only do something

of that sort now! This desire, quickened by the presence of the strange,

expressive woman, by the way she scattered sweet syllables as if she

were touching the piano-keys, combined with other things to make our

young lady's head swim--other things too mingled to name, admiration and

fear and dim divination and purposeless pride and curiosity and

resistance, the impulse to go away and the determination to (as she

would have liked fondly to fancy it) "hold her ground." The actress

courted her with a wondrous voice--what was the matter with the actress

and what did she want?--and Biddy tried in return to give an idea of

what Nick was doing. Not succeeding very well she was about to appeal to

her brother, but Miriam stopped her with the remark that it didn't

signify; besides, Dashwood was telling Nick something--something they

wanted him to know. "We're in a great excitement--he has taken a

theatre," Miriam added.

"Taken a theatre?" Biddy was vague.

"We're going to set up for ourselves. He's going to do for me

altogether. It has all been arranged only within a day or two. It

remains to be seen how it will answer," Miriam smiled. Biddy murmured

some friendly hope, and the shining presence went on: "Do you know why

I've broken in here to-day after a long absence--interrupting your poor

brother so basely, taking up his precious time? It's because I'm so

nervous."

"About your first night?" Biddy risked.

"Do you know about that--are you coming?" Miriam had caught at it.

"No, I'm not coming--I haven't a place."

"Will you come if I send you one?"

"Oh but really it's too beautiful of you!" breathed the girl.

"You shall have a box; your brother shall bring you. They can't squeeze

in a pin, I'm told; but I've kept a box, I'll manage it. Only if I do,

you know, mind you positively come!" She sounded it as the highest of

favours, resting her hand on Biddy's.

"Don't be afraid. And may I bring a friend--the friend with whom I'm

staying?"

Miriam now just gloomed. "Do you mean Mrs. Dallow?"

"No, no--Miss Tressilian. She puts me up, she has got a flat. Did you

ever see a flat?" asked Biddy expansively. "My cousin's not in London."

Miriam replied that she might bring whom she liked and Biddy broke out

to her brother: "Fancy what kindness, Nick: we're to have a box to-night

and you're to take me!"

Nick turned to her a face of levity which struck her even at the time as

too cynically free, but which she understood when the finer sense of it

subsequently recurred to her. Mr. Dashwood interposed with the remark

that it was all very well to talk about boxes, but that he didn't see

how at that time of day the miracle was to be worked.

"You haven't kept one as I told you?" Miriam demanded.

"As you told me, my dear? Tell the lamb to keep its tenderest mutton

from the wolves!"

"You shall have one: we'll arrange it," Miriam went on to Biddy.

"Let me qualify that statement a little, Miss Dormer," said Basil

Dashwood. "We'll arrange it if it's humanly possible."

"We'll arrange it even if it's inhumanly \_im\_possible--that's just the

point," Miriam declared to the girl. "Don't talk about trouble--what's

he meant for but to take it? \_Cela s'annonce bien\_, you see," she

continued to Nick: "doesn't it look as if we should pull beautifully

together?" And as he answered that he heartily congratulated her--he was

immensely interested in what he had been told--she exclaimed after

resting her eyes on him a moment: "What will you have? It seemed

simpler! It was clear there had to be some one." She explained further

to Nick what had led her to come in at that moment, while Dashwood

approached Biddy with a civil assurance that they would see, they would

leave no stone unturned, though he would not have taken upon himself to

promise.

Miriam reminded Nick of the blessing he had been to her nearly a year

before, on her other first night, when she was all impatient and on

edge; how he had let her come and sit there for hours--helped her to

possess her soul till the evening and to keep out of harm's way. The

case was the same at present, with the aggravation indeed that he would

understand--Dashwood's nerves as well as her own: Dashwood's were a

great deal worse than hers. Everything was ready for Juliet; they had

been rehearsing for five months--it had kept her from going mad from the

treadmill of the other piece--and he, Nick, had occurred to her again,

in the last intolerable hours, as the friend in need, the salutary

stop-gap, no matter how much she worried him. She shouldn't be turned

out? Biddy broke away from Basil Dashwood: she must go, she must hurry

off to Miss Tressilian with her news. Florry might make some other

stupid engagement for the evening: she must be warned in time. The girl

took a flushed, excited leave after having received a renewal of

Miriam's pledge and even heard her say to Nick that he must now give

back the seat already sent him--they should be sure to have another use

for it.

