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THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY.

XXI.

On one of the first days of May, some six months after old Mr. Touchett's death, a picturesque little group was gathered in one of the many rooms of an ancient villa which stood on the summit of an olive-muffled hill, outside of the Roman gate of Florence. The villa was a long, rather blank-looking structure, with the far-projecting roof which Tuscany loves, and which, on the hills that encircle Florence, when looked at from a distance, makes so harmonious a rectangle with the straight, dark, definite cypresses that usually rise, in groups of three or four, beside it. The house had a front upon a little grassy, empty, rural piazza which occupied a part of the hill-top; and this front, pierced with a few windows in irregular relations, and furnished with a stone bench which ran along the base of the structure and usually afforded a lounging-place to one or two persons wearing more or less of that air of undervalued merit which in Italy, for some reason or other, always gracefully invests any one who confidently assumes a perfectly passive attitude, — this ancient, solid, weather-worn, yet imposing front had a somewhat incommunicative character. It was the mask of the house; it was not its face. It had heavy lids, but no eyes; the house in reality looked another way, — looked off behind, into splendid openness and the range of the afternoon light. In that quarter the villa overlooked the slope of its hill and the long valley of the Arno, hazy with Italian color. It had a narrow garden, in the manner of a terrace, productive chiefly of tangles of wild roses and old stone benches, mossy and sun-warmed. The parapet of the terrace was just the height to lean upon, and beneath it the ground declined into the vagueness of olive crops and vineyards. It is not, however, with the outside of the place that we are concerned; on this bright morning of ripened spring its tenants had reason to prefer the shady side of the wall. The windows of the ground-floor, as you saw them from the piazza, were, in their noble proportions, extremely architectural; but their function seemed to be less to offer communication with the world than to defy the world to look in. They were massively cross-barred and placed at such a height that curiosity, even on tip-toe, expired before it reached them. In an apartment lighted by a row of three of these obstructive apertures — one of the several distinct apartments into which the villa was divided, and which were mainly occupied by foreigners of conflicting nationality long resident in Florence —

a gentleman was seated, in company with a young girl and two good sisters from a religious house. The room was, however, much less gloomy than my indications may have represented, for it had a wide, high door, which now stood open into the tangled garden behind; and the tall iron lattices admitted on occasion more than enough of the Italian sunshine. The place, moreover, was almost luxuriously comfortable; it told of habitation being practiced as a fine art. It contained a variety of those faded hangings of damask and tapestry, those chests and cabinets of carved and time-polished oak, those primitive specimens of pictorial art in frames pedantically rusty, those perverse-looking relics of mediæval brass and pottery, of which Italy has long been the not quite exhausted store-house. These things were intermingled with articles of modern furniture, in which liberal concession had been made to cultivated sensibilities. It was to be noticed that all the chairs were deep and well padded, and that much space was occupied by a writing-table, of which the ingenious perfection bore the stamp of London and the nineteenth century. There were books in profusion, and magazines and newspapers, and a few small modern pictures, chiefly in water-color. One of these productions stood on a drawing-room easel, before which, at the moment when we begin to be concerned with her, the young girl I have mentioned had placed herself. She was looking at the picture in silence.

Silence — absolute silence — had not fallen upon her companions; but their conversation had an appearance of embarrassed continuity. The two good sisters had not settled themselves in their respective chairs; their attitude was noticeably provisional, and they evidently wished to emphasize the transitory character of their presence. They were plain, comfortable, mild-faced women, with a kind of business-like modesty, to which the impersonal aspect of their stiffened linen and inexpressive serge gave an advantage. One of them, a person of a certain age, in spectacles, with a fresh complexion and a full cheek, had a more discriminating manner than her companion, and had evidently the responsibility of their errand, which apparently related to the young girl. This young lady wore her hat, a coiffure of extreme simplicity, which was not at variance with a plain muslin gown, too short for the wearer, and denoting that she was at the so-called "growing" age. The gentleman, who might have been supposed to be entertaining the two nuns, was perhaps conscious of the difficulties of his function; to entertain a nun is, in fact, a sufficiently delicate operation. At the same time he was plainly much interested in his youthful companion, and while she turned her back to him his eyes rested gravely upon her slim, small figure. He was a man of forty, with a well-shaped head, upon which the hair, still dense, but prematurely grizzled, had been cropped close. It had a thin, delicate, sharply-cut face, of which the only fault was that it looked too pointed; an appearance to which the shape of his beard contributed not a little. This beard, cut in the manner of the portraits of the sixteenth century, and surmounted by a fair mustache, of which the ends had a picturesque upward flourish, gave its wearer a somewhat foreign, traditionary look, and suggested that he was a gentleman who studied effect. His luminous, intelligent eye, an eye which expressed both softness and keenness, — the nature of the observer as well as of the dreamer, — would have assured you, however, that he studied it only within well-chosen limits, and that in so far as he sought it he found it. You would have been much at a loss to determine his nationality. He had none of the superficial signs that usually render the answer to this question an insipidly easy

one. If he had English blood in his veins, it had probably received some French or Italian commixture; he was one of those persons who, in the matter of race, may, as the phrase is, pass for anything. He had a light, lean, lazy-looking figure, and was apparently neither tall nor short. He was dressed as a man dresses who takes little trouble about it.

"Well, my dear, what do you think of it?" he asked of the young girl. He used the Italian tongue, and used it with perfect ease; but this would not have convinced you that he was an Italian.

The girl turned her head a little to one side and the other.

"It is very pretty, papa. Did you make it yourself?"

"Yes, my child; I made it. Don't you think I am clever?"

"Yes, papa, very clever; I also have learned to make pictures." And she turned round, and showed a small, fair face, of which the natural and usual expression seemed to be a smile of perfect sweetness.

"You should have brought me a specimen of your powers."

"I have brought a great many; they are in my trunk," said the child.

"She draws very — very carefully," the elder of the nuns remarked, speaking in French.

"I am glad to hear it. Is it you who have instructed her?"

"Happily, no," said the good sister, blushing a little. "*Ce n'est pas ma partie.* I teach nothing; I leave that to those who are wiser. We have an excellent drawing-master. Mr. — Mr. — What is his name?" she asked of her companion.

Her companion looked about at the carpet.

"It's a German name," she said in Italian, as if it needed to be translated.

"Yes," the other went on, "he is a German, and we have had him for many years."

The young girl, who was not heeding the conversation, had wandered away to the open door of the large room, and stood looking into the garden.

"And you, my sister, are French," said the gentleman.

"Yes, sir," the woman replied, gently. "I speak to the pupils in my own language. I know no other. But we have sisters of other countries, — English, German, Irish. They all speak their own tongue."

The gentleman gave a smile.

"Has my daughter been under the care of one of the Irish ladies?" And then, as he saw that his visitors suspected a joke, but failed to understand it, "You are very complete," he said, instantly.

"Oh, yes, we are complete. We have everything, and everything is of the best."

"We have gymnastics," the Italian sister ventured to remark. "But not dangerous."

"I hope not. Is that your branch?" — a question which provoked much candid hilarity on the part of the two ladies; on the subsidence of which their entertainer, glancing at his daughter, remarked that she had grown.

"Yes, but I think she has finished. She will remain little," said the French sister.

"I am not sorry. I like little women," the gentleman declared, frankly. "But I know no particular reason why my child should be short."

The nun gave a temperate shrug, as if to intimate that such things might be beyond our knowledge.

"She is in very good health; that is the best thing."

"Yes, she looks well." And the young girl's father watched her a moment. "What do you see in the garden?" he asked, in French.

"I see many flowers," she replied, in a little soft, clear, penetrating voice, and with a French accent as good as his own.

"Yes, but not many good ones. However, such as they are, go out and gather some for *ces dames*."

The child turned to him, with her smile brightened by pleasure. "May I, truly?" she asked.

"Ah, when I tell you," said her father.

The girl glanced at the elder of the nuns.

"May I, truly, *ma mère?*"

"Obey monsieur your father, my child," said the sister, blushing again.

The child, satisfied with this authorization, descended from the threshold, and was presently lost to sight.

"You don't spoil them," said her father, smiling.

"For everything they must ask leave. That is our system. Leave is freely granted, but they must ask it."

"Oh, I don't quarrel with your system; I have no doubt it is a very good one. I sent you my daughter to see what you would make of her. I had faith."

"One must have faith," the sister blandly rejoined, gazing through her spectacles.

"Well, has my faith been rewarded? What have you made of her?"

The sister dropped her eyes a moment.

"A good Christian, monsieur."

Her host dropped his eyes as well; but it was probable that the movement had in each case a different spring.

"Yes," he said in a moment, "and what else?"

He watched the lady from the convent, probably thinking that she would say that a good Christian was everything. But for all her simplicity, she was not so crude as that.

"A charming young lady, a real little woman, a daughter in whom you will have nothing but contentment."

"She seems to me very nice," said the father. "She is very pretty."

"She is perfect. She has no faults."

"She never had any as a child, and I am glad you have given her none."

"We love her too much," said the spectacled sister, with dignity. "And as for faults, how can we give what we have not? *Le convent n'est pas comme le monde, monsieur.* She is our child, as you may say. We have had her since she was so small."

"Of all those we shall lose this year, she is the one we shall miss most," the younger woman murmured, deferentially.

"Ah, yes, we shall talk long of her," said the other. "We shall hold her up to the new ones."

And at this the good sister appeared to find her spectacles dim; while her companion, after fumbling a moment, presently drew forth a pocket handkerchief of durable texture.

