There is a sense of joyance and of stir
Which frets, and makes me question and demur
Whether the holy life is best or not.

The saints forgive! What fiend has led me on?
Retro, Satanas, retro, — get thee hence!
Grazie, Signori, 't is the set of sun,
The angelus must ring. *Addio,* each one!
The poor monk thanks you for your recompense.

Susan Coolidge.

THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY.

XV.

It had been arranged that the two young ladies should proceed to London under Ralph's escort, though Mrs. Touchett looked with little favor upon the plan. It was just the sort of plan, she said, that Miss Stackpole would be sure to suggest, and she inquired if the correspondent of the Interviewer was to take the party to stay at a boarding-house.

"I don't care where she takes us to stay, so long as there is local color," said Isabel. "That is what we are going to London for."

"I suppose that after a girl has refused an English lord she may do anything," her aunt rejoined. "After that one need n't stand on trifles."

"Should you have liked me to marry Lord Warburton?" Isabel inquired.

"Of course I should."

"I thought you disliked the English so much."

"So I do; but it 's all the more reason for making use of them."

"Is that your idea of marriage?" And Isabel ventured to add that her aunt appeared to her to have made very little use of Mr. Touchett.

"Your uncle is not an English nobleman," said Mrs. Touchett, "though even if he had been, I should still probably have taken up my residence in Florence."

"Do you think Lord Warburton could make me any better than I am?" the girl asked, with some animation. "I don't mean, by that, that I am too good to improve. I mean — I mean that I don't love Lord Warburton enough to marry him."

"You did right to refuse him, then," said Mrs. Touchett, in her clear, sharp little voice. "Only, the next great offer you get, I hope you will manage to come up to your standard."

"We had better wait till the offer comes, before we talk about it. I hope very much that I may have no more offers for the present. They give me more pain than pleasure."

"You probably won't be troubled with them if you adopt permanently the Bohemian manner of life. However, I have promised Ralph not to criticise the affair."

"I will do whatever Ralph says is right," Isabel said. "I have unbounded confidence in Ralph."

"His mother is much obliged to you!" cried this lady, with a laugh.

"It seems to me she ought to be," Isabel rejoined, smiling.

Ralph had assured her that there would be no violation of decency in their paying a visit — the little party of

three — to the sights of the metropolis; but Mrs. Touchett took a different view. Like many ladies of her country who have lived a long time in Europe, she had completely lost her native tact on such points, and in her reaction, not in itself condemnable, against the liberty allowed to young persons beyond the seas had fallen into gratuitous and exaggerated scruples.

Ralph accompanied the two young ladies to town, and established them at a quiet inn in a street that ran at right angles to Piccadilly. His first idea had been to take them to his father's house in Winchester Square, a large, dull mansion, which at this period of the year was shrouded in silence and brown holland; but he bethought himself that, the cook being at Gardencourt, there was no one in the house to get them their meals; and Pratt's Hotel accordingly became their resting-place. Ralph, on his side, found quarters in Winchester Square, having a "den" there of which he was very fond, and not being dependent on the local *cuisine*. He availed himself largely, indeed, of that of Pratt's Hotel, beginning his day with an early visit to his fellow-travelers, who had Mr. Pratt in person, in a large, bulging white waistcoat, to remove their dish-covers. Ralph turned up, as he said, after breakfast, and the little party made out a scheme of entertainment for the day. As London does not wear in the month of September its most brilliant face, the young man, who occasionally took an apologetic tone, was obliged to remind his companion, to Miss Stackpole's high irritation, that there was not a creature in town.

"I suppose you mean that the aristocracy are absent," Henrietta answered; "but I don't think you could have a better proof that if they were absent altogether they would not be missed. It seems to me the place is about as full as it can be. There is no one here, of course, except three or four millions of people. What is it you call them, — the lower middle class? They are only the population of London, and that is of no consequence."

Ralph declared that for him the aristocracy left no void that Miss Stackpole herself did not fill, and that a more contented man was nowhere at that moment to be found. In this he spoke the truth, for the stale September days, in the huge, half-empty town, borrowed a charm from his circumstances. When he went home at night to the empty house in Winchester Square, after a day spent with his inquisitive countrywomen, he wandered into the big, dusky dining-room, where the candle he took from the hall table, after letting himself in, constituted the only illumination. The square was still, the house was still; when he raised one of the windows of the dining-room to let in the air, he heard the slow creak of the boots of a solitary policeman. His own step in the empty room seemed loud and sonorous; some of the carpets had been raised, and whenever he moved he roused a melancholy echo. He sat down in one of the arm-chairs; the big, dark dining-table twinkled here and there in the small candle-light; the pictures on the wall, all of them very brown, looked vague and incoherent. There was a ghostly presence in the room, as of dinners long since digested, of table-talk that had lost its actuality. This hint of the supernatural perhaps had something to do with the fact that Ralph's imagination took a flight, and that he remained in his chair a long time beyond the hour at which he should have been in bed; doing nothing, not even reading the evening paper. I say he did nothing, and I may maintain the phrase in the face of the fact that he thought at these moments of Isabel. To think of Isabel could only be for Ralph an idle pursuit, leading to nothing and profiting little to any one. His cousin had not yet seemed to him so charming as during these days

spent in sounding, tourist fashion, the deeps and shallows of the London art-world. Isabel was constantly interested and often excited; if she had come in search of local color, she found it everywhere. She asked more questions than he could answer, and propounded theories that he was equally unable to accept or to refute. The party went more than once to the British Museum, and to that brighter palace of art which reclaims for antique variety so large an area of a monotonous suburb; they spent a morning in the Abbey, and went on a penny steamer to the Tower; they looked at pictures both in public and private collections, and sat on various occasions beneath the great trees in Kensington Gardens. Henrietta Stackpole proved to be an indefatigable sight-seer, and a more good-natured critic than Ralph had ventured to hope. She had, indeed, many disappointments, and London at large suffered from her vivid remembrance of many of the cities of her native land; but she made the best of its dingy peculiarities, and only heaved an occasional sigh, and uttered a desultory "Well!" which led no further, and lost itself in retrospect. The truth was that, as she said herself, she was not in her element. "I have not a sympathy with inanimate objects," she remarked to Isabel at the National Gallery; and she continued to suffer from the meagreness of the glimpse that had as yet been vouchsafed to her of the inner life. Landscapes by Turner and Assyrian bulls were a poor substitute for the literary dinner-parties at which she had hoped to meet the genius and renown of Great Britain.

"Where are your public men? Where are your men and women of intellect?" Henrietta inquired of Ralph, standing in the middle of Trafalgar Square, as if she had supposed this to be a place where she would naturally meet a few. "That's one of them on the top of the column, you say, — Lord Nelson? Was he a lord, too? Was n't he high enough, that they had to stick him a hundred feet in the air? That 's the past, — I don't care about the past. I want to see some of the leading minds of the present, — I won't say of the future, because I don't believe much in your future." Poor Ralph had few leading minds among his acquaintance, and rarely enjoyed the pleasure of button-holing a celebrity, — a state of things which appeared to Miss Stackpole to indicate a deplorable want of enterprise. "If I were on the other side I should call," she said, "and tell the gentleman, whoever he might be, that I had heard a great deal about him and had come to see for myself. But I gather from what you say that this is not the custom here. You seem to have plenty of meaningless customs, and none of those that one really wants. We *are* in advance, certainly. I suppose I shall have to give up the social side altogether." And Henrietta, though she went about with her guide-book and pencil, and wrote a letter to the Interviewer about the Tower (in which she described the execution of Lady Jane Grey), had a depressing sense of falling below her own standard.

The incident which had preceded Isabel's departure from Gardencourt left a painful trace in the girl's mind; she took no pleasure in recalling Lord Warburton's handsome, bewildered face and softly reproachful tones. She could not have done less than what she did; this was certainly true. But her necessity, all the same, had been a distasteful one, and she felt no desire to take credit for her conduct. Nevertheless, mingled with this absence of an intellectual relish of it was a feeling of freedom which in itself was sweet, and which, as she wandered through the great city with her ill-matched companions, occasionally throbbed into joyous excitement. When she walked in Kensington Gardens, she stopped the children (mainly

of the poorer sort) whom she saw playing on the grass; she asked them their names and gave them sixpence, and when they were pretty she kissed them. Ralph noticed such incidents; he noticed everything that Isabel did.

One afternoon, by way of amusing his companions, he invited them to tea in Winchester Square, and he had the house set in order as much as possible, to do honor to their visit. There was another guest, also, to meet the ladies, an amiable bachelor, an old friend of Ralph's, who happened to be in town, and who got on uncommonly well with Miss Stackpole. Mr. Bantling, a stout, fair, smiling man of forty, who was extraordinarily well dressed, and whose contributions to the conversation were characterized by vivacity rather than continuity, laughed immoderately at everything Henrietta said, gave her several cups of tea, examined in her society the bricabrac, of which Ralph had a considerable collection, and afterwards, when the host proposed they should go out into the square and pretend it was a *fête-champêtre*, walked round the limited inclosure several times with her, and listened with candid interest to her remarks upon the inner life.

"Oh, I see," said Mr. Bantling. "I dare say you found it very quiet at Gardencourt. Naturally, there 's not much going on there when there 's such a lot of illness about. Touchett 's very bad, you know; the doctors have forbid his being in England at all, and he has only come back to take care of his father. The old man, I believe, has half a dozen things the matter with him. They call it gout, but to my certain knowledge he is dropsical as well, though he does n't look it. You may depend upon it, he has got a lot of water somewhere. Of course that sort of thing makes it awfully slow for people in the house; I wonder they have them, under such circumstances. Then I believe Mr. Touchett is always squabbling with his wife; she lives away from her husband, you know, in that extraordinary American way of yours. If you want a house where there is always something going on, I recommend you to go down and stay with my sister, Lady Pensil, in Bedfordshire. I 'll write to her to-morrow, and I am sure she 'll be delighted to ask you. I know just what you want: you want a house where they go in for theatricals and picnics and that sort of thing. My sister is just that sort of woman; she is always getting up something or other, and she is always glad to have the sort of people that help her. I am sure she 'll ask you down by return of post; she is tremendously fond of distinguished people and writers. She writes herself, you know; but I have n't read everything she has written. It 's usually poetry, and I don't go in much for poetry, — unless it 's Byron. I suppose you think a great deal of Byron in America," Mr. Bantling continued, expanding in the stimulating air of Miss Stackpole's attention, bringing up his sequences promptly, and at last changing his topic, with a natural eagerness to provide suitable conversation for so remarkable a woman. He returned, however, ultimately to the idea of Henrietta's going to stay with Lady Pensil, in Bedfordshire. "I understand what you want," he repeated: "you want to see some jolly good English sport. The Touchetts are not English at all, you know; they live on a kind of foreign system; they have got some awfully queer ideas. The old man thinks it 's wicked to hunt, I am told. You must get down to my sister's in time for the theatricals, and I am sure she will be glad to give you a part. I am sure you act well; I know you are very clever. My sister is forty years old, and she has seven children; but she is going to play the principal part. Of course you need n't act if you don't want to."