LI

That night at the theatre and in the box--the miracle had been wrought,

the treasure found--Nick Dormer pointed out to his two companions the

stall he had relinquished, which was close in front; noting how oddly it

remained during the whole of the first act vacant. The house was beyond

everything, the actress beyond any one; though to describe again so

famous an occasion--it has been described repeatedly by other

reporters--is not in the compass of the closing words of a history

already too sustained. It is enough to say that these great hours marked

an era in contemporary art and that for those who had a spectator's

share in them the words "revelation," "incarnation," "acclamation,"

"demonstration," "ovation"--to name only a few, and all accompanied by

the word "extraordinary"--acquired a new force. Miriam's Juliet was an

exquisite image of young passion and young despair, expressed in the

truest, divinest music that had ever poured from tragic lips. The great

childish audience, gaping at her points, expanded there before her like

a lap to catch flowers.

During the first interval our three friends in the box had plenty to

talk about, and they were so occupied with it that for some time they

failed to observe a gentleman who had at last come into the empty stall

near the front. This discovery was presently formulated by Miss

Tressilian in the cheerful exclamation: "Only fancy--there's Mr.

Sherringham!" This of course immediately became a high wonder--a wonder

for Nick and Biddy, who had not heard of his return; and the prodigy was

quickened by the fact that he gave no sign of looking for them or even

at them. Having taken possession of his place he sat very still in it,

staring straight before him at the curtain. His abrupt reappearance held

the seeds of anxiety both for Biddy and for Nick, so that it was mainly

Miss Tressilian who had freedom of mind to throw off the theory that he

had come back that very hour--had arrived from a long journey. Couldn't

they see how strange he was and how brown, how burnt and how red, how

tired and how worn? They all inspected him, though Biddy declined Miss

Tressilian's glass; but he was evidently indifferent to notice and

finally Biddy, leaning back in her chair, dropped the fantastic words:

"He has come home to marry Juliet!"

Nick glanced at her and then replied: "What a disaster--to make such a

journey as that and to be late for the fair!"

"Late for the fair?"

"Why she's married--these three days. They did it very quietly; Miriam

says because her mother hated it and hopes it won't be much known! All

the same she's Basil Dashwood's wedded wife--he has come in just in time

to take the receipts for Juliet. It's a good thing, no doubt, for there

are at least two fortunes to be made out of her, and he'll give up the

stage." Nick explained to Miss Tressilian, who had inquired, that the

gentleman in question was the actor who was playing Mercutio, and he

asked Biddy if she hadn't known that this was what they were telling him

in Rosedale Road that morning. She replied that she had understood

nothing but that she was to be where she was, and she sank considerably

behind the drapery of the box. From this cover she was able to launch,

creditably enough, the exclamation:

"Poor, poor Peter!"

Nick got up and stood looking at poor, poor Peter. "He ought to come

round and speak to us, but if he doesn't see us I suppose he doesn't."

He quitted the box as to go to the restored exile, and I may add that as

soon as he had done so Florence Tressilian bounded over to the dusk in

which Biddy had nestled. What passed immediately between these young

ladies needn't concern us: it is sufficient to mention that two minutes

later Miss Tressilian broke out:

"Look at him, dearest; he's turning his head this way!"

"Thank you, I don't care to watch his turns," said Biddy; and she

doubtless demeaned herself in the high spirit of these words. It

nevertheless happened that directly afterwards she had certain knowledge

of his having glanced at his watch as if to judge how soon the curtain

would rise again, as well as of his having then jumped up and passed

quickly out of his place. The curtain had risen again without his

reappearing and without Nick's returning. Indeed by the time Nick

slipped in a good deal of the third act was over; and even then, even

when the curtain descended, Peter had not come back. Nick sat down in

silence to watch the stage, to which the breathless attention of his

companions seemed attached, though Biddy after a moment threw round at

him a single quick look. At the end of the act they were all occupied

with the recalls, the applause and the responsive loveliness of Juliet

as she was led out--Mercutio had to give her up to Romeo--and even for a

few minutes after the deafening roar had subsided nothing was said among

the three. At last Nick began:

"It's quite true he has just arrived; he's in Great Stanhope Street.

They've given him several weeks, to make up for the uncomfortable way

they bundled him off--to get there in time for some special business

that had suddenly to be gone into--when he first went out: he tells me

they even then promised that. He got into Southampton only a few hours

ago, rushed up by the first train he could catch and came off here

without any dinner."

"Fancy!" said Miss Tressilian; while Biddy more generally asked if Peter

might be in good health and appeared to have been happy. Nick replied

that he described his post as beastly but didn't seem to have suffered

from it. He was to be in England probably a month, he was awfully brown,

he sent his love to Biddy. Miss Tressilian looked at his empty stall and

was of the opinion that it would be more to the point if he were to come

in to see her.

"Oh he'll turn up; we had a goodish talk in the lobby where he met me. I

think he went out somewhere."

"How odd to come so many thousand miles for this and then not to stay!"