"It is not certain that you will lose her; nothing is settled yet," the host rejoined, quickly; not as if to anticipate their tears, but in the tone of a man saying what was most agreeable to himself.

"We should be very happy to believe that. Fifteen is very young to leave us."

"Oh," exclaimed the gentleman, with more vivacity than he had yet used, "it is not I who wish to take her away! I wish you could keep her always!"

"Ah, monsieur," said the elder sister, smiling and getting up, "good as she is, she is made for the world. *Le monde y gagnera.*"

"If all the good people were hidden away in convents, how would the world get on?" her companion softly inquired, rising also.

This was a question of a wider bearing than the good woman apparently supposed; and the lady in spectacles took a harmonizing view by saying comfortably, —

"Fortunately, there are good people everywhere."

"If you are going, there will be two less here," her host remarked, gallantly.

For this extravagant sally his simple visitors had no answer, and they simply looked at each other in decent deprecation; but their confusion was speedily covered by the return of the young girl, with two large bunches of roses, — one of them all white, the other red.

"I give you your choice, mamman Catherine," said the child. "It is only the color that is different, mamman Justine; there are just as many roses in one bunch as another."

The two sisters turned to each other, smiling and hesitating, with, "Which will you take?" and "No, it's for you to choose."

"I will take the red," said mother Catherine, in the spectacles. "I am so red myself. They will comfort us on our way back to Rome."

"Ah, they won't last!" cried the young girl. "I wish I could give you something that would last!"

"You have given us a good memory of yourself, my daughter. That will last."

"I wish nuns could wear pretty things. I would give you my blue beads," the child went on.

"And do you go back to Rome to-night?" her father asked.

"Yes, we take the train again. We have so much to do *là-bas*."

"Are you not tired?"

"We are never tired."

"Ah, my sister, sometimes," murmured the junior votaress.

"Not to-day, at any rate. We have rested too well here. *Que Dieu vous garde, ma fille.*"

Their host, while they exchanged kisses with his daughter, went forward to open the door through which they were to pass; but as he did so he gave a slight exclamation, and stood looking beyond. The door opened into a vaulted antechamber, as high as a chapel, and paved with red tiles; and into this antechamber a lady had just been admitted by a servant, a lad in shabby livery, who was now ushering her toward the apartment in which our friends were grouped. The gentleman at the door, after dropping his exclamation, remained silent; in silence, too, the lady advanced. He gave her no further audible greeting, and offered her no hand, but stood aside to let her pass into the drawing-room. At the threshold she hesitated.

"Is there any one?" she asked.

"Some one you may see."

She went in, and found herself confronted with the two nuns and their pupil, who was coming forward between them, with a hand in the arm of each. At the sight of the new visitor they all paused, and the lady, who had stopped too, stood looking at them. The young girl gave a little soft cry:—

"Ah, Madame Merle!"

The visitor had been slightly startled; but her manner the next instant was none the less gracious.

"Yes, it's Madame Merle, come to welcome you home."

And she held out two hands to the girl, who immediately came up to her, presenting her forehead to be kissed. Madame Merle saluted this portion of her charming little person, and then stood smiling at the two nuns. They acknowledged her smile with a decent obeisance, but permitted themselves no direct scrutiny of this imposing, brilliant woman, who seemed to bring in with her something of the radiance of the outer world.

"These ladies have brought my daughter home, and now they return to the convent," the gentleman explained.

"Ah, you go back to Rome? I have lately come from there. It was very lovely there," said Madame Merle.

The good sisters, standing with their hands folded into their sleeves, accepted this statement uncritically; and the master of the house asked Madame Merle how long it was since she had left Rome.

"She came to see me at the convent,"

said the young girl, before her father's visitors had time to reply.

"I have been more than once, Pansy," Madame Merle answered. "Am I not your great friend in Rome?"

"I remember the last time best," said Pansy, "because you told me I should leave the place."

"Did you tell her that?" the child's father asked.

"I hardly remember. I told her what I thought would please her. I have been in Florence a week. I hoped you would come and see me."

"I should have done so if I had known you were here. One does n't know such things by inspiration, — though I suppose one ought. You had better sit down."

These two speeches were made in a peculiar tone of voice, — a tone half lowered and carefully quiet, but as from habit rather than from any definite heed.

Madame Merle looked about her, choosing her seat.

"You are going to the door with these women? Let me of course not interrupt the ceremony. *Je vous salue, mesdames,*" she added, in French, to the nuns, as if to dismiss them.

"This lady is a great friend of ours; you will have seen her at the convent," said the host. "We have much faith in her judgment, and she will help me to decide whether my daughter shall return to you at the end of the holidays."

"I hope you will decide in our favor, madame," the sister in spectacles ventured to remark.

"That is Mr. Osmond's pleasantry; I decide nothing," said Madame Merle, smiling still. "I believe you have a very good school, but Miss Osmond's friends must remember that she is meant for the world."

"That is what I have told monsieur," Sister Catherine answered. "It is precisely to fit her for the world," she murmured, glancing at Pansy, who stood at a little distance, looking at Madame Merle's elegant apparel.

"Do you hear that, Pansy? You are meant for the world," said Pansy's father.

The child gazed at him an instant with her pure young eyes.

"Am I not meant for you, papa?" she asked.

Papa gave a quick, light laugh.

"That does n't prevent it! I am of the world, Pansy."

"Kindly permit us to retire," said Sister Catherine. "Be good, in any case, my daughter."

"I shall certainly come back and see you," Pansy declared, recommencing her embraces, which were presently interrupted by Madame Merle.

"Stay with me, my child," she said, "while your father takes the good ladies to the door."

Pansy stared, disappointed, but not protesting. She was evidently impregnated with the idea of submission, which was due to any one who took the tone of authority; and she was a passive spectator of the operation of her fate.

"May I not see mamman Catherine get into the carriage?" she asked, very gently.

"It would please me better if you would remain with me," said Madame Merle, while Mr. Osmond and his companions, who had bowed low again to the other visitor, passed into the antechamber.

"Oh, yes, I will stay," Pansy answered; and she stood near Madame Merle, surrendering her little hand, which this lady took. She stared out of the window; her eyes had filled with tears.

"I am glad they have taught you to obey," said Madame Merle. "That is what little girls should do."

"Oh, yes, I obey very well," said Pansy, with soft eagerness, almost with boastfulness, as if she had been speak-

ing of her piano-playing. And then she gave a faint, just audible sigh.

Madame Merle, holding her hand, drew it across her own fine palm, and looked at it. The gaze was critical, but it found nothing to deprecate; the child's small hand was delicate and fair.

"I hope they always see that you wear gloves," she said, in a moment. "Little girls usually dislike them."

"I used to dislike them, but I like them now," the child answered.

"Very good, I will make you a present of a dozen."

"I thank you very much. What colors will they be?" Pansy demanded, with interest.

Madame Merle meditated a moment.

"Useful colors."

"But will they be pretty?"

"Are you fond of pretty things?"

"Yes; but — but not too fond," said Pansy, with a trace of asceticism.

"Well, they shall not be too pretty," Madame Merle answered, with a laugh. She took the child's other hand, and drew her nearer; and then, looking at her a moment, "Shall you miss mother Catherine?"

"Yes, when I think of her."

"Try, then, not to think of her. Perhaps, some day," added Madame Merle, "you will have another mother."

"I don't think that is necessary," Pansy said, repeating her little soft, conciliatory sigh. "I had more than thirty mothers at the convent."

Her father's step sounded again in the antechamber, and Madame Merle got up, releasing the child. Mr. Osmond came in and closed the door; then, without looking at Madame Merle, he pushed one or two chairs back into their places.

His visitor waited a moment for him to speak, watching him as he moved about. Then, at last, she said, "I hoped you would have come to Rome. I thought it possible you would have come to fetch Pansy away."

"That was a natural supposition; but I am afraid it is not the first time I have acted in defiance of your calculations."

"Yes," said Madame Merle, "I think you are very perverse."

Mr. Osmond busied himself for a moment in the room, — there was plenty of space in it to move about, — in the fashion of a man mechanically seeking pretexts for not giving an attention which may be embarrassing. Presently, however, he had exhausted his pretexts; there was nothing left for him — unless he took up a book — but to stand with his hands behind him, looking at Pansy. "Why did n't you come and see the last of mamman Catherine?" he asked of her abruptly, in French.

Pansy hesitated a moment, glancing at Madame Merle. "I asked her to stay with me," said this lady, who had seated herself again in another place.

"Ah, that was better," said Osmond. Then, at last, he dropped into a chair, and sat looking at Madame Merle; leaning forward a little, with his elbows on the edge of the arms and his hands interlocked.

"She is going to give me some gloves," said Pansy.

"You need n't tell that to every one, my dear," Madame Merle observed.

"You are very kind to her," said Osmond. "She is supposed to have everything she needs."

"I should think she had had enough of the nuns."

"If we are going to discuss that matter, she had better go out of the room."

"Let her stay," said Madame Merle. "We will talk of something else."

"If you like, I won't listen," Pansy suggested, with an appearance of candor which imposed conviction.

"You may listen, charming child, because you won't understand," her father replied. The child sat down deferentially, near the open door, within sight of the garden, into which she directed

her innocent, wistful eyes; and Mr. Osmond went on, irrelevantly, addressing himself to his other companion. "You are looking particularly well."

"I think I always look the same," said Madame Merle.

"You always *are* the same; you don't vary. You are a wonderful woman."

"Yes, I think I am."

"You sometimes change your mind, however. You told me, on your return from England, that you would not leave Rome again for the present."