In this manner Mr. Bantling delivered himself, while they strolled over

the grass in Winchester Square, which, although it had been peppered by the London soot, invited the tread to linger. Henrietta thought her blooming, easy-voiced bachelor, with his impressibility to feminine merit and his suggestiveness of allusion, a very agreeable man, and she valued the opportunity he offered her.

"I don't know but I would go, if your sister should ask me," she said. "I think it would be my duty. What do you call her name?"

"Pensil. It's an odd name, but it is n't a bad one."

"I think one name is as good as another. But what is her rank?"

"Oh, she's a baron's wife; a convenient sort of rank. You are fine enough, and you are not too fine."

"I don't know but what she'd be too fine for me. What do you call the place she lives in, — Bedfordshire?"

"She lives away in the northern corner of it. It's a hideous country, but I dare say you won't mind that. I 'll try and run down while you are there."

All this was very pleasant to Miss Stackpole, and she was sorry to be obliged to separate from Lady Pensil's obliging brother. But it happened that she had met the day before, in Piccadilly, some friends whom she had not seen for a year, — the Miss Climbers, two ladies from Wilmington, Delaware, who had been traveling on the Continent, and were now preparing to reëmbark. Henrietta had a long interview with them on the Piccadilly pavement, and though the three ladies all talked at once they had not exhausted their accumulated topics. It had been agreed, therefore, that Henrietta should come and dine with them in their lodgings in Jermyn Street at six o'clock on the morrow, and she now bethought herself of this engagement. She prepared to start for Jermyn Street, taking leave first of Ralph Touchett and Isabel, who, seated on garden chairs in another part of the inclosure, were occupied — if the term may be used — with an exchange of amenities less pointed than the practical colloquy of Miss Stackpole and Mr. Bantling. When it had been settled between Isabel and her friend that they should be reunited at some reputable hour at Pratt's Hotel, Ralph remarked that the latter must have a cab; she could not walk all the way to Jermyn Street.

"I suppose you mean it's improper for me to walk alone!" Henrietta exclaimed. "Merciful powers! have I come to this?"

"There is not the slightest need of your walking alone," said Mr. Bantling, in an off-hand tone, expressive of gallantry. "I should be greatly pleased to go with you."

"I simply meant that you would be late for dinner," Ralph answered. "Think of those poor ladies, in their impatience, waiting for you!"

"You had better have a hansom, Henrietta," said Isabel.

"I will get you a hansom, if you will trust to me," Mr. Bantling went on. "We might walk a little till we met one."

"I don't see why I should n't trust to him, do you?" Henrietta inquired of Isabel.

"I don't see what Mr. Bantling could do to you," Isabel answered, smiling; "but if you like, we will walk with you till you find your cab."

"Never mind; we will go alone. Come on, Mr. Bantling, and take care you get me a good one."

Mr. Bantling promised to do his best, and the two took their departure, leaving Isabel and her cousin standing in the square, over which a clear September twilight had now begun to gather. It was perfectly still; the wide quadrangle of dusky houses showed lights in none of the windows, where the shutters and blinds were closed; the pavements were a vacant expanse, and putting aside

two small children from a neighboring slum, who, attracted by symptoms of abnormal animation in the interior, were squeezing their necks between the rusty railings of the inclosure, the most vivid object within sight was the big red pillar-post on the southeast corner.

"Henrietta will ask him to get into the cab and go with her to Jermyn Street," Ralph observed. He always spoke of Miss Stackpole as Henrietta.

"Very possibly," said his companion.

"Or rather, no, she won't," he went on. "But Bantling will ask leave to get in."

"Very likely again. I am very glad they are such good friends."

"She has made a conquest. He thinks her a brilliant woman. It may go far," said Ralph.

Isabel was silent a moment. "I call Henrietta a very brilliant woman; but I don't think it will go far," she rejoined at last. "They would never really know each other. He has not the least idea what she really is, and she has no just comprehension of Mr. Bantling."

"There is no more usual basis of matrimony than a mutual misunderstanding. But it ought not to be so difficult to understand Bob Bantling," Ralph added. "He is a very simple fellow."

"Yes, but Henrietta is simpler still! And pray, what am I to do?" Isabel asked, looking about her through the fading light, in which the limited landscape-gardening of the square took on a large and effective appearance. "I don't imagine that you will propose that you and I, for our amusement, should drive about London in a hansom."

"There is no reason why we should not stay here, — if you don't dislike it. It is very warm; there will be half an hour yet before dark; and if you permit it I will light a cigarette."

"You may do what you please," said Isabel, "if you will amuse me till seven o'clock. I propose at that hour to go back and partake of a simple and solitary repast — two poached eggs and a muffin — at Pratt's Hotel."

"May I not dine with you?" Ralph asked.

"No; you will dine at your club."

They had wandered back to their chairs in the centre of the square again, and Ralph had lighted his cigarette. It would have given him extreme pleasure to be present in person at the modest little feast she had sketched; but in default of this he liked even being forbidden. For the moment, however, he liked immensely being alone with her, in the thickening dusk, in the centre of the multitudinous town; it made her seem to depend upon him and to be in his power. This power he could exert but vaguely; the best exercise of it was to accept her decisions submissively. There was almost an emotion in doing so.

"Why won't you let me dine with you?" he asked, after a pause.

"Because I don't care for it."

"I suppose you are tired of me."

"I shall be, an hour hence. You see I have the gift of fore-knowledge."

"Oh, I shall be delightful meanwhile," said Ralph. But he said nothing more, and as Isabel made no rejoinder they sat some time in silence which seemed to contradict his promise of entertainment. It seemed to him that she was preoccupied, and he wondered what she was thinking about; there were two or three very possible subjects. At last he spoke again: "Is your objection to my society this evening caused by your expectation of another visitor?"

She turned her head, with a glance of her clear, fair eyes.

"Another visitor? What visitor should I have?"

He had none to suggest; which made his question seem to himself silly as well as brutal.

"You have a great many friends that

I don't know," he said, laughing a little awkwardly. "You have a whole past from which I was perversely excluded."

"You were reserved for my future. You must remember that my past is over there across the waters. There is none of it here in London."

"Very good, then, since your future is seated beside you. Capital thing to have your future so handy." And Ralph lighted another cigarette, and reflected that Isabel probably meant that she had received news that Mr. Caspar Goodwood had crossed to Paris. After he had lighted his cigarette he puffed it a while, and then he went on: "I promised a while ago to be very amusing; but you see I don't come up to the mark, and the fact is there is a good deal of temerity in my undertaking to amuse a person like you. What do you care for my feeble attempts? You have grand ideas, — you have a high standard in such matters. I ought at least to bring in a band of music or a company of mountebanks."

"One mountebank is enough, and you do very well. Pray go on, and in another ten minutes I shall begin to laugh."

"I assure you that I am very serious," said Ralph. "You do really ask a great deal."

"I don't know what you mean. I ask nothing!"

"You accept nothing," said Ralph. She colored, and now suddenly it seemed to her that she guessed his meaning. But why should he speak to her of such things? He hesitated a little, and then he continued: "There is something I should like very much to say to you. It 's a question I wish to ask. It seems to me I have a right to ask it, because I have a kind of interest in the answer."

"Ask what you will," Isabel answered gently, "and I will try and satisfy you."

"Well, then, I hope you won't mind my saying that Lord Warburton has told me of something that has passed between you."

Isabel started a little; then she sat looking at her open fan. "Very good; I suppose it was natural he should tell you."

"I have his leave to let you know he has done so. He has some hope still," said Ralph.

"Still?"

"He had it a few days ago."

"I don't believe he has any now," said the girl.

"I am very sorry for him, then; he is such a fine fellow."

"Pray, did he ask you to talk to me?"

"No, not that. But he told me because he could n't help it. We are old friends, and he was greatly disappointed. He sent me a line asking me to come and see him, and I rode over to Lockleigh the day before he and his sister lunched with us. He was very heavy-hearted; he had just got a letter from you."

"Did he show you the letter?" asked Isabel, with momentary loftiness.

"By no means. But he told me it was a neat refusal. I was very sorry for him," Ralph repeated.

For some moments Isabel said nothing; then, at last, "Do you know how often he had seen me? Five or six times."

"That 's to your glory."

"It 's not for that I say it."

"What, then, do you say it for? Not to prove that poor Warburton's state of mind is superficial, because I am pretty sure you don't think that."

Isabel certainly was unable to say that she thought it; but presently she said something else: "If you have not been requested by Lord Warburton to argue with me, then you are doing it disinterestedly, — or for the love of ar gument."

"I have no wish to argue with you at all. I only wish to leave you alone.

I am simply greatly interested in your own state of mind."

"I am greatly obliged to you!" cried Isabel, with a laugh.

"Of course you mean that I am meddling in what does n't concern me. But why should n't I speak to you of this matter without annoying you or embarrassing myself? What 's the use of being your cousin, if I can't have a few privileges? What is the use of adoring you without the hope of a reward, if I can't have a few compensations? What is the use of being ill and disabled, and restricted to mere spectatorship at the game of life, if I really can't see the show when I have paid so much for my ticket? Tell me this," Ralph went on, while Isabel listened to him with quickened attention: "What had you in your mind when you refused Lord Warburton?"

"What I had in my mind?"

"What was the logic — the view of your situation — that dictated so remarkable an act?"

"I did n't wish to marry him, — if that is logic."

"No, that is not logic, — and I knew that before. What was it you said to yourself? You certainly said more than that."

Isabel reflected a moment, and then she answered this inquiry with a question of her own: "Why do you call it a remarkable act? That is what your mother thinks, too."

"Warburton is such a fine fellow; as a man I think he has hardly a fault. And then he is what they call here a swell. He has immense possessions, and his wife would be thought a superior being. He unites the intrinsic and the extrinsic advantages."