Biddy fluted.

"Did he come on purpose for this?" Miss Tressilian asked.

"Perhaps he's gone out to get his dinner!" joked Biddy.

Her friend suggested that he might be behind the scenes, but Nick cast

doubts; whereupon Biddy asked if he himself were not going round. At

this moment the curtain rose; Nick said he would go in the next

interval. As soon as it came he quitted the box, remaining absent while

it lasted.

All this time, in the house, there was no sign of Peter. Nick reappeared

only as the fourth act was beginning and uttered no word to his

companions till it was over. Then, after a further delay produced by

renewed vociferous proofs of the personal victory won, he depicted his

visit to the stage and the wonderful sight of Miriam on the field of

battle. Miss Tressilian inquired if he had found Mr. Sherringham with

her; to which he replied that, save across the footlights, she had not

been in touch with him. At this a soft exclamation broke from Biddy.

"Poor Peter! Where is he, then?"

Nick seemed to falter. "He's walking the streets."

"Walking the streets?"

"I don't know--I give it up!" our young man replied; and his tone, for

some minutes, reduced his companions to silence. But a little later

Biddy said:

"Was it for him this morning she wanted that place--when she asked you

to give yours back?"

"For him exactly. It's very odd she had just managed to keep it--for all

the good use he makes of it! She told me just now that she heard from

him, at his post, a short time ago, to the effect that he had seen in a

newspaper a statement she was going to do Juliet and that he firmly

intended, though the ways and means were not clear to him--his leave of

absence hadn't yet come out and he couldn't be sure when it would

come--to be present on her first night; whereby she must do him the

service to provide him a place. She thought this a speech rather in the

air, so that in the midst of all her cares she took no particular pains

about the matter. She had an idea she had really done with him for a

long time. But this afternoon what does he do but telegraph to her from

Southampton that he keeps his appointment and counts on her for a stall?

Unless she had got back mine she wouldn't have been able to help him.

When she was in Rosedale Road this morning she hadn't received his

telegram; but his promise, his threat, whatever it was, came back to

her: she had a vague foreboding and thought that on the chance she had

better hold something ready. When she got home she found his telegram,

and she told me he was the first person she saw in the house, through

her fright when she came on in the second act. It appears she was

terrified this time, and it lasted half through the play."

"She must be rather annoyed at his having gone away," Miss Tressilian

observed.

"Annoyed? I'm not so sure!" laughed Nick.

"Ah here he comes back!" cried Biddy, behind her fan, while the absentee

edged into his seat in time for the fifth act. He stood there a moment,

first looking round the theatre; then he turned his eyes to the box

occupied by his relatives, smiling and waving his hand.

"After that he'll surely come and see you," said Miss Tressilian.

"We shall see him as we go out," Biddy returned: "he must lose no more

time."

Nick looked at him with a glass, then exclaiming: "Well, I'm glad he has

pulled himself together!"

"Why what's the matter with him--if he wasn't disappointed of his seat?"

Miss Tressilian demanded.

"The matter with him is that a couple of hours ago he had a great

shock."

"A great shock?"

"I may as well mention it at last," Nick went on. "I had to say

something to him in the lobby there when we met--something I was pretty

sure he couldn't like. I let him have it full in the face--it seemed to

me better and wiser. I let him know that Juliet's married."

"Didn't he know it?" asked Biddy, who, with her face raised, had

listened in deep stillness to every word that fell from her brother.

"How should he have known it? It has only just taken place, and they've

been so clever, for reasons of their own--those people move among a lot

of considerations that are absolutely foreign to us--about keeping it

out of the papers. They put in a lot of lies and they leave out the real

things."

"You don't mean to say Mr. Sherringham wanted to \_marry\_ her!" Miss

Tressilian gasped.

"Don't ask me what he wanted--I daresay we shall never know. One thing's

very certain--that he didn't like my news, dear old Peter, and that I

shan't soon forget the look in his face as he turned away from me and

slipped out into the street. He was too much upset--he couldn't trust

himself to come back; he had to walk about--he tried to walk it off."

"Let us hope, then, he \_has\_ walked it off!"

"Ah poor fellow--he couldn't hold out to the end; he has had to come

back and look at her once more. He knows she'll be sublime in these last

scenes."

"Is he so much in love with her as that? What difference does it make

for an actress if she \_is\_ mar--?" But in this rash inquiry Miss

Tressilian suddenly checked herself.

"We shall probably never know how much he has been in love with her, nor

what difference it makes. We shall never know exactly what he came back

for, nor why he couldn't stand it out there any longer without relief,

nor why he scrambled down here all but straight from the station, nor

why after all, for the last two hours, he has been roaming the streets.