"I am pleased that you remember so well what I say. That was my intention. But I have come to Florence to meet some friends who have lately arrived, and as to whose movements I was at that time uncertain."

"That reason is characteristic. You are always doing something for your friends."

Madame Merle looked straight at her interlocutor, smiling. "It is less characteristic than your comment upon it, — which is perfectly insincere. I don't, however, make a crime of that," she added, "because if you don't believe what you say, there is no reason why you should. I don't ruin myself for my friends; I don't deserve your praise. I care greatly for myself."

"Exactly; but yourself includes so many other selves, — so much of everything. I never knew a person whose life touched so many other lives."

"What do you call one's life?" asked Madame Merle. "One's appearance, one's movements, one's engagements, one's society?"

"I call your life — your ambitions," said Osmond.

Madame Merle looked a moment at Pansy. "I wonder whether she understands that," she murmured.

"You see she can't stay with us!" And Pansy's father gave a rather joyless smile. "Go into the garden, *ma bonne*, and pluck a flower or two for Madame Merle," he went on, in French.

"That 's just what I wanted to do!" Pansy exclaimed, rising with promptness and noiselessly departing. Her father followed her to the open door, stood a moment watching her, and then came back, but remained standing, or rather strolling to and fro, as if to cultivate a sense of freedom which in another attitude might be wanting.

"My ambitions are principally for you," said Madame Merle, looking up at him with a certain nobleness of expression.

"That comes back to what I say. I am part of your life, — I and a thousand others. You are not selfish, — I can't admit that. If you were selfish, what should I be? What epithet would properly describe me?"

"You are indolent. For me that is your worst fault."

"I am afraid it is really my best."

"You don't care," said Madame Merle, gravely.

"No; I don't think I care much. What sort of a fault do you call that? My indolence, at any rate, was one of the reasons I did n't go to Rome. But it was only one of them."

"It is not of importance — to me, at least — that you did n't go; though I should have been glad to see you. I am glad that you are not in Rome now, — which you might be, would probably be, if you had gone there a month ago. There is something I should like you to do at present in Florence."

"Please remember my indolence," said Osmond.

"I will remember it; but I beg you to forget it. In that way you will have both the virtue and the reward. This is not a great labor, and it may prove a great pleasure. How long is it since you made a new acquaintance?"

"I don't think I have made any since I made yours."

"It is time you should make another, then. There is a friend of mine I want you to know."

Mr. Osmond, in his walk, had gone back to the open door again, and was looking at his daughter, as she moved about in the intense sunshine.

"What good will it do me?" he asked, with a sort of genial crudity.

Madame Merle reflected a moment.

"It will amuse you." There was nothing crude in this rejoinder; it had been thoroughly well considered.

"If you say that, I believe it," said Osmond, coming toward her. "There are some points in which my confidence in you is complete. I am perfectly aware, for instance, that you know good society from bad."

"Society is all bad."

"Excuse me. It is a common sort of wisdom. You have gained it in the right way, — experimentally; you have compared an immense number of people with one another."

"Well, I invite you to profit by my knowledge."

"To profit? Are you very sure that I shall?"

"It's what I hope. It will depend upon yourself. If I could only induce you to make an effort!"

"Ah, there you are! I knew something tiresome was coming. What in the world — that is likely to turn up here — is worth an effort?"

Madame Merle flushed a little, and her eye betrayed vexation. "Don't be foolish, Osmond. There is no one knows better than you that there are many things worth an effort."

"Many things, I admit. But they are none of them probable things."

"It is the effort that makes them probable," said Madame Merle.

"There's something in that. Who is your friend?"

"The person I came to Florence to see. She is a niece of Mrs. Touchett, whom you will not have forgotten."

"A niece? The word niece suggests youth. I see what you are coming to."

"Yes, she is young, — twenty-three years old. She is a great friend of mine. I met her for the first time in England, several months ago, and we took a great fancy to each other. I like her immensely, and I do what I don't do every day, — I admire her. You will do the same."

"Not if I can help it."

"Precisely. But you won't be able to help it."

"Is she beautiful, clever, rich, splendid, universally intelligent and unprecedentedly virtuous? It is only on those conditions that I care to make her acquaintance. You know I asked you, some time ago, never to speak to me of any one who should not correspond to that description. I know plenty of dingy people; I don't want to know any more."

"Miss Archer is not dingy; she's as bright as the morning. She corresponds to your description; it is for that I wish you to know her. She fills all your requirements."

"More or less, of course."

"No; quite literally. She is beautiful, accomplished, generous, and, for an American, well born. She is also very clever and very amiable, and she has a handsome fortune."

Mr. Osmond listened to this in silence, appearing to turn it over in his mind, with his eyes on his informant. "What do you want to do with her?" he asked, at last.

"What you see. Put her in your way."

"Is n't she meant for something better than that?"

"I don't pretend to know what people are meant for," said Madame Merle. "I only know what I can do with them."

"I am sorry for Miss Archer!." Osmond declared.

Madame Merle got up. "If that is a beginning of interest in her, I take note of it."

The two stood there, face to face;

she settled her mantilla, looking down at it as she did so.

"You are looking very well," Osmond repeated, still more irrelevantly than before. "You have got some idea. You are never as well as when you have got an idea; they are always becoming to you."

In the manner of these two persons, on first meeting on any occasion, and especially when they met in the presence of others, there was something indirect and circumspect, which showed itself in glance and tone. They approached each other obliquely, as it were, and they addressed each other by implication. The effect of each appeared to be to intensify to an embarrassing degree the self-consciousness of the other. Madame Merle of course carried off all such awkwardness better than her friend; but even Madame Merle had not on this occasion the manner she would have liked to have, — the perfect self-possession she would have wished to exhibit to her friend. The point I wish to make is, however, that at a certain moment the obstruction, whatever it was, always leveled itself, and left them more closely face to face than either of them ever was with any one else. This was what had happened now. They stood there, knowing each other well, and each of them, on the whole, willing to accept the satisfaction of knowing as a compensation for the inconvenience — whatever it might be — of being known.

"I wish very much you were not so heartless," said Madame Merle, quietly. "It has always been against you, and it will be against you now."

"I am not so heartless as you think. Every now and then something touches me; as, for instance, your saying just now that your ambitions are for me. I don't understand it; I don't see how or why they should be. But it touches me, all the same."

"You will probably understand it even less, as time goes on. There are some things you will never understand. There is no particular need that you should."

"You, after all, are the most remarkable woman," said Osmond. "You have more in you than almost any one. I don't see why you think Mrs. Touchett's niece should matter very much to me, when — when" — and he paused a moment.

"When I myself have mattered so little?"

"That of course is not what I meant to say. When I have known and appreciated such a woman as you."

"Isabel Archer is better than I," said Madame Merle.

Her companion gave a laugh. "How little you must think of her, to say that!"

"Do you suppose I am capable of jealousy? Please answer me that."

"With regard to me? No; on the whole, I don't."

"Come and see me, then, two days hence. I am staying at Mrs. Touchett's, — the Palazzo Crescentini, — and the girl will be there."

"Why didn't you ask me that at first, simply, without speaking of the girl?" said Osmond. "You could have had her there, at any rate."

Madame Merle looked at him in the manner of a woman whom no question that he could ask would find unprepared. "Do you wish to know why? Because I have spoken of you to her."

Osmond frowned and turned away. "I would rather not know that." Then, in a moment, he pointed out the easel supporting the little water-color drawing. "Have you seen that, — my last?"

Madame Merle drew near and looked at it a moment.

"Is it the Venetian Alps, — one of your last year's sketches?"

"Yes; but how you guess everything!"

Madame Merle looked for a moment

longer; then she turned away. "You know I don't care for your drawings."

"I know it, yet I am always surprised at it. They are really so much better than most people's."

"That may very well be. But as the only thing you do, it's so little. I should have liked you to do so many other things: those were my ambitions."

"Yes; you have told me many times, — things that were impossible."

"Things that were impossible!" said Madame Merle. And then, in quite a different tone, "In itself your little picture is very good." She looked about the room, — at the old cabinets, the pictures, the tapestries, the surface of faded silk. "Your rooms, at least, are perfect," she went on. "I am struck with that afresh, whenever I come back; I know none better anywhere. You understand this sort of thing as no one else does."

"I am very sick of it," said Osmond.

"You must let Miss Archer come and see all this. I have told her about it."

"I don't object to showing my things, when people are not idiots."

"You do it delightfully. As a cicerone in your own museum you appear to particular advantage."

Mr. Osmond, in return for this compliment, simply turned upon his companion an eye expressive of perfect clairvoyance.

"Did you say she was rich?" he asked, in a moment.

"She has seventy thousand pounds."

"*En écus bien comptés?*"

"There is no doubt whatever about her fortune. I have seen it, as I may say."

"Satisfactory woman! — I mean you. And if I go to see her shall I see the mother?"

"The mother? She has none, — nor father, either."

"The aunt, then, — whom did you say? — Mrs. Touchett."

"I can easily keep her out of the way."

"I don't object to her," said Osmond; "I rather like Mrs. Touchett. She has a sort of old-fashioned character that is passing away, — a vivid identity. But that long jackanapes, the son, — is he about the place?"

"He is there, but he won't trouble you."

"He's an awful ass."

"I think you are mistaken. He is a very clever man. But he is not fond of being about when I am there, because he does n't like me."

"What could be more asinine than that? Did you say that she was pretty?" Osmond went on.

"Yes; but I won't say it again, lest you should be disappointed. Come and make a beginning; that is all I ask of you."