Isabel watched her cousin while he spoke, as if to see how far he would go. "I refused him because he was too perfect, then. I am not perfect myself, and he is too good for me. Besides, his perfection would irritate me."

"That is ingenious rather than candid," said Ralph. "As a fact, you think nothing in the world too perfect for you."

"Do I think I am so good?"

"No; but you are exacting, all the same, without the excuse of thinking yourself good. Nineteen women out of twenty, however, even of the most exacting sort, would have contented themselves with Warburton. Perhaps you don't know how he has been run after."

"I don't wish to know. But it seems to me," said Isabel, "that you told me of several faults that he has, one day when I spoke of him to you."

Ralph looked grave. "I hope that what I said then had no weight with you; for they were not faults, the things I spoke of; they were simply peculiarities of his position. If I had known he wished to marry you, I would never have alluded to them. I think I said that as regards that position he was rather a skeptic. It would have been in your power to make him a believer."

"I think not. I don't understand the matter, and I am not conscious of any mission of that sort. You are evidently disappointed," Isabel added, looking gently but earnestly at her cousin. "You would have liked me to marry Lord Warburton."

"Not in the least. I am absolutely without a wish on the subject. I don't pretend to advise you, and I content myself with watching you, — with the deepest interest."

Isabel gave a rather conscious sigh.

"I wish I could be as interesting to myself as I am to you!"

"There you are not candid, again; you are extremely interesting to yourself. Do you know, however," said Ralph, "that if you have really given Lord Warburton his final answer I am rather glad it has been what it was? I don't mean I am glad for you, and still less, of course, for him. I am glad for myself."

"Are you thinking of proposing to me?"

"By no means. From the point of view I speak of, that would be fatal; I should overturn my own porridge. What I mean is, I shall have the entertainment of seeing what a young lady does who won't marry Lord Warburton."

"That is what your mother counts upon, too," said Isabel.

"Ah, there will be plenty of spectators! We shall contemplate the rest of your career. I shall not see all of it, but I shall probably see the most interesting years. Of course, if you were to marry our friend, you would still have a career, — a very honorable and brilliant one. But, relatively speaking, it would be a little prosaic. It would be definitively marked out in advance; it would be wanting in the unexpected. You know I am extremely fond of the unexpected, and now that you have kept the game in your hands I depend on your giving us some magnificent example of it."

"I don't understand you very well," said Isabel, "but I do so well enough to be able to say that if you look for magnificent examples of anything, I shall disappoint you."

"You will do so only by disappointing yourself, — and that will go hard with you!"

To this Isabel made no direct reply; there was an amount of truth in it which would bear consideration. At last she said, abruptly, "I don't see what harm there is in my wishing not to tie myself. I don't want to begin life by marrying. There are other things a woman can do."

"There is nothing she can do so well. But you are many-sided."

"If one is two-sided, it is enough," said Isabel.

"You are the most charming of polygons!" Ralph broke out, with a laugh. At a glance from his companion, however, he became grave, and to prove it he went on, "You want to see life, as the young men say."

"I don't think I want to see it as the young men want to see it; but I do want to look about me."

"You want to drain the cup of experience."

"No, I don't wish to touch the cup of experience. It's a poisoned drink! I only want to see for myself."

"You want to see, but not to feel," said Ralph.

"I don't think that if one is a sentient being one can make the distinction," Isabel returned. "I am a good deal like Henrietta. The other day, when I asked her if she wished to marry, she said, 'Not till I have seen Europe!' I too don't wish to marry until I have seen Europe."

"You evidently expect that a crowned head will be struck with you."

"No, that would be worse than marrying Lord Warburton. But it is getting very dark," Isabel continued, "and I must go home."

She rose from her place, but Ralph sat still a moment, looking at her. As he did not follow her, she stopped, and they remained a while exchanging a gaze, full on either side, but especially on Ralph's, of utterances too vague for words.

"You have answered my question," said Ralph at last. "You have told me what I wanted. I am greatly obliged to you."

"It seems to me I have told you very little."

"You have told me the great thing, — that the world interests you, and that you want to throw yourself into it."

Isabel's silvery eyes shone for a moment in the darkness. "I never said that."

"I think you meant it. Don't repudiate it; it's so fine!"

"I don't know what you are trying to fasten upon me, for I am not in the

least an adventurous spirit. Women are not like men."

Ralph slowly rose from his seat, and they walked together to the gate of the square. "No," he said: "women rarely boast of their courage; men do so with a certain frequency."

"Men have it to boast of!"

"Women have it, too; you have a great deal."

"Enough to go home in a cab to Pratt's Hotel; but not more."

Ralph unlocked the gate, and after they had passed out he fastened it.

"We will find your cab," he said; and as they turned towards a neighboring street, in which it seemed that this quest would be fruitful, he asked her again if he might not see her safely to the inn.

"By no means," she answered. "You are very tired; you must go home and go to bed."

The cab was found, and he helped her into it, standing a moment at the door.

"When people forget I am a sick man I am often annoyed," he said. "But it 's worse when they remember it."

XVI.

Isabel had had no hidden motive in wishing her cousin not to take her home; it simply seemed to her that for some days past she had consumed an inordinate quantity of his time, and the independent spirit of the American girl, who ends by regarding perpetual assistance as a sort of derogation to her sanity, had made her decide that for these few hours she must suffice to herself. She had, moreover, a great fondness for intervals of solitude, and since her arrival in England it had been but scantily gratified. It was a luxury she could always command at home, and she had missed it. That evening, however, an incident occurred which — had there been a critic to note it — would have taken all color from the theory that the love of solitude had caused her to dispense with Ralph's attendance. She was sitting, toward nine o'clock, in the dim illumination of Pratt's Hotel, trying with the aid of two tall candles to lose herself in a volume she had brought from Gardencourt, but succeeding only to the extent of reading other words on the page than those that were printed there, — words that Ralph had spoken to her in the afternoon.

Suddenly the well-muffled knuckle of the waiter was applied to the door, which presently admitted him, bearing the card of a visitor. This card, duly considered, offered to Isabel's startled vision the name of Mr. Caspar Goodwood. She let the servant stand before her inquiringly for some instants, without signifying her wishes.

"Shall I show the gentleman up, ma'am?" he asked at last, with a slightly encouraging inflection.

Isabel hesitated still, and while she hesitated she glanced at the mirror.

"He may come in," she said at last, and waited for him with some emotion.

Caspar Goodwood came in, and shook hands with her. He said nothing till the servant had left the room again; then he said, —

"Why did n't you answer my letter?" He spoke in a quick, full, slightly peremptory tone; the tone of a man whose questions were usually pointed, and who was capable of much insistence.

Isabel answered him by a question: —

"How did you know I was here?"

"Miss Stackpole let me know," said Caspar Goodwood. "She told me that you would probably be at home alone this evening, and would be willing to see me."

"Where did she see you — to tell you that?"

"She did n't see me; she wrote to me."

Isabel was silent. Neither of them had

seated themselves; they stood there with a certain air of defiance, or at least of resistance.

"Henrietta never told me that she was writing to you," Isabel said at last. "This is not kind of her."

"Is it so disagreeable to you to see me?" asked the young man.

"I did n't expect it. I don't like such surprises."

"But you knew I was in town; it was natural we should meet."

Do you call this meeting? I hoped I should not see you. In so large a place as London it seemed to me very possible."

"Apparently it was disagreeable to you even to write to me," said Mr. Goodwood.

Isabel made no answer to this; the sense of Henrietta Stackpole's treachery, as she momentarily qualified it, was strong within her.

"Henrietta is not delicate!" she exclaimed, with a certain bitterness. "It was a great liberty to take."

"I suppose I am not delicate, either. The fault is mine as much as hers."

As Isabel looked at him it seemed to her that his jaw had never been more square. This might have displeased her; nevertheless, she rejoined inconsequently, —

"No, it is not your fault so much as hers. What you have done is very natural."

"It is, indeed!" cried Caspar Goodwood, with a short laugh. "And now that I have come, at any rate, may I not stay?"

"You may sit down, certainly."

And Isabel went back to her chair again, while her visitor took the first place that offered, in the manner of a man accustomed to pay little thought to the sort of chair he sat in.

"I have been hoping every day for an answer to my letter," he said. "You might have written me a few lines."

"It was not the trouble of writing that prevented me; I could as easily have written you four pages as one. But my silence was deliberate; I thought it best."

He sat with his eyes fixed on hers while she said this; then he lowered them and attached them to a spot in the carpet, as if he were making a strong effort to say nothing but what he ought to say. He was a strong man in the wrong, and he was acute enough to see that an uncompromising exhibition of his strength would only throw the falsity of his position into relief. Isabel was not incapable of finding it agreeable to have an advantage of position over a person of this calibre, and though she was not a girl to flaunt her advantage in his face, she was woman enough to enjoy being able to say, "You know you ought not to have written to me yourself!" and to say it with a certain air of triumph.

Caspar Goodwood raised his eyes to hers again; they wore an expression of ardent remonstrance. He had a strong sense of justice, and he was ready any day in the year, over and above this, to argue the question of his rights.

"You said you hoped never to hear from me again; I know that. But I never accepted the prohibition. I promised you that you should hear very soon."

"I did not say that I hoped never to hear from you," said Isabel.

"Not for five years, then, — for ten years. It is the same thing."

"Do you find it so? It seems to me there is a great difference. I can imagine that at the end of ten years we might have a very pleasant correspondence. I expect to write a much more brilliant letter ten years hence than I do now."

Isabel looked away while she spoke these words, for she knew they were of a much less earnest cast than the countenance of her listener. Her eyes, however, at last came back to him, just as he said, very irrelevantly, —

"Are you enjoying your visit to your uncle?"

"Very much indeed." She hesitated, and then she broke out with even greater irrelevance, "What good do you expect to get by insisting?"

"The good of not losing you."

"You have no right to talk about losing what is not yours. And even from your own point of view," Isabel added, "you ought to know when to let one alone."

"I displease you very much," said Caspar Goodwood gloomily; not as if to provoke her to compassion for a man conscious of this blighting fact, but as if to set it well before himself, so that he might endeavor to act with his eyes upon it.

"Yes, you displease me very much, and the worst is that it is needless."

Isabel knew that his was not a soft nature, from which pin-pricks would draw blood; and from the first of her acquaintance with him, and of her having to defend herself against a certain air that he had of knowing better what was good for her than she knew herself, she had recognized the fact that perfect frankness was her best weapon. To attempt to spare his sensibility or make her opposition oblique, as one might do with men smaller and superficially more irritable, — this, in dealing with Caspar Goodwood, who would take everything of every sort that one might give him, was superfluous diplomacy. It was not that he had not susceptibilities, but his passive surface, as well as his active, was large and firm, and he might always be trusted to dress his wounds himself. In measuring the effect of his suffering, one might always reflect that he had a sound constitution.