And it doesn't matter, for it's none of our business. But I'm sorry for

him--she is going to be sublime," Nick added. The curtain was rising on

the tragic climax of the play.

Miriam Rooth was sublime; yet it may be confided to the reader that

during these supreme scenes Bridget Dormer directed her eyes less to the

inspired actress than to a figure in the stalls who sat with his own

gaze fastened to the stage. It may further be intimated that Peter

Sherringham, though he saw but a fragment of the performance, read

clear, at the last, in the intense light of genius with which this

fragment was charged, that even so after all he had been rewarded for

his formidable journey. The great trouble of his infatuation subsided,

leaving behind it something appreciably deep and pure. This pacification

was far from taking place at once, but it was helped on, unexpectedly to

him--it began to work at least--the very next night he saw the play,

through the whole of which he then sat. He felt somehow recalled to the

real by the very felicity of this experience, the supreme exhibition

itself. He began to come back as from a far-off province of his history

where miserable madness had reigned. He had been baffled, he had got his

answer; it must last him--that was plain. He didn't fully accept it the

first week or the second; but he accepted it sooner than he could have

supposed had he known what it was to be when he paced at night, under

the southern stars, the deck of the ship bearing him to England.

It had been, as we know, Miss Tressilian's view, and even Biddy's, that

evening, that Peter Sherringham would join them as they left the

theatre. This view, however, was not confirmed by the event, for our

troubled gentleman vanished utterly--disappointingly crude behaviour on

the part of a young diplomatist who had distinguished himself--before

any one could put a hand on him. And he failed to make up for his

crudity by coming to see any one the next day, or even the next. Indeed

many days elapsed and very little would have been known about him had it

not been that, in the country, Mrs. Dallow knew. What Mrs. Dallow knew

was eventually known to Biddy Dormer; and in this way it could be

established in his favour that he had remained some extraordinarily

small number of days in London, had almost directly gone over to Paris

to see his old chief. He came back from Paris--Biddy learnt this not

from Julia, but in a much more immediate way: she knew it by his

pressing the little electric button at the door of Florence Tressilian's

flat one day when the good Florence was out and she herself was at home.

He made on this occasion a very long visit. The good Florence knew it

not much later, you may be sure--and how he had got their address from

Nick--and she took an extravagant pleasure in it. Mr. Sherringham had

never been to see \_her\_--the like of her--in his life: therefore it was

clear what had made him begin. When he had once begun he kept it up, and

Miss Tressilian's pleasure grew.

Good as she was, she could remember without the slightest relenting what

Nick Dormer had repeated to them at the theatre about the dreary side of

Peter's present post. However, she was not bound to make a stand at this

if persons more nearly concerned, Lady Agnes and the girl herself,

didn't mind it. How little \_they\_ minded it, and Grace and Julia Dallow

and even Nick, was proved in the course of a meeting that took place at

Harsh during the Easter holidays. The mistress of that seat had a small

and intimate party to celebrate her brother's betrothal. The two ladies

came over from Broadwood; even Nick, for two days, went back to his old

hunting-ground, and Miss Tressilian relinquished for as long a time the

delights of her newly arranged flat. Peter Sherringham obtained an

extension of leave, so that he might go back to his legation with a

wife. Fortunately, as it turned out, Biddy's ordeal, in the more or less

torrid zone, was not cruelly prolonged, for the pair have already

received a superior appointment. It is Lady Agnes's proud opinion that

her daughter is even now shaping their destiny. I say "even now," for

these facts bring me very close to contemporary history. During those

two days at Harsh Nick arranged with the former mistress of his fate the

conditions, as they might be called, under which she should sit to him;

and every one will remember in how recent an exhibition general

attention was attracted, as the newspapers said in describing the

private view, to the noble portrait of a lady which was the final

outcome of that arrangement. Gabriel Nash had been at many a private

view, but he was not at that one.

These matters are highly recent, however, as I say; so that in glancing

about the little circle of the interests I have tried to evoke I am

suddenly warned by a sharp sense of modernness. This renders it

difficult to me, for instance, in taking leave of our wonderful Miriam,

to do much more than allude to the general impression that her

remarkable career is even yet only in its early prime. Basil Dashwood

has got his theatre, and his wife--people know now she \_is\_ his

wife--has added three or four new parts to her repertory; but every one

is agreed that both in public and in private she has a great deal more

to show. This is equally true of Nick Dormer, in regard to whom I may

finally say that his friend Nash's predictions about his reunion with

Mrs. Dallow have not up to this time been justified. On the other hand,

I must not omit to add, this lady has not, at the latest accounts,

married Mr. Macgeorge. It is very true there has been a rumour that Mr.

Macgeorge is worried about her--has even ceased at all fondly to believe

in her.