"A beginning of what?"

Madame Merle was silent a moment. "I want you, of course, to marry her."

"The beginning of the end! Well, I will see for myself. Have you told her that?"

"For what do you take me? She is a very delicate piece of machinery."

"Really," said Osmond, after some meditation, "I don't understand your ambitions."

"I think you will understand this one after you have seen Miss Archer. Suspend your judgment till then." Madame Merle, as she spoke, had drawn near the open door of the garden, and stood a moment, looking out. "Pansy has grown pretty," she presently added.

"So it seemed to me."

"But she has had enough of the convent."

"I don't know," said Osmond. "I like what they have made of her. It's very charming."

"That's not the convent. It's the child's nature."

"It's the combination, I think. She's as pure as a pearl."

"Why does n't she come back with my flowers, then?" Madame Merle asked. "She is not in a hurry."

"We will go and get them," said her companion.

"She does n't like me," murmured Madame Merle, as she raised her parasol, and they passed into the garden.

XXII.

Madame Merle, who had come to Florence, on Mrs. Touchett's arrival, at the invitation of this lady, — Mrs. Touchett offering her for a month the hospitality of the Palazzo Crescentini, — the judicious Madame Merle spoke to Isabel afresh about Gilbert Osmond, and expressed the wish that she should know him; but made no such point of the matter as we have seen her do in recommending the girl herself to Mr. Osmond's attention. The reason of this was, perhaps, that Isabel offered no resistance whatever to Madame Merle's proposal. In Italy, as in England, the lady had a multitude of friends, both among the natives of the country and its heterogeneous visitors. She had mentioned to Isabel most of the people the girl would find it well to know, — of course, she said, Isabel could know whomever she would, — and she had placed Mr. Osmond near the top of the list. He was an old friend of her own; she had known him these ten years; he was one of the cleverest and most agreeable men it was possible to meet. He was altogether above the respectable average; quite another affair! He was not perfect, — far from it; the effect he produced depended a good deal on the state of his nerves and his spirits. If he were not in the right mood, he could be very unsatisfactory, — like most people, after all; but when he chose to exert himself no man could do it to better purpose. He had his peculiarities, — which, indeed, Isabel would find to be the case with all the men really worth knowing, — and he did not cause his light to shine equally for all persons. Madame Merle, however, thought she could undertake that for Isabel he would be brilliant. He was easily bored, — too easily, — and dull people always put him out; but a quick and cultivated girl like Isabel would give him a stimulus which was too absent from his life. At any rate, he was a person to know. One should not attempt to live in Italy without making a friend of Gilbert Osmond, who knew more about the country than any one, except two or three German professors. And if they had more knowledge than he, he had infinitely more taste; he had a taste which was quite by itself. Isabel remembered that her friend had spoken of him during their multifarious colloquies at Gardencourt, and wondered a little what was the nature of the tie that united them. She was inclined to imagine that Madame Merle's ties were peculiar, and such a possibility was a part of the interest created by this suggestive woman. As regards her relations with Mr. Osmond, however, Madame Merle hinted at nothing but a long-established and tranquil friendship. Isabel said that she should be happy to know a person who had enjoyed her friend's confidence for so many years. "You ought to see a great many men," Madame Merle remarked; "you ought to see as many as possible, so as to get used to them."

"Used to them?" Isabel repeated, with that exceedingly serious gaze which sometimes seemed to proclaim that she was deficient in a sense of humor, — an intimation which at other moments she effectively refuted. "I am not afraid of them!"

"Used to them, I mean, so as to despise them. That 's what one comes to, with most of them. You will pick out, for your society, the few whom you don't despise."

This remark had a bitterness which

Madame Merle did not often allow herself to betray; but Isabel was not alarmed by it, for she had never supposed that, as one saw more of the world, the sentiment of respect became the most active of one's emotions. This sentiment was excited, however, by the beautiful city of Florence, which pleased her not less than Madame Merle had promised; and if her unassisted perception had not been able to gauge its charms she had clever companions to call attention to latent merits. She was in no want, indeed, of æsthetic illumination, for Ralph found it a pleasure, which renewed his own earlier sensations, to act as cicerone to his eager young kinswoman. Madame Merle remained at home; she had seen the treasures of Florence so often, and she had always something to do. But she talked of all things with remarkable vividness of memory: she remembered the right-hand angel in the large Perugino, and the position of the hands of the St. Elizabeth in the Titian; and had her own opinions as to the character of many famous works of art, differing often with Ralph with great sharpness, and defending her interpretations with as much ingenuity as good-humor. Isabel listened to the discussions which took place between the two with a sense that she might derive much benefit from them, and that they were among the advantages which, for instance, she could not have enjoyed in Albany. In the clear May mornings, before the formal breakfast, — this repast at Mrs. Touchett's was served at twelve o'clock, — Isabel wandered about with her cousin through the narrow and sombre Florentine streets, resting a while in the thicker dusk of some historic church, or the vaulted chambers of some dispeopled convent. She went to the galleries and palaces; she looked at the pictures and statues which had hitherto been great names to her, and exchanged for a knowledge which was sometimes a limitation a presentiment which proved usually to have been a blank. She performed all those acts of mental prostration in which, on a first visit to Italy, youth and enthusiasm so freely indulge; she felt her heart beat in the presence of immortal genius, and knew the sweetness of rising tears in eyes to which faded fresco and darkened marble grew dim. But the return, every day, was even pleasanter than the going forth, — the return into the wide, monumental court of the great house in which Mrs. Touchett, many years before, had established herself, and into the high, cool rooms, where carven rafters and pompous frescos of the sixteenth century looked down upon the prosaic minuteness of modern comfort. Mrs. Touchett inhabited an historic building in a narrow street whose very name recalled the strife of mediæval factions; and found compensation for the darkness of her frontage in the modicity of her rent and the brightness of a garden in which nature itself looked as archaic as the rugged architecture of the palace, and which illumined the rooms that were in regular use. Isabel found that to live in such a place might be a source of happiness, — almost of excitement. At first it had struck her as a sort of prison; but very soon its prison-like quality became a merit, for she discovered that it contained other prisoners than the members of her aunt's household. The spirit of the past was shut up there, like a refugee from the outer world; it lurked in lonely corners, and, at night, haunted even the rooms in which Mrs. Touchett diffused her matter-of-fact influence. Isabel used to hear vague echoes and strange reverberations; she had a sense of the hovering of unseen figures, of the flitting of ghosts. Often she paused, listening, half startled, half disappointed, on the great cold stone staircase.

Gilbert Osmond came to see Madame Merle, who presented him to the young lady seated almost out of sight at the

other end of the room. Isabel, on this occasion, took little share in the conversation; she scarcely even smiled when the others turned to her appealingly, but sat there as an impartial auditor of the brilliant discourse of her companions. Mrs. Touchett was not present, and these two had it, as the phrase is, their own way. They talked extremely well; it struck Isabel almost as a dramatic entertainment, rehearsed in advance. Madame Merle referred everything to her, but the girl answered nothing, though she knew that this attitude would make Mr. Osmond think she was one of those dull people who bored him. It was the worse, too, that Madame Merle should have told him that she was almost as much above the merely respectable average as he himself, and that she was putting her friend dreadfully in the wrong. But this was no matter for once; even if more had depended on it, Isabel could not have made an attempt to shine. There was something in Mr. Osmond that arrested her and held her in suspense, — made it seem more important that she should get an impression of him than that she should produce one herself. Besides, Isabel had little skill in producing an impression which she knew to be expected; nothing could be more charming, in general, than to seem dazzling; but she had a perverse unwillingness to perform on a fixed occasion. Mr. Osmond, to do him justice, had a well-bred air of expecting nothing; he was a quiet gentleman, with a colorless manner, who said elaborate things with a great deal of simplicity. Isabel, however, privately perceived that if he did not expect he observed; she was very sure he was sensitive. His face, his head, were sensitive; he was not handsome, but he was fine, — as fine as one of the drawings in the long gallery above the bridge at the Uffizzi. Mr. Osmond was very delicate; the tone of his voice alone would have proved it. It was the visitor's delicacy that made her abstain from interference. His talk was like the tinkling of glass, and if she had put out her finger she might have changed the pitch and spoiled the concert. Before he went he made an appeal to her.

"Madame Merle says she will come up to my hill-top, some day next week, and drink tea in my garden. It would give me much pleasure if you would come with her. It 's thought rather pretty; there 's what they call a general view. My daughter, too, would be so glad; or rather, for she is too young to have strong emotions, I should be so glad, — so very glad!" And Mr. Osmond paused a moment, with a slight air of embarrassment, leaving his sentence unfinished. "I should be so happy if you could know my daughter," he went on, a moment afterwards.

Isabel answered that she should be delighted to see Miss Osmond, and that if Madame Merle would show her the way to the hill-top she should be very grateful.

Upon this assurance the visitor took his leave; after which Isabel fully expected that her friend would scold her for having been so stupid. But, to her surprise, Madame Merle, who indeed never fell into the matter-of-course, said to her in a few moments, —

"You were charming, my dear; you were just as one would have wished you. You are never disappointing."

A rebuke might possibly have been irritating, though it is much more probable that Isabel would have taken it in good part; but, strange to say, the words that Madame Merle actually used caused her the first feeling of displeasure she had known this lady to excite. "That is more than I intended," she answered, coldly. "I am under no obligation, that I know of, to charm Mr. Osmond."

Madame Merle colored a moment; but we know it was not her habit to retract. "My dear child, I did n't speak

for him, poor man; I spoke for yourself. It is not, of course, a question as to his liking you; it matters little whether he likes you or not! But I thought you liked him."