"I can't reconcile myself to that," he said.

There was a dangerous magnanimity about this; for Isabel felt that it was quite open to him to say that he had not always displeased her.

"I can't reconcile myself to it, either, and it is not the state of things that ought to exist between us. If you would only try and banish me from your mind for a few months, we should be on good terms again."

"I see. If I should cease to think of you for a few months, I should find I could keep it up indefinitely."

"Indefinitely is more than I ask. It is more even than I should like."

"You know that what you ask is impossible," said the young man, taking his adjective for granted in a manner that Isabel found irritating.

"Are you not capable of making an effort?" she demanded. "You are strong for everything else; why should n't you be strong for that?"

"Because I am in love with you," said Caspar Goodwood simply. "If one is strong, one loves only the more strongly."

"There is a good deal in that;" and indeed our young lady felt the force of it. "Think of me or not, as you find most possible; only leave me alone."

"Until when?"

"Well, for a year or two."

"Which do you mean? Between one year and two there is a great difference."

"Call it two, then," said Isabel, wondering whether a little cynicism might not be effective.

"And what shall I gain by that?" Mr. Goodwood asked, giving no sign of wincing.

"You will have obliged me greatly."

"But what will be my reward?"

"Do you need a reward for an act of generosity?"

"Yes, when it involves a great sacrifice."

"There is no generosity without sacrifice. Men don't understand such things. If you make this sacrifice I shall admire you greatly."

"I don't care a straw for your admiration. Will you marry me? That is the question."

"Assuredly not, if I feel as I feel at present."

"Then I ask again what I shall gain."

"You will gain quite as much as by worrying me to death!"

Caspar Goodwood bent his eyes again, and gazed for a while into the crown of his hat. A deep flush overspread his face, and Isabel could perceive that this dart at last had struck home. To see a strong man in pain had something terrible for her, and she immediately felt very sorry for her visitor.

"Why do you make me say such things to you?" she cried, in a trembling voice. "I only want to be gentle, — to be kind. It is not delightful to me to feel that people care for me, and yet to have to try and reason them out of it. I think others also ought to be considerate; we have each to judge for ourselves. I know you are considerate, as much as you can be; you have good reasons for what you do. But I don't want to marry. I shall probably never marry. I have a perfect right to feel that way, and it is no kindness to a woman to urge her, — to persuade her against her will. If I give you pain, I can only say I am very sorry. It is not my fault; I can't marry you simply to please you. I won't say that I shall always remain your friend, because when women say that, in these circumstances, it is supposed, I believe, to be a sort of mockery. But try me some day."

Caspar Goodwood, during this speech, had kept his eyes fixed upon the name of his hatter, and it was not until some time after she had ceased speaking that he raised them. When he did so, the sight of a certain rosy, lovely eagerness in Isabel's face threw some confusion into his attempt to analyze what she had said. "I will go home, — I will go to morrow. I will leave you alone," he murmured at last. "Only," he added in a louder tone, "I hate to lose sight of you!"

"Never fear. I will do no harm."

"You will marry some one else," said Caspar Goodwood.

"Do you think that is a generous charge?"

"Why not? Plenty of men will ask you."

"I told you just now that I don't wish to marry, and that I shall probably never do so."

"I know you did; but I don't believe it."

"Thank you very much. You appear to think I am attempting to deceive you; you say very delicate things."

"Why should I not say that? You have given me no promise that you will not marry."

"No; that is all that would be wanting!" cried Isabel, with a bitter laugh.

"You think you won't, but you will," her visitor went on, as if he were preparing himself for the worst.

"Very well, I will, then. Have it as you please."

"I don't know, however," said Caspar Goodwood, "that my keeping you in sight would prevent it."

"Don't you, indeed? I am, after all, very much afraid of you. Do you think I am so very easily pleased?" she asked suddenly, changing her tone.

"No, I don't; I shall try and con sole myself with that. But there are a certain number of very clever men in the world; if there were only one, it would be enough. You will be sure to take no one who is not."

"I don't need the aid of a clever man to teach me how to live," said Isabel. "I can find it out for myself."

"To live alone, do you mean? I wish that when you have found that out you would teach me."

Isabel glanced at him a moment; then, with a quick smile, "Oh, *you* ought to marry!" she said.

Poor Caspar may be pardoned if for an instant this exclamation seemed to him to have the infernal note, and I can-

not take upon myself to say that Isabel uttered it in obedience to a strictly celestial impulse. It was a fact, however, that it had always seemed to her that Caspar Goodwood, of all men, ought to enjoy the whole devotion of some tender woman. "God forgive you!" he murmured between his teeth, turning away.

Her exclamation had put her slightly in the wrong, and after a moment she felt the mind to right herself. The easiest way to do it was to put her suitor in the wrong. "You do me great injustice, — you say what you don't know!" she broke out. "I should not be an easy victim; I have proved it."

"Oh, to me, perfectly."

"I have proved it to others as well," and she paused a moment. "I refused a proposal of marriage last week, — what they call a brilliant one."

"I am very glad to hear it," said the young man, gravely.

"It was a proposal that many girls would have accepted. It had everything to recommend it." Isabel had hesitated to tell this story, but now she had begun, the satisfaction of speaking it out, and doing herself justice, as it were, took possession of her. "I was offered a great position and a great fortune, — by a person whom I like extremely."

Caspar was gazing at her with great interest. "Is he an Englishman?"

"He is an English nobleman," said Isabel.

Mr. Goodwood received this announcement in silence; then, at last, he said, "I am glad he is disappointed."

"Well, then, as you have companions in misfortune, make the best of it."

"I don't call him a companion," said Caspar, grimly.

"Why not, since I declined his offer absolutely?"

"That does n't make him my companion. Besides, he 's an Englishman."

"And pray, is not an Englishman a human being?" Isabel inquired.

"Oh, no; he 's superhuman."

"You are angry," said the girl. "We have discussed this matter quite enough."

"Oh, yes, I am angry. I plead guilty to that!"

Isabel turned away from him, and walked to the open window, where she stood a moment looking into the dusky vacancy of the street, where a turbid gaslight alone represented social animation. For some time neither of these two young persons spoke; Caspar lingered near the chimney-piece, with his eyes gloomily fixed upon our heroine. She had virtually requested him to withdraw, — he knew that; but at the risk of making himself odious to her he kept his ground. She was far too dear to him to be easily forfeited, and he had sailed across the Atlantic to extract some pledge from her. Presently she left the window, and stood before him again.

"You do me very little justice," she said, "after my telling you what I told you just now. I am sorry I told you, since it matters so little to you."

"Ah," cried the young man, "if you were thinking of *me* when you did it!" And then he paused, with the fear that she might contradict so happy a thought.

"I was thinking of you a little," said Isabel.

"A little? I don't understand. If the knowledge that I love you had any weight with you at all, it must have had a good deal."

Isabel shook her head impatiently, as if to carry off a blush. "I have refused a noble gentleman. Make the most of that."

"I thank you, then," said Caspar Goodwood, gravely. "I thank you immensely."

"And now you had better go home."

"May I not see you again?" he asked.

"I think it is better not. You will be sure to talk of this, and you see it leads to nothing."

"I promise you not to say a word that will annoy you."

Isabel reflected a little, and then she said, "I return in a day or two to my uncle's, and I can't propose to you to come there; it would be very inconsistent."

Caspar Goodwood, on his side, debated within himself. "You must do me justice, too. I received an invitation to your uncle's more than a week ago, and I declined it."

"From whom was your invitation?" Isabel asked, surprised.

"From Mr. Ralph Touchett, whom I suppose to be your cousin. I declined it because I had not your authorization to accept it. The suggestion that Mr. Touchett should invite me appeared to have come from Miss Stackpole."

"It certainly did n't come from me. Henrietta certainly goes very far," Isabel added.

"Don't be too hard on her; that touches me."

"No; if you declined, that was very proper of you, and I thank you for it." And Isabel gave a little exhalation of dismay at the thought that Lord Warburton and Mr. Goodwood might have met at Gardencourt. It would have been so awkward for Lord Warburton!

"When you leave your uncle, where are you going?" Caspar asked.

"I shall go abroad with my aunt, — to Florence and other places."

The serenity of this announcement struck a chill to the young man's heart; he seemed to see her whirled away into circles from which he was inexorably excluded. Nevertheless, he went on quickly with his questions: "And when shall you come back to America?"

"Perhaps not for a long time; I am very happy here."

"Do you mean to give up your country?"

"Don't be an infant."

"Well, you will be out of my sight, indeed!" said Caspar Goodwood.

"I don't know," she answered, rather grandly. "The world strikes me as small."

"It is too large for me!" Caspar exclaimed, with a simplicity which our young lady might have found touching if her face had not been set against concessions.

This attitude was part of a system, a theory, that she had lately embraced, and to be thorough she said, after a moment, "Don't think me unkind if I say that it's just that — being out of your sight — that I like. If you were in the same place as I, I should feel as if you were watching me, and I don't like that. I like my liberty too much. If there is a thing in the world that I am fond of," Isabel went on, with a slight recurrence of the grandeur that had shown itself a moment before, "it is my personal independence."

But whatever there was of grandeur in this speech moved Caspar Goodwood's admiration; there was nothing that displeased him in the sort of feeling it expressed. This feeling not only did no violence to his way of looking at the girl he wished to make his wife, but seemed a grace the more in so ardent a spirit. To his mind she had always had wings, and this was but the flutter of those stainless pinions. He was not afraid of having a wife with a certain largeness of movement; he was a man of long steps himself. Isabel's words, if they had been meant to shock him, failed of the mark, and only made him smile with the sense that here was common ground. "Who would wish less to curtail your liberty than I?" he asked. "What can give me greater pleasure than to see you perfectly independent — doing whatever you like? It is to make you independent that I want to marry you."

"That's a beautiful sophism," said

the girl, with a smile more beautiful still.

"An unmarried woman, a girl of your age, is not independent. There are all sorts of things she can't do. She is hampered at every step."

"That 's as she looks at the question," Isabel answered, with much spirit. "I am not in my first youth; I can do what I choose; I belong quite to the independent class. I have neither father nor mother; I am poor; I am of a serious disposition, and not pretty. I therefore am not bound to be timid and conventional; indeed, I can't afford such luxuries. Besides, I try to judge things for myself; to judge wrong, I think, is more honorable than not to judge at all. I don't wish to be a mere sheep in the flock; I wish to choose my fate, and know something of human affairs beyond what other people think it compatible with propriety to tell me." She paused a moment, but not long enough for her companion to reply. He was apparently on the point of doing so, when she went on: "Let me say this to you, Mr. Goodwood. You are so kind as to speak of being afraid of my marrying. If you should hear any rumor that I am on the point of doing so, — girls are liable to have such things said about them, — remember what I have told you about my love of liberty, and venture to doubt it."

There was something almost passionately positive in the tone in which Isabel gave him this advice, and he saw a shining candor in her eyes which helped him to believe her. On the whole, he felt reassured, and you might have perceived it by the manner in which he said, quite eagerly, "You want simply to travel for two years? I am quite willing to wait two years, and you may do what you like in the interval. If that is all you want, pray say so. I don't want you to be conventional; do I strike you as conventional myself? Do you want to improve your mind? Your mind is quite good enough for me; but if it interests you to wander about a while and see different countries, I shall be delighted to help you, in any way in my power."

"You are very generous; that is nothing new to me. The best way to help me will be to put as many hundred miles of sea between us as possible."

"One would think you were going to commit a crime!" said Caspar Goodwood.

"Perhaps I am. I wish to be free even to do that, if the fancy takes me."

"Well, then," he said, slowly, "I will go home;" and he put out his hand, trying to look contented and confident.

Isabel's confidence in him, however, was greater than any he could feel in her. Not that he thought her capable of committing a crime; but, turn it over as he would, there was something ominous in the way she reserved her option. As Isabel took his hand, she felt a great respect for him; she knew how much he cared for her, and she thought him magnanimous. They stood so for a moment, looking at each other, united by a hand-clasp which was not merely passive on her side. "That 's right," she said, very kindly, almost tenderly. "You will lose nothing by being a reasonable man."

"But I will come back, wherever you are, two years hence," he returned, with characteristic grimness.

We have seen that our young lady was inconsequent, and at this she suddenly changed her note: "Ah, remember, I promise nothing, — absolutely nothing!" Then, more softly, as if to help him to leave her, she added, "And remember, too, that I shall not be an easy victim!"

"You will get very sick of your independence."

"Perhaps I shall; it is even very probable. When that day comes, I shall be very glad to see you."

She had laid her hand on the knob of the door that led into her own room, and she waited a moment to see whether her visitor would not take his departure. But he appeared unable to move; there was still an immense unwillingness in his attitude, a deep remonstrance in his eyes.

"I must leave you now," said Isabel; and she opened the door, and passed into the other room.

This apartment was dark, but the darkness was tempered by a vague radiance sent up through the window from the court of the hotel, and Isabel could make out the masses of the furniture, the dim shining of the mirror, and the looming of the big four-posted bed. She stood still a moment, listening, and at last she heard Caspar Goodwood walk out of the sitting-room and close the door behind him. She stood still a moment longer, and then, by an irresistible impulse, she dropped on her knees before her bed, and hid her face in her arms.

XVII.

She was not praying; she was trembling, — trembling all over. She was an excitable creature, and now she was much excited; but she wished to resist her excitement, and the attitude of prayer, which she kept for some time, seemed to help her to be still. She was extremely glad Caspar Goodwood was gone; there was something exhilarating in having got rid of him. As Isabel became conscious of this feeling she bowed her head a little lower. The feeling was there, throbbing in her heart; it was a part of her emotion; but it was a thing to be ashamed of, — it was profane and out of place. It was not for some ten minutes that she rose from her knees, and when she came back to the sitting-room she was still trembling a little. Her agitation had two causes: part of it was to be accounted for by her long discussion with Mr. Goodwood, but it might be feared that the rest was simply the enjoyment she found in the exercise of her power. She sat down in the same chair again, and took up her book, but without going through the form of opening the volume. She leaned back, with that low, soft, aspiring murmur with which she often expressed her gladness in accidents of which the brighter side was not superficially obvious, and gave herself up to the satisfaction of having refused two ardent suitors within a fortnight. That love of liberty of which she had given Caspar Goodwood so bold a sketch was as yet almost exclusively theoretic; she had not been able to indulge it on a large scale. But it seemed to her that she had done something: she had tasted of the delight, if not of battle, at least of victory; she had done what she preferred. In the midst of this agreeable sensation the image of Mr. Goodwood taking his sad walk homeward through the dingy town presented itself with a certain reproachful force; so that, as at the same moment the door of the room was opened, she rose quickly, with an apprehension that he had come back. But it was only Henrietta Stackpole returning from her dinner.

Miss Stackpole immediately saw that something had happened to Isabel, and indeed the discovery demanded no great penetration. Henrietta went straight up to her friend, who received her without a greeting. Isabel's elation in having sent Caspar Goodwood back to America presupposed her being glad that he had come to see her; but at the same time she perfectly remembered that Henrietta had had no right to set a trap for her.

"Has he been here, dear?" Miss Stackpole inquired, softly.

Isabel turned away, and for some moments answered nothing.

"You acted very wrongly," she said at last.

"I acted for the best, dear. I only hope you acted as well."

"You are not the judge. I can't trust you," said Isabel.

This declaration was unflattering, but Henrietta was much too unselfish to heed the charge it conveyed; she cared only for what it intimated with regard to her friend.

"Isabel Archer," she declared, with equal abruptness and solemnity, "if you marry one of these people, I will never speak to you again!"

"Before making so terrible a threat, you had better wait till I am asked," Isabel replied. Never having said a word to Miss Stackpole about Lord Warburton's overtures, she had now no impulse whatever to justify herself to Henrietta by telling her that she had refused that nobleman.

"Oh, you 'll be asked quick enough, when once you get off on the Continent. Annie Climber was asked three times in Italy, — poor, plain little Annie."

"Well, if Annie Climber was not captured, why should I be?"

"I don't believe Annie was pressed; but you 'll be."

"That 's a flattering conviction," said Isabel, with a laugh.

"I don't flatter you, Isabel; I tell you the truth!" cried her friend. "I hope you don't mean to tell me that you did n't give Mr. Goodwood some hope!"

"I don't see why I should tell you anything; as I said to you just now, I can't trust you. But since you are so much interested in Mr. Goodwood, I won't conceal from you that he returns immediately to America."

"You don't mean to say you have sent him off?" Henrietta broke out in dismay.

"I asked him to leave me alone; and I ask you the same, Henrietta."

Miss Stackpole stood there with expanded eyes, and then she went to the mirror over the chimney-piece and took off her bonnet.

"I hope you have enjoyed your dinner," Isabel remarked, lightly, as she did so.

But Miss Stackpole was not to be diverted by frivolous propositions, nor bribed by the offer of autobiographic opportunities.

"Do you know where you are going, Isabel Archer?"

"Just now I am going to bed," said Isabel, with persistent frivolity.

"Do you know where you are drifting?" Henrietta went on, holding out her bonnet delicately.

"No, I have n't the least idea, and I find it very pleasant not to know. A swift carriage, of a dark night, rattling with four horses over roads that one can't see, — that 's my idea of happiness."

"Mr. Goodwood certainly did n't teach you to say such things as that, — like the heroine of an immoral novel," said Miss Stackpole. "You are drifting to some great mistake."

Isabel was irritated by her friend's interference, but even in the midst of her irritation she tried to think what truth this declaration could represent. She could think of nothing that diverted her from saying, "You must be very fond of me, Henrietta, to be willing to be so disagreeable to me."

"I love you, Isabel," said Miss Stackpole, with feeling.

"Well, if you love me, let me alone. I asked that of Mr. Goodwood, and I must also ask it of you."

"Take care you are not let alone too much."

"That is what Mr. Goodwood said to me. I told him I must take the risks."

"You are a creature of risks; you make me shudder!" cried Henrietta. "When does Mr. Goodwood return to America?"

"I don't know; he did n't tell me."

"Perhaps you did n't inquire," said

Henrietta, with the note of righteous irony.

"I gave him too little satisfaction to have the right to ask questions of him."

This assertion seemed to Miss Stackpole, for a moment, to bid defiance to comment; but at last she exclaimed, "Well, Isabel, if I did n't know you, I might think you were heartless!"

"Take care," said Isabel; "you are spoiling me."

"I am afraid I have done that already. I hope, at least," Miss Stackpole added, "that he may cross with Annie Climber!"

Isabel learned from her the next morning that she had determined not to return to Gardencourt (where old Mr. Touchett had promised her a renewed welcome), but to await in London the arrival of the invitation that Mr. Bantling had promised her from his sister, Lady Pensil. Miss Stackpole related very freely her conversation with Ralph Touchett's sociable friend, and declared to Isabel that she really believed she had now got hold of something that would lead to something. On the receipt of Lady Pensil's letter — Mr. Bantling had virtually guaranteed its arrival — she would immediately depart for Bedfordshire, and if Isabel cared to look out for her impressions in the Interviewer she would certainly find them. Henrietta was evidently going to see something of the inner life this time.

"Do you know where you are drifting, Henrietta Stackpole?" Isabel asked, imitating the tone in which her friend had spoken the night before.

"I am drifting to a big position, — to being the queen of American journalism. If my next letter is n't copied all over the West, I 'll swallow my pen-wiper!"

She had arranged with her friend, Miss Annie Climber, the young lady of the Continental offers, that they should go together to make those purchases which were to constitute Miss Climber's farewell to a hemisphere in which she at least had been appreciated; and she presently repaired to Jermyn Street to pick up her companion. Shortly after her departure Ralph Touchett was announced, and, as soon as he came in, Isabel saw that he had, as the phrase is, something on his mind. He very soon took his cousin into his confidence. He had received a telegram from his mother, telling him that his father had had a sharp attack of his old malady, that she was much alarmed, and that she begged Ralph would instantly return to Gardencourt. On this occasion, at least, Mrs. Touchett's devotion to the electric wire had nothing incongruous.

"I have judged it best to see the great doctor, Sir Matthew Hope, first," Ralph said. "By great good luck, he 's in town. He is to see me at half past twelve, and I shall make sure of his coming down to Gardencourt, — which he will do the more readily as he has already seen my father several times, both there and in London. There is an express at 2.45, which I shall take, and you will come back with me, or remain here a few days longer, exactly as you prefer."

"I will go with you!" Isabel exclaimed. "I don't suppose I can be of any use to my uncle, but if he is ill I should like to be near him."