"I did," said Isabel, honestly. "But I don't see what that matters, either."

"Everything that concerns you matters to me," Madame Merle returned, with a sort of noble gentleness, "especially when at the same time another old friend is concerned."

Whatever Isabel's obligations may have been to Mr. Osmond, it must be admitted that she found them sufficient to lead her to ask Ralph a few questions about him. She thought Ralph's judgments cynical, but she flattered herself that she had learned to make allowance for that.

"Do I know him?" said her cousin. "Oh, yes, I know him; not well, but on the whole enough. I have never cultivated his society, and he apparently has never found mine indispensable to his happiness. Who is he, — what is he? He is a mysterious American, who has been living these twenty years, or more, in Italy. Why do I call him mysterious? Only as a cover for my ignorance. I don't know his antecedents, his family, his origin. For all I know, he may be a prince in disguise; he rather looks like one, by the way, — like a prince who has abdicated in a fit of magnanimity, and has been in a state of disgust ever since. He used to live in Rome, but of late years he has taken up his abode in Florence; I remember hearing him say once that Rome has grown vulgar. He has a great dread of vulgarity; that 's his special line; he has n't any other that I know of. He lives on his income, which I suspect of not being vulgarly large. He 's a poor gentleman, — that 's what he calls himself. He married young, and lost his wife, and I believe he has a daughter. He also has a sister who is married to some little count or other of these parts; I remember meeting her of old. She is nicer than he, I should think, but rather wicked. I remember there used to be some stories about her. I don't think I recommend you to know her. But why don't you ask Madame Merle about these people? She knows them all much better than I."

"I ask you because I want your opinion as well as hers," said Isabel.

"A fig for my opinion! If you fall in love with Mr. Osmond, what will you care for that?"

"Not much, probably. But meanwhile it has a certain importance. The more information one has about a person the better."

"I don't agree to that. We know too much about people in these days; we hear too much. Our ears, our minds, our mouths, are stuffed with personalities. Don't mind anything that any one tells you about any one else. Judge every one and everything for yourself."

"That 's what I try to do," said Isabel; "but when you do that people call you conceited."

"You are not to mind them, — that 's precisely my argument; not to mind what they say about yourself any more than what they say about your friend or your enemy."

Isabel was silent a moment. "I think you are right; but there are some things I can't help minding; for instance, when my friend is attacked, or when I myself am praised."

"Of course you are always at liberty to judge the critic. Judge people as critics, however," Ralph added, "and you will condemn them all!"

"I shall see Mr. Osmond for myself," said Isabel. "I have promised to pay him a visit."

"To pay him a visit?"

"To go and see his view, his pictures, his daughter, — I don't know exactly what. Madame Merle is to take me;

she tells me a great many ladies call upon him."

"Ah, with Madame Merle you may go anywhere, *de confiance*," said Ralph. "She knows none but the best people."

Isabel said no more about Mr. Osmond, but she presently remarked to her cousin that she was not satisfied with his tone about Madame Merle. "It seems to me that you insinuate things about her. I don't know what you mean, but if you have any grounds for disliking her, I think you should either mention them frankly, or else say nothing at all."

Ralph, however, resented this charge with more apparent earnestness than he commonly used. "I speak of Madame Merle exactly as I speak to her, with an even exaggerated respect."

"Exaggerated, precisely. That is what I complain of."

"I do so because Madame Merle's merits are exaggerated."

"By whom, pray? By me? If so, I do her a poor service."

"No, no; by herself."

"Ah, I protest!" Isabel cried, with fervor. "If ever there was a woman who made small claims" —

"You put your finger on it," Ralph interrupted. "Her modesty is exaggerated. She has no business with small claims; she has a perfect right to make large ones."

"Her merits are large, then. You contradict yourself."

"Her merits are immense," said Ralph. "She is perfect; she is the only woman I know who has but that one little fault."

Isabel turned away with impatience. "I don't understand you; you are too paradoxical for my plain mind."

"Let me explain. When I say she exaggerates, I don't mean it in the vulgar sense, — that she boasts, overstates, gives too fine an account of herself. I mean literally that she pushes the search for perfection too far, — that her merits are in themselves overstrained. She is too good, too kind, too clever, too learned, too accomplished, too everything. She is too complete, in a word. I confess to you that she acts a little on my nerves, and that I feel about her a good deal as that intensely human Athenian felt about Aristides the Just."

Isabel looked hard at her cousin; but the mocking spirit, if it lurked in his words, failed on this occasion to peep from his eye. "Do you wish Madame Merle to be banished?" she inquired.

"By no means. She is much too good company. I delight in Madame Merle," said Ralph Touchett, simply.

"You are very odious, sir!" Isabel exclaimed. And then she asked him if he knew anything that was not to the honor of her brilliant friend.

"Nothing whatever. Don't you see that is just what I mean? Upon the character of every one else you may find some little black speck; if I were to take half an hour to it, some day, I have no doubt I should be able to find one on yours. For my own, of course, it is spotted like a leopard. But on Madame Merle's — nothing, nothing, nothing!"

"That is just what I think!" said Isabel, with a toss of her head. "That is why I like her so much."

"She is a capital person for you to know. Since you wish to see the world, you could n't have a better guide."

"I suppose you mean by that that she is worldly?"

"Worldly? No," said Ralph; "she is the world itself!"

It had certainly not, as Isabel for the moment took it into her head to believe, been a refinement of malice in him to say that he delighted in Madame Merle. Ralph Touchett took his entertainment wherever he could find it, and he would not have forgiven himself if he had not been able to find a great deal in the society of a woman in whom the social

virtues existed in polished perfection. There are deep-lying sympathies and antipathies, and it may have been that, in spite of the intellectual justice he rendered her, her absence from his mother's house would not have made life seem barren; but Ralph Touchett had learned to appreciate, and there could be no better field for such a talent than the table-talk of Madame Merle. He talked with her largely, treated her with conspicuous civility, occupied himself with her, and let her alone, with an opportuneness which she herself could not have surpassed. There were moments when he felt almost sorry for her; and these, oddly enough, were the moments when his kindness was least demonstrative. He was sure that she had been richly ambitious, and that what she had visibly accomplished was far below her ambition. She had got herself into perfect training, but she had won none of the prizes. She was always plain Madame Merle, the widow of a Swiss *négociant*, with a small income and a large acquaintance, who stayed with people a great deal, and was universally liked. The contrast between this position and any one of some half dozen others which he vividly imagined her to have had her eyes upon at various moments had an element of the tragical. His mother thought he got on beautifully with their pliable guest; to Mrs. Touchett's sense two people who dealt so largely in factitious theories of conduct would have much in common. He had given a great deal of consideration to Isabel's intimacy with Madame Merle, having long since made up his mind that he could not, without opposition, keep his cousin to himself; and he regarded it, on the whole, with philosophic tolerance. He believed it would take care of itself; it would not last forever. Neither of these two superior persons knew the other as well as she supposed, and when each of them had made certain discoveries there would be, if not a rupture, at least a relaxation. Meanwhile, he was quite willing to admit that the conversation of the elder lady was an advantage to the younger, who had a great deal to learn, and would doubtless learn it better from Madame Merle than from some other instructors of the young. It was not probable that Isabel would be injured.

XXIII.

It would certainly have been hard to see what injury could arise to her from the visit she presently paid to Mr. Osmond's hill-top. Nothing could have been more charming than this occasion, — a soft afternoon in May, in the full maturity of the Italian spring. The two ladies drove out of the Roman Gate, beneath the enormous blank superstructure which crowns the fine clear arch of that portal and makes it nakedly impressive, and wound between high-walled lanes, into which the wealth of blossoming orchards overdrooped and flung a perfume, until they reached the small super-urban piazza, of crooked shape, of which the long brown wall of the villa, occupied in part by Mr. Osmond, formed the principal, or at least the most imposing side. Isabel went with her friend through a wide, high court, where a clear shadow rested below, and a pair of light-arched galleries, facing each other above, caught the upper sunshine upon their slim columns and the flowering plants in which they were dressed. There was something rather severe about the place; it looked, somehow, as if, once you were in, it would not be easy to get out. For Isabel, however, there was of course as yet no thought of getting out, but only of advancing. Mr. Osmond met her in the cold antechamber, — it was cold even in the month of May, — and ushered her, with her companion, into the apartment to which we have already been in-

troduced. Madame Merle was in front, and while Isabel lingered a little, talking with Mr. Osmond, she went forward, familiarly, and greeted two persons who were seated in the drawing-room. One of these was little Pansy, on whom she bestowed a kiss; the other was a lady whom Mr. Osmond presented to Isabel as his sister, the Countess Gemini. "And that is my little girl," he said, "who has just come out of a convent."

Pansy had on a scanty white dress, and her fair hair was neatly arranged in a net; she wore a pair of slippers, tied, sandal-fashion, about her ankles. She made Isabel a little conventual courtesy, and then came to be kissed. The Countess Gemini simply nodded, without getting up. Isabel could see that she was a woman of fashion. She was thin and dark, and not at all pretty, having features that suggested some tropical bird, — a long, beak-like nose, a small, quickly-moving eye, and a mouth and chin that receded extremely. Her face, however, thanks to a very human and feminine expression, was by no means disagreeable; and as regards her appearance, it was evident that she understood herself and made the most of her points. The soft brilliancy of her toilet had the look of shimmering plumage, and her attitudes were light and sudden, like those of a creature that perched upon twigs. She had a great deal of manner; Isabel, who had never known any one with so much manner, immediately classified the Countess Gemini as the most affected of women. She remembered that Ralph had not recommended her as an acquaintance; but she was ready to acknowledge that on a casual view the countess presented no appearance of wickedness. Nothing could have been kinder or more innocent than her greeting to Isabel.