"I think you like him," said Ralph, with a certain shy pleasure in his eye. "You appreciate him, which all the world has n't done. The quality is too fine."

"I think I love him," said Isabel, simply.

"That 's very well. After his son, he is your greatest admirer."

Isabel welcomed this assurance, but she gave secretly a little sigh of relief at the thought that Mr. Touchett was one of those admirers who could not propose to marry her. This, however, was not what she said; she went on to inform Ralph that there were other rea-

sons why she should not remain in London. She was tired of it, and wished to leave it; and then Henrietta was going away, — going to stay in Bedfordshire.

"In Bedfordshire?" Ralph exclaimed, with surprise.

"With Lady Pensil, the sister of Mr. Bantling, who has answered for an invitation."

Ralph was feeling anxious, but at this he broke into a laugh. Suddenly, however, he looked grave again. "Bantling is a man of courage. But if the invitation should get lost on the way?"

"I thought the British post-office was impeccable."

"The good Homer sometimes nods," said Ralph. "However," he went on, more brightly, "the good Bantling never does, and, whatever happens, he will take care of Henrietta."

Ralph went to keep his appointment with Sir Matthew Hope, and Isabel made her arrangements for quitting Pratt's Hotel. Her uncle's danger touched her nearly, and while she stood before her open trunk, looking about her vaguely for what she should put into it, the tears suddenly rushed into her eyes. It was perhaps for this reason that when Ralph came back, at two o' clock, to take her to the station she was not yet ready. He found Miss Stackpole, however, in the sitting-room, where she had just risen from the lunch-table, and this lady immediately expressed her regret at his father's illness.

"He is a grand old man," she said; "he is faithful to the last. If it is really to be the last, — excuse my alluding to it, but you must often have thought of the possibility, — I am sorry that I shall not be at Gardencourt."

"You will amuse yourself much more in Bedfordshire."

"I shall be sorry to amuse myself at such a time," said Henrietta, with much propriety. But she immediately added, "I should like so to commemorate the closing scene."

"My father may live a long time," said Ralph, simply. Then, adverting to topics more cheerful, he interrogated Miss Stackpole as to her own future.

Now that Ralph was in trouble, she addressed him in a tone of larger allowance, and told him that she was much indebted to him for having made her acquainted with Mr. Bantling. "He has told me just the things I want to know," she said; "all the society items and all about the royal family. I can't make out that what he tells me about the royal family is much to their credit; but he says that 's only my peculiar way of looking at it. Well, all I want is that he should give me the facts; I can put them together quick enough, when once I 've got them." And she added that Mr. Bantling had been so good as to promise to come and take her out in the afternoon.

"To take you where?" Ralph ventured to inquire.

"To Buckingham Palace. He is going to show me over it, so that I may get some idea how they live."

"Ah," said Ralph, "we leave you in good hands. The first thing we shall hear is that you are invited to Windsor Castle."

"If they ask me, I shall certainly go. Once I get started I am not afraid. But for all that," Henrietta added, in a moment, "I am not satisfied; I am not satisfied about Isabel."

"What is her last misdemeanor?"

"Well, I have told you before, and I suppose there is no harm in my going on. I always finish a subject that I take up. Mr. Goodwood was here last night."

Ralph opened his eyes. He even blushed a little, — his blush being the sign of an emotion somewhat acute. He remembered that Isabel, in separating from him in Winchester Square, had repudiated his suggestion that her motive in doing so was the expectation of a visitor at Pratt's Hotel, and it was a novel

sensation to him to have to suspect her of duplicity. On the other hand, he quickly said to himself, What concern was it of his that she should have made an appointment with a lover? Had it not been thought graceful in every age that young ladies should make a secret of such appointments? Ralph made Miss Stackpole a diplomatic answer: "I should have thought that, with the views you expressed to me the other day, that would satisfy you perfectly."

"That he should come to see her? That was very well, as far as it went. It was a little plot of mine; I let him know that we were in London, and when it had been arranged that I should spend the evening out I just sent him a word, — a word to the wise. I hoped he would find her alone; I won't pretend I did n't hope that you would be out of the way. He came to see her; but he might as well have stayed away."

"Isabel was cruel?" Ralph inquired, smiling, and relieved at learning that his cousin had not deceived him.

"I don't exactly know what passed between them. But she gave him no satisfaction, — she sent him back to America."

"Poor Mr. Goodwood!" Ralph exclaimed.

"Her only idea seems to be to get rid of him," Henrietta went on.

"Poor Mr. Goodwood!" repeated Ralph. The exclamation, it must be confessed, was somewhat mechanical. It failed exactly to express his thoughts, which were taking another line.

"You don't say that as if you felt it. I don't believe you care."

"Ah," said Ralph, "you must remember that I don't know this interesting young man, — that I have never seen him."

"Well, I shall see him, and I shall tell him not to give up. If I did n't believe Isabel would come round," said Miss Stackpole, — "well, I 'd give her up myself!"

XVIII.

It had occurred to Ralph that, under the circumstances, Isabel's parting with Miss Stackpole might be of a slightly embarrassed nature, and he went down to the door of the hotel in advance of his cousin, who after a slight delay followed, with the traces of an unaccepted remonstrance, as he thought, in her eye. The two made the journey to Gardencourt in almost unbroken silence, and the servant who met them at the station had no better news to give them of Mr. Touchett, — a fact which caused Ralph to congratulate himself afresh on Sir Matthew Hope's having promised to come down in the five-o'clock train and spend the night. Mrs. Touchett, he learned, on reaching home, had been constantly with the old man, and was with him at that moment; and this fact made Ralph say to himself that, after all, what his mother wanted was simply opportunity. The finest natures were those that shone on large occasions. Isabel went to her own room, noting, throughout the house that perceptible hush which precedes a crisis. At the end of an hour, however, she came downstairs, in search of her aunt, whom she wished to ask about Mr. Touchett. She went into the library, but Mrs. Touchett was not there, and as the day, which had been damp and chill, was now apparently on the point of breaking into storm it was not probable that she had gone for her usual walk in the grounds. Isabel was on the point of ringing to send an inquiry to her room, when her attention was taken by an unexpected sound, — the sound of low music, proceeding, apparently, from the drawing-room. She knew that her aunt never touched the piano, and the musician was therefore probably Ralph, who played for his own amusement. That he should have resorted to this recreation at the present time indicated, evidently, that his anxiety about his

father had been relieved; so that Isabel took her way to the drawing-room with much alertness. The drawing-room at Gardencourt was an apartment of great distances, and as the piano was placed at the end of it furthest removed from the door at which Isabel entered, her arrival was not noticed by the person seated before the instrument. This person was neither Ralph nor his mother; it was a lady whom Isabel immediately saw to be a stranger to herself, although her back was presented to the door. This back — an ample and well-dressed one — Isabel contemplated for some moments in surprise. The lady was of course a visitor, who had arrived during her absence, and who had not been mentioned by either of the servants — one of them her aunt's maid — of whom she had had speech since her return. Isabel had already learned, however, that the British domestic is not effusive, and she was particularly conscious of having been treated with dryness by her aunt's maid, whose offered assistance the young lady from Albany — versed, as young ladies are in Albany, in the very metaphysics of the toilet — had suffered her to perceive that she deemed obstructive. The arrival of a visitor was far from disagreeable to Isabel; she had not yet divested herself of a youthful impression that each new acquaintance would exert some momentous influence upon her life. By the time she had made these reflections, she became aware that the lady at the piano played remarkably well. She was playing something of Beethoven's, — Isabel knew not what, but she recognized Beethoven,— and she touched the piano softly and discreetly, but with evident skill. Her touch was that of an artist.

Isabel sat down, noiselessly, on the nearest chair, and waited till the end of the piece. When it was finished she felt a strong desire to thank the player, and rose from her seat to do so, while at the same time the lady at the piano turned quickly round, as if she had become aware of her presence.

"That is very beautiful, and your playing makes it more beautiful still," said Isabel, with all the young radiance with which she usually uttered a truthful rapture.

"You don't think I disturbed Mr. Touchett, then?" the musician answered as sweetly as this compliment deserved. "The house is so large, and his room so far away, that I thought I might venture, especially as I played just — just *du bout des doigts*."

"She is a Frenchwoman," Isabel said to herself; "she says that as if she were French." And this supposition made the stranger more interesting to our speculative heroine. "I hope my uncle is doing well," Isabel added. "I should think that to hear such lovely music as that would really make him feel better."

The lady gave a discriminating smile.

"I am afraid there are moments in life when even Beethoven has nothing to say to us. We must admit, however, that they are our worst moments."

"I am not in that state now," said Isabel. "On the contrary, I should be so glad if you would play something more."

"If it will give you pleasure, — most willingly." And this obliging person took her place again, and struck a few chords, while Isabel sat down nearer the instrument. Suddenly the stranger stopped, with her hands on the keys, half turning and looking over her shoulder at the girl. She was forty years old, and she was not pretty; but she had a delightful expression. "Excuse me," she said, "but are you the niece, — the young American?"

"I am my aunt's niece," said Isabel, with *naïveté*.

The lady at the piano sat still a moment longer, looking over her shoulder with her charming smile. "That 's very well," she said; "we are compatriots." And then she began to play.

"Ah, then she is not French," Isabel murmured; and as the opposite supposition had made her interesting, it might have seemed that this revelation would have diminished her effectiveness. But such was not the fact; for Isabel, as she listened to the music, found much stimulus to conjecture in the fact that an American should so strongly resemble a foreign woman.

Her companion played in the same manner as before, softly and solemnly, and while she played the shadows deepened in the room. The autumn twilight gathered in, and from her place Isabel could see the rain, which had now begun in earnest, washing the cold-looking lawn, and the wind shaking the great trees. At last, when the music had ceased, the lady got up, and, coming to her auditor, smiling, before Isabel had time to thank her again, said, "I am very glad you have come back. I have heard a great deal about you."

Isabel thought her a very attractive person; but she nevertheless said, with a certain abruptness, in answer to this speech, "From whom have you heard about me?"

The stranger hesitated a single moment, and then, "From your uncle," she answered. "I have been here three days, and the first day he let me come and pay him a visit in his room. Then he talked constantly of you."

"As you did n't know me, that must have bored you."

"It made me want to know you. All the more that since then — your aunt being so much with Mr. Touchett — I have been quite alone, and have got rather tired of my own society. I have not chosen a good moment for my visit."

A servant had come in with lamps, and was presently followed by another, bearing the tea-tray. Of the appearance of this repast Mrs. Touchett had apparently been notified, for she now arrived, and addressed herself to the tea-pot. Her greeting to her niece did not differ materially from her manner of raising the lid of this receptacle in order to glance at the contents: in neither act was it becoming to make a show of avidity. Questioned about her husband, she was unable to say that he was better; but the local doctor was with him, and much light was expected from this gentleman's consultation with Sir Matthew Hope.

"I suppose you two ladies have made acquaintance?" she said. "If you have not, I recommend you to do so; for so long as we continue — Ralph and I — to cluster about Mr. Touchett's bed, you are not likely to have much society but each other."

"I know nothing about you but that you are a great musician," Isabel said to the visitor.

"There is a good deal more than that to know," Mrs. Touchett affirmed, in her little dry tone.

"A very little of it, I am sure, will content Miss Archer!" the lady exclaimed, with a light laugh. "I am an old friend of your aunt's; I have lived much in Florence, — I am Madame Merle."

She made this last announcement as if she was referring to a person of tolerably distinct identity. For Isabel, however, it represented but little; she could only continue to feel that Madame Merle had a charming manner.

"She is not a foreigner, in spite of her name," said Mrs. Touchett. "She was born — I always forget where you were born."

"It is hardly worth while I should tell you, then."

"On the contrary," said Mrs. Touchett, who rarely missed a logical point, "if I remembered, your telling me would be quite superfluous."

Madame Merle glanced at Isabel with a fine, frank smile. "I was born under the shadow of the national banner."

"She is too fond of mystery," said Mrs. Touchett; "that is her great fault."

"Ah," exclaimed Madame Merle, "I have great faults, but I don't think that is one of them; it certainly is not the greatest! I came into the world in the Brooklyn navy-yard. My father was a high officer in the United States navy, and had a post — a post of responsibility — in that establishment at the time. I suppose I ought to love the sea, but I hate it. That 's why I don't return to America. I love the land; the great thing is to love something."

Isabel, as a dispassionate witness, had not been struck with the force of Mrs. Touchett's characterization of her visitor, who had an expressive, communicative, responsive face, — by no means of the sort which, to Isabel's mind, suggested a secretive disposition. It was a face that told of a rich nature and of quick and liberal impulses, and, though it had no regular beauty, was in the highest degree agreeable to contemplate.

Madame Merle was a tall, fair, plump woman; everything in her person was round and replete, though without those accumulations which minister to indolence. Her features were thick, but there was a graceful harmony among them, and her complexion had a healthy clearness. She had a small gray eye, with a great deal of light in it, — an eye incapable of dullness, and, according to some people, incapable of tears, — and a wide, firm mouth, which, when she smiled, drew itself upward to the left side, in a manner that most people thought very odd, some very affected, and a few very graceful. Isabel inclined to range herself in the last category. Madame Merle had thick, fair hair, which was arranged with picturesque simplicity, and a large, white hand, of a perfect shape, — a shape so perfect that its owner, preferring to leave it unadorned, wore no rings. Isabel had taken her at first, as we have seen, for a Frenchwoman; but extended observation led her to say to herself that Madame Merle might be a German, — a German of rank, a countess, a princess. Isabel would never have supposed that she had been born in Brooklyn, though she could doubtless not have justified her assumption that the air of distinction, possessed by Madame Merle in so eminent a degree, was inconsistent with such a birth. It was true that the national banner had floated immediately over the spot of the lady's nativity, and the breezy freedom of the stars and stripes might have shed an influence upon the attitude which she then and there took towards life. And yet Madame Merle had evidently nothing of the fluttered, flapping quality of a morsel of bunting in the wind; her deportment expressed the repose and confidence which come from a large experience. Experience, however, had not quenched her youth; it had simply made her sympathetic and supple. She was, in a word a woman of ardent impulses, kept in admirable order. What an ideal combination! thought Isabel.

She made these reflections while the three ladies sat at their tea; but this ceremony was interrupted before long by the arrival of the great doctor from London, who had been immediately ushered into the drawing-room. Mrs. Touchett took him off to the library, to confer with him in private; and then Madame Merle and Isabel parted, to meet again at dinner. The idea of seeing more of this interesting woman did much to mitigate Isabel's perception of the melancholy that now hung over Gardencourt.

When she came into the drawing-room, before dinner, she found the place empty; but in the course of a moment Ralph arrived. His anxiety about his father had been lightened; Sir Matthew Hope's view of his condition was less sombre than Ralph's had been. The doctor recommended that the nurse alone should remain with the old man for the next three or four hours; so that Ralph, his mother, and the great physi-

cian himself were free to dine at table. Mrs. Touchett and Sir Matthew came in; Madame Merle was the last to appear.

Before she came, Isabel spoke of her to Ralph, who was standing before the fire-place.

"Pray, who is Madame Merle?"

"The cleverest woman I know, not excepting yourself," said Ralph.

"I thought she seemed very pleasant."

"I was sure you would think her pleasant," said Ralph.

"Is that why you invited her?"

"I did n't invite her, and when we came back from London I did n't know she was here. No one invited her. She is a friend of my mother's, and just after you and I went to town my mother got a note from her. She had arrived in England (she usually lives abroad, though she has first and last spent a good deal of time here), and she asked leave to come down for a few days. Madame Merle is a woman who can make such proposals with perfect confidence; she is so welcome wherever she goes. And with my mother there could be no question of hesitating; she is the one person in the world whom my mother very much admires. If she were not herself (which she after all much prefers), she would like to be Madame Merle. It would, indeed, be a great change."

"Well, she is very charming," said Isabel. "And she plays beautifully."

"She does everything beautifully. She is complete."

Isabel looked at her cousin a moment. "You don't like her."

"On the contrary, I was once in love with her."

"And she did n't care for you, and that 's why you don't like her."

"How can we have discussed such things? M. Merle was then living."

"Is he dead now?"

"So she says."

"Don't you believe her?"

"Yes, because the statement agrees with the probabilities. The husband of Madame Merle would be likely to die."

Isabel gazed at her cousin again. "I don't know what you mean. You mean something — that you don't mean. What was M. Merle?"

"The husband of madame."

"You are very odious. Has she any children?"

"Not the least little child, — fortunately."

"Fortunately?"

"I mean fortunately for the child; she would be sure to spoil it."

Isabel was apparently on the point of assuring her cousin for the second time that he was odious; but the discussion was interrupted by the arrival of the lady who was the topic of it. She came rustling in quickly, apologizing for being late, fastening a bracelet, dressed in dark blue satin, which exposed a white bosom that was ineffectually covered by a curious silver necklace. Ralph offered his arm with the exaggerated alertness of a man who was no longer a lover.

Even if this had still been his condition, however, Ralph had other things to think about. The great doctor spent the night at Gardencourt, and, returning to London on the morrow, after another consultation with Mr. Touchett's own medical adviser, concurred in Ralph's desire that he should see the patient again on the day following. On the day following Sir Matthew Hope reappeared at Gardencourt, and on this occasion took a less encouraging view of the old man, who had grown worse in the twenty-four hours. His feebleness was extreme, and to his son, who constantly sat by his bedside, it often seemed that his end was at hand. The local doctor, who was a very sagacious man, and in whom Ralph had secretly more confidence than in his distinguished colleague, was constantly in attendance, and Sir Matthew Hope returned several times to Gardencourt. Mr. Touchett

was much of the time unconscious; he slept a great deal; he rarely spoke. Isabel had a great desire to be useful to him, and was allowed to watch with him several times, when his other attendants (of whom Mrs. Touchett was not the least regular) went to take rest. He never seemed to know her, and she always said to herself, "Suppose he should die while I am sitting here," — an idea which excited her and kept her awake. Once he opened his eyes for a while, and fixed them upon her intelligently; but when she went to him, hoping he would recognize her, he closed them, and relapsed into unconsciousness. The day after this, however, he revived for a longer time; but on this occasion Ralph was with him, alone. The old man began to talk, much to his son's satisfaction, who assured him that they should presently have him sitting up.

"No, my boy," said Mr. Touchett; "not unless you bury me in a sitting posture, as some of the ancients — was it the ancients? — used to do."

"Ah, daddy, don't talk about that," Ralph murmured. "You must not deny that you are getting better."

"There will be no need of my denying it, if you don't affirm it," the old man answered. "Why should we prevaricate, just at the last? We never prevaricated before. I have got to die some time, and it 's better to die when one is sick than when one is well. I am very sick, — as sick as I shall ever be. I hope you don't want to prove that I shall ever be worse than this? That would be too bad. You don't? Well, then."

Having made this excellent point, he became quiet; but the next time that Ralph was with him he again addressed himself to conversation. The nurse had gone to her supper, and Ralph was alone with him, having just relieved Mrs. Touchett, who had been on guard since dinner. The room was lighted only by the flickering fire, which of late had become necessary, and Ralph's tall shadow was projected upon the wall and ceiling, with an outline constantly varying, but always grotesque.

"Who is that with me? Is it my son?" the old man asked.

"Yes, it 's your son, daddy."

"And is there no one else?"

"No one else."

Mr. Touchett said nothing for a while; and then, "I want to talk a little," he went on.

"Won't it tire you?" Ralph inquired.

"It won't matter if it does. I shall have a long rest. I want to talk about you."

Ralph had drawn nearer to the bed; he sat leaning forward, with his hand on his father's. "You had better select a brighter topic," he said.

"You were always bright; I used to be proud of your brightness. I should like so much to think that you would do something."

"If you leave us," said Ralph, "I shall do nothing but miss you."

"That is just what I don't want; it 's what I want to talk about. You must get a new interest."

"I don't want a new interest, daddy. I have more old ones than I know what to do with."

The old man lay there looking at his son; his face was the face of the dying, but his eyes were the eyes of Daniel Touchett. He seemed to be reckoning over Ralph's interest. "Of course you have got your mother," he said at last. "You will take care of her."

"My mother will always take care of herself," Ralph answered.

"Well," said his father, "perhaps as she grows older she will need a little help."

"I shall not see that. She will outlive me."

"Very likely she will; but that 's no reason" — Mr. Touchett let his phrase die away in a helpless but not exact-

ly querulous sigh, and remained silent again.

"Don't trouble yourself about us," said his son. "My mother and I get on very well together, you know."

"You get on by always being apart; that 's not natural."

"If you leave us, we shall probably see more of each other."

"Well," the old man observed, with wandering irrelevance, "it cannot be said that my death will make much difference in your mother's life."

"It will probably make more than you think."