"You will believe that I am glad to see you when I tell you that it is only because I knew you were to be here that I came myself. I don't come and see my brother; I make him come and see me. This hill of his is impossible. I don't see what possesses him. Really, Osmond, you will be the ruin of my horses some day; and if they receive an injury you will have to give me another pair. I heard them panting to-day; I assure you I did. It is very disagreeable to hear one's horses panting when one is sitting in the carriage; it sounds, too, as if they were not what they should be. But I have always had good horses; whatever else I may have lacked, I have always managed that. My husband does n't know much, but I think he does know a horse. In general the Italians don't, but my husband has been a good deal in England. My horses are English, so it is all the greater pity they should be ruined. I must tell you," she went on, directly addressing Isabel, "that Osmond does n't often invite me; I don't think he likes to have me. It was quite my own idea, coming to-day. I like to see new people, and I am sure you are very new. But don't sit there; that chair is not what it looks. There are some very good seats here, but there are also some horrors."

These remarks were delivered with a variety of little jerks and glances, in a tone which, although it expressed a high degree of good-nature, was rather shrill than sweet.

"I don't like to have you, my dear?" said her brother. "I am sure you are invaluable."

"I don't see any horrors anywhere," Isabel declared, looking about her. "Everything here seems to me very beautiful."

"I have got a few good things," Mr. Osmond murmured; "indeed, I have nothing very bad. But I have not what I should have liked."

He stood there a little awkwardly, smiling and glancing about; his manner was an odd mixture of the indifferent and the expressive. He seemed to in-

timate that nothing was of much consequence. Isabel made a rapid induction: perfect simplicity was not the badge of his family. Even the little girl from the convent, who, in her prim white dress, with her small submissive face and her hands locked before her, stood there as if she were about to partake of her first communion, — even Mr. Osmond's diminutive daughter had a kind of finish which was not entirely artless.

"You would have liked a few things from the Uffizzi and the Pitti, — that 's what you would have liked," said Madame Merle.

"Poor Osmond, with his old curtains and crucifixes!" the Countess Gemini exclaimed. She appeared to call her brother only by his family name. Her ejaculation had no particular object; she smiled at Isabel as she made it, and looked at her from head to foot.

Her brother had not heard her; he seemed to be thinking what he could say to Isabel. "Won't you have some tea? You must be very tired," he at last bethought himself of remarking.

"No, indeed, I am not tired; what have I done to tire me?" Isabel felt a certain need of being very direct, of pretending to nothing; there was something in the air, in her general impression of things, — she could hardly have said what it was, — that deprived her of all disposition to put herself forward. The place, the occasion, the combination of people, signified more than lay on the surface; she would try to understand; she would not simply utter graceful platitudes. Poor Isabel was perhaps not aware that many women would have uttered graceful platitudes to cover the working of their observation. It must be confessed that her pride was a trifle concerned. A man whom she had heard spoken of in terms that excited interest, and who was evidently capable of distinguishing himself, had invited her, a young lady not lavish of her favors, to come to his house. Now that she had done so, the burden of the entertainment rested naturally upon himself. Isabel was not rendered less observant, and for the moment, I am afraid, she was not rendered more indulgent, by perceiving that Mr. Osmond carried his burden less easily than might have been expected. "What a fool I was to have invited these women here!" she could fancy his exclaiming to himself.

"You will be tired when you go home, if he shows you all his *bibelots*, and gives you a lecture on each," said the Countess Gemini.

"I am not afraid of that; but if I am tired, I shall at least have learned something."

"Very little, I am afraid. But my sister is dreadfully afraid of learning anything," said Mr. Osmond.

"Oh, I confess to that. I don't want to know anything more; I know too much already. The more you know, the more unhappy you are."

"You should not undervalue knowledge before Pansy, who has not finished her education," Madame Merle interposed, with a smile.

"Pansy will never know any harm," said the child's father; "Pansy is a little convent-flower."

"Oh, the convents, the convents!" cried the countess, with a sharp laugh. "Speak to me of the convents. You may learn anything there; I am a convent-flower myself. I don't pretend to be good, but the nuns do. Don't you see what I mean?" she went on, appealing to Isabel.

Isabel was not sure that she saw, and she answered that she was very bad at following arguments. The countess then declared that she herself detested arguments, but that this was her brother's taste; he would always discuss. "For me," she said, "one should like a thing, or one should n't; one can't like everything, of course. But one should n't attempt to reason it out; you never know where it may lead you. There

are some very good feelings that may have bad reasons; don't you know? And then there are very bad feelings, sometimes, that have good reasons. Don't you see what I mean? I don't care anything about reasons, but I know what I like."

"Ah, that's the great thing," said Isabel, smiling, but suspecting that her acquaintance with this lightly-flitting personage would not lead to intellectual repose. If the countess objected to argument, Isabel at this moment had as little taste for it, and she put out her hand to Pansy, with a pleasant sense that such a gesture committed her to nothing that would admit of a divergence of views.

Gilbert Osmond apparently took a rather hopeless view of his sister's tone, and he turned the conversation to another topic. He presently sat down on the other side of his daughter, who had taken Isabel's hand for a moment; but he ended by drawing her out of her chair, and making her stand between his knees, leaning against him while he passed his arm around her little waist. The child fixed her eyes on Isabel with a still, disinterested gaze, which seemed void of an intention, but conscious of an attraction. Mr. Osmond talked of many things; Madame Merle had said he could be agreeable when he chose, and to-day, after a little, he appeared not only to have chosen, but to have determined. Madame Merle and the Countess Gemini sat a little apart, conversing in the effortless manner of persons who knew each other well enough to take their ease; every now and then Isabel heard the countess say something extravagant. Mr. Osmond talked of Florence, of Italy, of the pleasure of living in that country, and of the abatements to such pleasure. There were both satisfactions and drawbacks; the drawbacks were pretty numerous; strangers were too apt to see Italy in rose-color. On the whole, it was better than other countries, if one was content to lead a quiet life and take things as they came. It was very dull sometimes, but there were advantages in living in the country which contained the most beauty. There were certain impressions that one could get only in Italy. There were others that one never got there, and one got some that were very bad. But from time to time one got a delightful one, which made up for everything. He was inclined to think that Italy had spoiled a great many people. He was even fatuous enough to believe at times that he himself might have been a better man if he had spent less of his life there. It made people idle and dilettantish and second-rate; there was nothing tonic in an Italian life. One was out of the current; one was not *dans le mouvement*, as the French said; one was too far from Paris and London. "We are gloriously provincial, I assure you," said Mr. Osmond, "and I am perfectly aware that I myself am as rusty as a key that has no lock to fit it. It polishes me up a little to talk with you; not that I venture to pretend I can turn that very complicated lock I suspect your intellect of being! But you will be going away before I have seen you three times, and I shall perhaps never see you after that. That's what it is to live in a country that people come to. When they are disagreeable it is bad enough; when they are agreeable it is still worse. As soon as you find you like them they are off again! I have been deceived too often; I have ceased to form attachments, to permit myself to feel attractions. You mean to stay, to settle? That would be really comfortable. Ah, yes, your aunt is a sort of guarantee; I believe she may be depended upon. Oh, she's an old Florentine — I mean, literally, an old one; not a modern outsider. She is a contemporary of the Medici; she must have been present at the burning of Savonarola, and I am not sure she didn't throw a handful of chips

into the flame. Her face is very much like some faces in the early pictures; little, dry, definite faces, that must have had a good deal of expression, but almost always the same one. Indeed, I can show you her portrait in a fresco of Ghirlandaio's. I hope you don't object to my speaking that way of your aunt, eh? I have an idea you don't. Perhaps you think that's even worse. I assure you there is no want of respect in it, to either of you. You know I 'm a particular admirer of Mrs. Touchett."

While Isabel's host exerted himself to entertain her in this somewhat confidential fashion, she looked occasionally at Madame Merle, who met her eyes with an inattentive smile in which, on this occasion, there was no infelicitous intimation that our heroine appeared to advantage. Madame Merle eventually proposed to the Countess Gemini that they should go into the garden, and the countess, rising and shaking out her soft plumage, began to rustle toward the door.

"Poor Miss Archer!" she exclaimed, surveying the other group with expressive compassion. "She has been brought quite into the family."

"Miss Archer can certainly have nothing but sympathy for a family to which you belong," Mr. Osmond answered, with a laugh which, though it had something of a mocking ring, was not ill-natured.

"I don't know what you mean by that! I am sure she will see no harm in me but what you tell her. I am better than he says, Miss Archer," the countess went on. "I am only rather light. Is that all he has said? Ah, then, you keep him in good humor. Has he opened on one of his favorite subjects? I give you notice that there are two or three that he treats *à fond*. In that case you had better take off your bonnet."

"I don't think I know what Mr. Osmond's favorite subjects are," said Isabel, who had risen to her feet.

The countess assumed, for an instant, an attitude of intense meditation; pressing one of her hands, with the finger-tips gathered together, to her forehead.

"I 'll tell you in a moment," she answered. "One is Machiavelli, the other is Vittoria Colonna, the next is Metastasio."

"Ah, with me," said Madame Merle, passing her arm into the Countess Gemini's, as if to guide her course to the garden, "Mr. Osmond is never so historical."

"Oh, you," the countess answered, as they moved away, "you yourself are Machiavelli, — you yourself are Vittoria Colonna!"

"We shall hear next that poor Madame Merle is Metastasio!" Gilbert Osmond murmured, with a little melancholy smile.

Isabel had got up, on the assumption that they too were to go into the garden; but Mr. Osmond stood there, with no apparent inclination to leave the room, with his hands in the pockets of his jacket, and his daughter, who had now locked her arm into one of his own, clinging to him and looking up, while her eyes moved from his own face to Isabel's. Isabel waited, with a certain unuttered contentedness, to have her movements directed; she liked Mr. Osmond's talk, his company; she felt that she was being entertained. Through the open doors of the great room she saw Madame Merle and the countess stroll across the deep grass of the garden; then she turned, and her eyes wandered over the things that were scattered about her. The understanding had been that her host should show her his treasures; his pictures and cabinets all looked like treasures. Isabel, after a moment, went toward one of the pictures to see it better; but, just as she had done so, Mr. Osmond said to her, abruptly, —

"Miss Archer, what do you think of my sister?"

Isabel turned, with a good deal of surprise: —

"Ah, don't ask me that; I have seen your sister too little."

"Yes, you have seen her very little; but you must have observed that there is not a great deal of her to see. What do you think of our family tone?" Osmond went on, smiling. "I should like to know how it strikes a fresh, unprejudiced mind. I know what you are going to say, — you have had too little observation of it. Of course this is only a glimpse. But just take notice, in future, if you have a chance. I sometimes think we have got into a rather bad way, living off here among things and people not our own, without responsibilities or attachments, with nothing to hold us together or keep us up; marrying foreigners, forming artificial tastes, playing tricks with our natural mission! Let me add, though, that I say that much more for myself than for my sister. She 's a very good woman, — better than she seems. She is rather unhappy, and as she is not of a very serious disposition, she does n't tend to show it tragically; she shows it comically instead. She has got a nasty husband, though I am not sure she makes the best of him. Of course, however, a nasty husband is an awkward thing. Madame Merle gives her excellent advice, but it 's a good deal like giving a child a dictionary to learn a language with. He can look out the words, but he can't put them together. My sister needs a grammar, but unfortunately she is not grammatical. Excuse my troubling you with these details; my sister was very right in saying that you have been taken into the family. Let me take down that picture; you want more light."

He took down the picture, carried it toward the window, related some curious facts about it. She looked at the other works of art, and he gave her such further information as might appear to be most acceptable to a young lady making a call on a summer's afternoon. His pictures, his carvings, and tapestries were interesting; but after a while Isabel became conscious that the owner was more interesting still. He resembled no one she had ever seen; most of the people she knew might be divided into groups of half-a-dozen specimens. There were one or two exceptions to this; she could think, for instance, of no group that would contain her aunt Lydia. There were other people who were, relatively speaking, original, — original, as one might say, by courtesy, — such as Mr. Goodwood, as her cousin Ralph, as Henrietta Stackpole, as Lord Warburton, as Madame Merle. But in essentials, when one came to look at them, these individuals belonged to types which were already present to her mind. Her mind contained no class which offered a natural place to Mr. Osmond; he was a specimen apart. Isabel did not say all these things to herself at the time; but she felt them, and afterwards they became distinct. For the moment she only said to herself that Mr. Osmond had the interest of rareness. It was not so much what he said and did, but rather what he withheld, that distinguished him; he indulged in no striking deflections from common usage; he was an original without being an eccentric. Isabel had never met a person of so fine a grain. The peculiarity was physical, to begin with, and it extended to his immaterial part. His dense, delicate hair, his overdrawn, retouched features, his clear complexion, ripe without being coarse, the very evenness of the growth of his beard, and that light, smooth slenderness of structure which made the movement of a single one of his fingers produce the effect of an expressive gesture, — these personal points struck our observant young lady as the signs of an unusual sensibility. He was certainly fastidious and critical; he was probably

irritable. His sensibility had governed him, — possibly governed him too much; it had made him impatient of vulgar troubles and had led him to live by himself, in a serene, impersonal way thinking about art and beauty and history. He had consulted his taste in everything, — his taste alone, perhaps; that was what made him so different from every one else. Ralph had something of this same quality, this appearance of thinking that life was a matter of connoisseurship; but in Ralph it was an anomaly, a kind of humorous excrescence, whereas in Mr. Osmond it was the key-note, and everything was in harmony with it. Isabel was certainly far from understanding him completely; his meaning was not at all times obvious. It was hard to see what he meant, for instance, by saying that he was gloriously provincial, — which was so exactly the opposite of what she had supposed. Was it a harmless paradox, intended to puzzle her? or was it the last refinement of high culture? Isabel trusted that she should learn in time: it would be very interesting to learn. If Mr. Osmond were provincial, pray what were the characteristics of the capital? Isabel could ask herself this question, in spite of having perceived that her host was a shy personage; for such shyness as his — the shyness of ticklish nerves and fine perceptions — was perfectly consistent with the best breeding. Indeed, it was almost a proof of superior qualities. Mr. Osmond was not a man of easy assurance, who chatted and gossiped with the fluency of a superficial nature; he was critical of himself as well as of others, and exacting a good deal of others (to think them agreeable), he probably took a rather ironical view of what he himself offered: a proof, into the bargain, that he was not grossly conceited. If he had not been shy, he would not have made that gradual, subtle, successful effort to overcome his shyness to which Isabel felt that she owed both what pleased and what puzzled her in his conversation to-day. His suddenly asking her what she thought of the Countess of Gemini, — that was doubtless a proof that he was interested in her feelings; it could scarcely be as a help to knowledge of his own sister. That he should be so interested showed an inquiring mind; but it was a little singular that he should sacrifice his fraternal feeling to his curiosity. This was the most eccentric thing he had done.

There were two other rooms, beyond the one in which she had been received, equally full of picturesque objects, and in these apartments Isabel spent a quarter of an hour. Everything was very curious and valuable, and Mr. Osmond continued to be the kindest of ciceroni, as he led her from one fine piece to another, still holding his little girl by the hand. His kindness almost surprised our young lady, who wondered why he should take so much trouble for her; and she was oppressed at last with the accumulation of beauty and knowledge to which she found herself introduced. There was enough for the present; she had ceased to attend to what he said; she listened to him with attentive eyes, but she was not thinking of what he told her. He probably thought she was cleverer than she was; Madame Merle would have told him so; which was a pity, because in the end he would be sure to find out, and then perhaps even her real cleverness would not reconcile him to his mistake. A part of Isabel's fatigue came from the effort to appear as intelligent as she believed Madame Merle had described her, and from the fear (very unusual with her) of exposing — not her ignorance; for that she cared comparatively little — but her possible grossness of perception. It would have annoyed her to express a liking for something which her host, in his superior enlightenment, would think she ought not to like; or to pass

by something at which the truly initiated mind would arrest itself. She was very careful, therefore, as to what she said, as to what she noticed or failed to notice, — more careful than she had ever been before.

They came back into the first of the rooms, where the tea had been served; but as the two other ladies were still on the terrace, and as Isabel had not yet been made acquainted with the view, which constituted the paramount distinction of the place, Mr. Osmond directed her steps into the garden, without more delay. Madame Merle and the countess had had chairs brought out, and as the afternoon was lovely the countess proposed they should take their tea in the open air. Pansy therefore was sent to bid the servant bring out the tray. The sun had got low, the golden light took a deeper tone, and on the mountains and the plain that stretched beneath them the masses of purple shadow seemed to glow as richly as the places that were still exposed. The scene had an extraordinary charm. The air was almost solemnly still, and the large expanse of the landscape, with its garden-like culture and nobleness of outline, its teeming valley and delicately-fretted hills, its peculiarly human-looking touches of habitation, lay there in splendid harmony and classic grace.

"You seem so well pleased that I think you can be trusted to come back," Mr. Osmond said, as he led his companion to one of the angles of the terrace.

"I shall certainly come back," Isabel answered, "in spite of what you say about its being bad to live in Italy. What was that you said about one's natural mission? I wonder if I should forsake my natural mission if I were to settle in Florence."

"A woman's natural mission is to be where she is most appreciated."

"The point is to find out where that is."

"Very true; a woman often wastes a great deal of time in the inquiry. People ought to make it very plain to her."

"Such a matter would have to be made very plain to me," said Isabel, smiling.

"I am glad, at any rate, to hear you talk of settling. Madame Merle had given me an idea that you were of a rather roving disposition. I thought she spoke of your having some plan of going round the world."

"I am rather ashamed of my plans; I make a new one every day."

"I don't see why you should be ashamed. It's the greatest of pleasures."

"It seems frivolous, I think," said Isabel. "One ought to choose something, very deliberately, and be faithful to that."

"By that rule, then, I have not been frivolous."

"Have you never made plans?"

"Yes, I made one years ago, and I am acting on it to-day."

"It must have been a very pleasant one," said Isabel.

"It was very simple. It was to be as quiet as possible."

"As quiet?" the girl repeated.

"Not to worry, — not to strive nor struggle. To resign myself. To be content with a little." He uttered these sentences slowly, with little pauses between, and his intelligent eyes were fixed upon Isabel's, with the conscious look of a man who has brought himself to confess something.

"Do you call that simple?" Isabel asked, with a gentle laugh.

"Yes, because it's negative."

"Has your life been negative?"

"Call it affirmative if you like. Only it has affirmed my indifference. Mind you, not my natural indifference, — I had none. But my studied, my willful renunciation."