"Well, she 'll have more money," said Mr. Touchett. "I have left her a good wife's portion, just as if she had been a good wife."

"She has been one, daddy, according to her own theory. She has never troubled you."

"Ah, some troubles are pleasant," Mr. Touchett murmured. "Those you have given me, for instance. But your mother has been less — less — what do you call it? — less theoretic since I have been ill. I presume she knows I have noticed it."

"I shall certainly tell her so. I am so glad you mention it."

"It won't make any difference to her; she did n't do it to please me. She did it to please — to please" — And he lay a while, trying to think why she had done it. "She did it to please herself. But that is not what I want to talk about," he added. "It 's about you. You will be very well off."

"Yes," said Ralph, "I know that. But I hope you have not forgotten the talk we had a year ago, — when I told you exactly what money I should need, and begged you to make some good use of the rest."

"Yes, yes, I remember. I made a new will — in a few days. I suppose it was the first time such a thing had happened, — a young man trying to get a will made against him."

"It is not against me," said Ralph. "It would be against me to have a large property to take care of. It is impossible for a man in my state of health to spend much money, and enough is as good as a feast."

"Well, you will have enough, — and something over. There will be more than enough for one, — there will be enough for two."

"That 's too much," said Ralph.

"Ah, don't say that. The best thing you can do, when I am gone, will be to marry."

Ralph had foreseen what his father was coming to, and this suggestion was by no means novel. It had long been Mr. Touchett's most ingenious way of expressing the optimistic view of his son's health. Ralph had usually treated it humorously; but present circumstances made the humorous tone impossible. He simply fell back in his chair, and returned his father's appealing gaze in silence.

"If I, with a wife who has n't been very fond of me, have had a very happy life," said the old man, carrying his ingenuity further still, "what a life might you not have, if you should marry a person different from Mrs. Touchett. There are more different from her than there are like her." Ralph still said nothing; and after a pause his father asked softly, "What do you think of your cousin?"

At this Ralph started, meeting the question with a rather fixed smile. "Do I understand you to propose that I should marry Isabel?"

"Well, that 's what it comes to in the end. Don't you like her?"

"Yes, very much." And Ralph got up from his chair and wandered over to the fire. He stood before it an instant, and then he stooped and stirred it, mechanically. "I like Isabel very much," he repeated.

"Well," said his father, "I know she likes you. She told me so."

"Did she remark that she would like to marry me?"

"No; but she can't have anything against you. And she is the most charming young lady I have ever seen. And she would be good to you. I have thought a great deal about it."

"So have I," said Ralph, coming back to the bedside again. "I don't mind telling you that."

"You *are* in love with her, then? I should think you would be. It 's as if she came over on purpose."

"No, I am not in love with her; but I should be if — if certain things were different."

"Ah, things are always different from what they might be," said the old man. "If you wait for them to change, you never do anything. I don't know whether you know," he went on, "but I suppose there is no harm in my alluding to it in such an hour as this: there was some one wanted to marry Isabel, the other day, and she would n't have him."

"I know she refused Lord Warburton; he told me himself."

"Well, that proves that there is a chance for somebody else."

"Somebody else took his chance, the other day, in London, — and got nothing by it."

"Was it you?" Mr. Touchett asked, eagerly.

"No, it was an older friend, — a poor gentleman who came over from America to see about it."

"Well, I am sorry for him. But it only proves what I say, — that the way is open to you."

"If it is, dear father, it is all the greater pity that I am unable to tread it. I have n't many convictions, but I have three or four that I hold strongly. One is that people, on the whole, had better not marry their cousins. Another is that people in an advanced stage of pulmonary weakness had better not marry at all."

The old man raised his feeble hand, and moved it to and fro a little before his face. "What do you mean by that? You look at things in a way that would make everything wrong. What sort of a cousin is a cousin that you have never seen for more than twenty years of her life? We are all each other's cousins, and if we stopped at that the human race would die out. It is just the same with your weak lungs. You are a great deal better than you used to be. All you want is to lead a natural life. It is a great deal more natural to marry a pretty young lady that you are in love with than it is to remain single, on false principles."

"I am not in love with Isabel," said Ralph.

"You said just now that you would be if you did n't think it was wrong. I want to prove to you that it is n't wrong."

"It will only tire you, dear daddy," said Ralph, who marveled at his father's tenacity, and at his finding strength to insist. "Then where shall we all be?"

"Where shall you be if I don't provide for you? You won't have anything to do with the bank, and you won't have me to take care of. You say you have got so many interests; but I can't make them out."

Ralph leaned back in his chair, with folded arms; his eyes were fixed for some time in meditation. At last, with the air of a man fairly mustering courage, "I take a great interest in my cousin," he said, "but not the sort of interest you desire. I shall not live many years; but I hope I shall live long enough to see what she does with herself. She is entirely independent of me; I can exercise very little influence upon her life. But I should like to do something for her."

"What should you like to do?"

"I should like to put a little wind in her sails."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I should like to put it into her power

to do some of the things she wants. She wants to see the world, for instance. I should like to put money in her purse."

"Ah, I am glad you have thought of that," said the old man. "But I have thought of it, too. I have left her a legacy, — five thousand pounds."

"That is capital; it is very kind of you. But I should like to do a little more."

Something of that veiled acuteness with which it had been, on Daniel Touchett's part, the habit of a life-time to listen to a financial proposition, still lingered in the face in which the invalid had not obliterated the man of business. "I shall be happy to consider it," he said, softly.

"Isabel is poor, then. My mother tells me that she has but a few hundred dollars a year. I should like to make her rich."

"What do you mean by rich?"

"I call people rich when they are able to gratify their imagination. Isabel has a great deal of imagination."

"So have you, my son," said Mr. Touchett, listening very attentively, but a little confusedly.

"You tell me I shall have money enough for two. What I want is that you should kindly relieve me of my superfluity, and give it to Isabel. Divide my inheritance into two equal halves, and give the second half to her."

"To do what she likes with?"

"Absolutely what she likes."

"And without an equivalent?"

"What equivalent could there be?"

"The one I have already mentioned."

"Her marrying some one or other? It 's just to do away with anything of that sort that I make my suggestion. If she has an easy income she will never have to marry for a support. She wishes to be free, and your bequest will make her free."

"Well, you seem to have thought it out," said Mr. Touchett. "But I don't see why you appeal to me. The money will be yours, and you can easily give it to her yourself."

Ralph started a little. "Ah, dear father, *I* can't offer Isabel money!"

The old man groaned. "Don't tell me you are not in love with her! Do you want me to have the credit of it?"

"Entirely. I should like it simply to be a clause in your will, without the slightest reference to me."

"Do you want me to make a new will, then?"

"A few words will do it; you can attend to it the next time you feel a little lively."

"You must telegraph to Mr. Hilary, then. I will do nothing without my lawyer."

"You shall see Mr. Hilary to-morrow."

"He will think we have quarreled, you and I," said the old man.

"Very probably. I shall like him to think it," said Ralph, smiling; "and to carry out the idea I give you notice that I shall be very sharp with you."

The humor of this appeared to touch his father; he lay a little while taking it in. "I will do anything you like," he said at last; "but I 'm not sure it 's right. You say you want to put wind in her sails; but are n't you afraid of putting too much?"

"I should like to see her going before the breeze!" Ralph answered.

"You speak as if it were for your entertainment."

"So it is, a good deal."

"Well, I don't think I understand," said Mr. Touchett, with a sigh. "Young men are very different from what I was. When I cared for a girl, — when I was young, — I wanted to do more than look at her. You have scruples that I should n't have had, and you have ideas that I should n't have had, either. You say that Isabel wants to be free, and that her being rich will keep her from marrying for money. Do you think that she is a girl to do that?"

"By no means. But she has less money than she has ever had before; her father gave her everything, because he used to spend his capital. She has nothing but the crumbs of that feast to live on, and she does n't really know how meagre they are; she has yet to learn it. My mother has told me all about it. Isabel will learn it when she is thrown upon the world, and it would be painful to me to think of her coming to the consciousness of a lot of wants that she should be unable to satisfy."

"I have left her five thousand pounds. She can satisfy a good many wants with that."

"She can, indeed. But she would probably spend it in two or three years."

"You think she would be extravagant, then?"

"Most certainly," said Ralph, smiling serenely.

Poor Mr. Touchett's acuteness was rapidly giving place to pure confusion. "It would merely be a question of time, then, her spending the larger sum?"

"No. At first I think she would plunge into that pretty freely; she would probably make over a part of it to each of her sisters. But after that she would come to her senses, remember that she had still a life-time before her, and live within her means."

"Well, you *have* worked it out," said the old man, with a sigh. "You do take an interest in her, certainly."

"You can't consistently say I go too far. You wished me to go further."

"Well, I don't know," the old man answered. "I don't think I enter into your spirit. It seems to me immoral."

"Immoral, dear daddy?"

"Well, I don't know that it 's right to make everything so easy for a person."

"It surely depends upon the person. When the person is good, your making things easy is all to the credit of virtue. To facilitate the execution of good impulses, what can be a nobler act?"

This was a little difficult to follow, and Mr. Touchett considered it for a while. At last he said, —

"Isabel is a sweet young girl; but do you think she is as good as that?"

"She is as good as her best opportunities," said Ralph.

"Well," Mr. Touchett declared, "she ought to get a great many opportunities for sixty thousand pounds."

"I have no doubt she will."

"Of course I will do what you want," said the old man. "I only want to understand it a little."

"Well, dear daddy, don't you understand it now?" his son asked, caressingly. "If you don't, we won't take any more trouble about it; we will leave it alone."

Mr. Touchett lay silent a long time. Ralph supposed that he had given up the attempt to understand it. But at last he began again: —

"Tell me this, first: Does n't it occur to you that a young lady with sixty thousand pounds may fall a victim to the fortune-hunters?"

"She will hardly fall a victim to more than one."

"Well, one is too many."

"Decidedly. That 's a risk, and it has entered into my calculation. I think it 's appreciable, but I think it 's small, and I am prepared to take it."

Poor Mr. Touchett's acuteness had passed into perplexity, and his perplexity now passed into admiration.

"Well, you *have* gone into it!" he exclaimed. "But I don't see what good you are to get of it."

Ralph leaned over his father's pillows and gently smoothed them; he was aware that their conversation had been prolonged to a dangerous point. "I shall get just the good that I said just now I wished to put into Isabel's reach, — that of having gratified my imagination. But it 's scandalous, the way I have taken advantage of you!"

Henry James, Jr.