Isabel scarcely understood him; it seemed a question whether he were joking or not. Why should a man who

struck her as having a great fund of reserve suddenly bring himself to be so confidential? This was his affair, however, and his confidences were interesting. "I don't see why you should have renounced," she said in a moment.

"Because I could do nothing. I had no prospects, I was poor, and I was not a man of genius. I had no talents even; I took my measure early in life. I was simply the most fastidious young gentleman living. There were two or three people in the world I envied, — the Emperor of Russia, for instance, and the Sultan of Turkey! There were even moments when I envied the Pope of Rome, — for the consideration he enjoys. I should have been delighted to be considered to that extent; but since I could n't be, I did n't care for anything less, and I made up my mind not to go in for honors. A gentleman can always consider himself, and, fortunately, I was a gentleman. I could do nothing in Italy, — I could n't even be an Italian patriot. To do that I should have had to go out of the country; and I was too fond of it to leave it. So I have passed a great many years here, on that quiet plan I spoke of. I have not been at all unhappy. I don't mean to say I have cared for nothing; but the things I have cared for have been definite, — limited. The events of my life have been absolutely unperceived by any one save myself; getting an old silver crucifix at a bargain (I have never bought anything dear, of course), or discovering, as I once did, a sketch by Correggio on a panel daubed over by some inspired idiot!"

This would have been rather a dry account of Mr. Osmond's career if Isabel had fully believed it; but her imagination supplied the human element which she was sure had not been wanting. His life had been mingled with other lives more than he admitted; of course she could not expect him to enter into this. For the present she abstained from provoking further revelations; to intimate that he had not told her everything would be more familiar and less considerate than she now desired to be. He had certainly told her quite enough. It was her present inclination, however, to express considerable sympathy for the success with which he had preserved his independence. "That 's a very pleasant life," she said, "to renounce everything but Correggio!"

"Oh, I have been very happy; don't imagine me to suggest for a moment that I have not. It 's one's own fault if one is not happy."

"Have you lived here always?"

"No, not always. I lived a long time at Naples, and many years in Rome. But I have been here a good while. Perhaps I shall have to change, however; to do something else. I have no longer myself to think of. My daughter is growing up, and it is very possible she may not care so much for the Correggios and crucifixes as I. I shall have to do what is best for her."

"Yes, do that," said Isabel. "She is such a dear little girl."

"Ah," cried Gilbert Osmond, with feeling, "she is a little saint of heaven! She is my great happiness!"

XXIV.

While this sufficiently intimate colloquy (prolonged for some time after we cease to follow it) was going on, Madame Merle and her companion, breaking a silence of some duration, had begun to exchange remarks. They were sitting in an attitude of unexpressed expectancy; an attitude especially marked on the part of the Countess Gemini, who, being of a more nervous temperament than Madame Merle, practiced with less success the art of disguising impatience. What these ladies were waiting for would not have been appar-

ent, and was perhaps not very definite to their own minds. Madame Merle waited for Osmond to release their young friend from her *tête-à-tête*, and the countess waited because Madame Merle did. The countess, moreover, by waiting, found the time ripe for saying something discordant; a necessity of which she had been conscious for the last twenty minutes. Her brother wandered with Isabel to the end of the garden, and she followed the pair for a while with her eyes.

"My dear," she then observed to Madame Merle, "you will excuse me if I don't congratulate you!"

"Very willingly; for I don't in the least know why you should."

"Have n't you a little plan that you think rather well of?" And the countess nodded towards the retreating couple.

Madame Merle's eyes took the same direction; then she looked serenely at her neighbor. "You know I never understand you very well," she answered, smiling.

"No one can understand better than you when you wish. I see that, just now, you don't wish to."

"You say things to me that no one else does," said Madame Merle, gravely, but without bitterness.

"You mean things you don't like? Does n't Osmond sometimes say such things?"

"What your brother says has a point."

"Yes, a very sharp one sometimes. If you mean that I am not so clever as he, you must not think I shall suffer from your saying it. But it will be much better that you should understand me."

"Why so?" asked Madame Merle; "what difference will it make?"

"If I don't approve of your plan, you ought to know it in order to appreciate the danger of my interfering with it."

Madame Merle looked as if she were ready to admit that there might be something in this; but in a moment she said quietly, "You think me more calculating than I am."

"It 's not your calculating that I think ill of; it 's your calculating wrong. You have done so in this case."

"You must have made extensive calculations yourself to discover it."

"No, I have not had time for that. I have seen the girl but this once," said the countess, "and the conviction has suddenly come to me. I like her very much."

"So do I," Madame Merle declared.

"You have a strange way of showing it."

"Surely — I have given her the advantage of making your acquaintance."

"That, indeed," cried the countess, with a laugh, "is perhaps the best thing that could happen to her!"

Madame Merle said nothing for some time. The countess's manner was impertinent, but she did not suffer this to discompose her; and with her eyes upon the violet slope of Monte Morello, she gave herself up to reflection.

"My dear lady," she said at last, "I advise you not to agitate yourself. The matter you allude to concerns three persons much stronger of purpose than yourself."

"Three persons? You and Osmond, of course. But is Miss Archer also very strong of purpose?"

"Quite as much so as we."

"Ah, then," said the countess radiantly, "if I convince her it 's her interest to resist you, she will do so successfully!"

"Resist us? Why do you express yourself so coarsely? She is not to be subjected to force."

"I am not sure of that. You are capable of anything, you and Osmond. I don't mean Osmond by himself, and I don't mean you by yourself. But together you are dangerous, — like some chemical combination."

"You had better leave us alone, then," said Madame Merle, smiling.

"I don't mean to touch you; but I shall talk to that girl."

"My poor Amy," Madame Merle murmured, "I don't see what has got into your head."

"I take an interest in her, — that is what has got into my head. I like her."

Madame Merle hesitated a moment. "I don't think she likes you."

The countess's bright little eyes expanded, and her face was set in a grimace. "Ah, you *are* dangerous," she cried, "even by yourself!"

"If you want her to like you, don't abuse your brother to her," said Madame Merle.

"I don't suppose you pretend she has fallen in love with him, — in two interviews."

Madame Merle looked a moment at Isabel and at the master of the house. He was leaning against the parapet, facing her, with his arms folded; and she, at present, though she had her face turned to the opposite prospect, was evidently not scrutinizing it. As Madame Merle watched her, she lowered her eyes; she was listening, possibly with a certain embarrassment, while she pressed the point of her parasol into the path. Madame Merle rose from her chair. "Yes, I think so!" she said.

The shabby footboy, summoned by Pansy, had come out with a small table, which he placed upon the grass, and then had gone back and fetched the tea-tray; after which he again disappeared, to return with a couple of chairs. Pansy had watched these proceedings with the deepest interest, standing with her small hands folded together upon the front of her scanty frock; but she had not presumed to offer assistance to the servant. When the tea-table had been arranged, she gently approached her aunt. "Do you think papa would object to my making the tea?"

The countess looked at her with a deliberately critical gaze, and without answering her question. "My poor niece," she said, "is that your best frock?"

"Ah, no," Pansy answered, "it's just a little toilet for common occasions."

"Do you call it a common occasion when I come to see you? — to say nothing of Madame Merle and the pretty lady yonder."

Pansy reflected a moment, looking gravely from one of the persons mentioned to the other. Then her face broke into its perfect smile. "I have a pretty dress, but even that one is very simple. Why should I expose it beside your beautiful things?"

"Because it's the prettiest you have; for me you must always wear the prettiest. Please put it on the next time. It seems to me they don't dress you so well as they might."

The child stroked down her antiquated skirt, sparingly. "It's a good little dress to make tea, — don't you think? Do you not believe papa would allow me?"

"Impossible for me to say, my child," said the countess. "For me, your father's ideas are unfathomable. Madame Merle understands them better; ask her."

Madame Merle smiled with her usual geniality. "It's a weighty question, — let me think. It seems to me it would please your father to see a careful little daughter making his tea. It 's the proper duty of the daughter of the house, — when she grows up."

"So it seems to me, Madame Merle!" Pansy cried. "You shall see how well I will make it. A spoonful for each." And she began to busy herself at the table.

"Two spoonfuls for me," said the countess, who, with Madame Merle, remained for some moments watching her. "Listen to me, Pansy," the countess re-

sumed at last. "I should like to know what you think of your visitor."

"Ah, she is not mine, — she is papa's," said Pansy.

"Miss Archer came to see you as well," Madame Merle remarked.

"I am very happy to hear that. She has been very polite to me."

"Do you like her, then?" the countess asked.

"She is charming, — charming," said Pansy, in her little neat, conversational tone. "She pleases me exceedingly."

"And you think she pleases your father?"

"Ah, really, countess," murmured Madame Merle, dissuasively. "Go and call them to tea," she went on, to the child.

"You will see if they don't like it!" Pansy declared; and went off to summon the others, who were still lingering at the end of the terrace.

"If Miss Archer is to become her mother it is surely interesting to know whether the child likes her," said the countess.

"If your brother marries again, it won't be for Pansy's sake," Madame Merle replied. "She will soon be sixteen, and after that she will begin to need a husband rather than a step-mother."

"And will you provide the husband as well?"

"I shall certainly take an interest in her marrying well. I imagine you will do the same."

"Indeed I shan't!" cried the countess. "Why should I, of all women, set such a price on a husband?"

"You did n't marry well; that 's what I am speaking of. When I say a husband, I mean a good one."

"There are no good ones. Osmond won't be a good one."

Madame Merle closed her eyes a moment. "You are irritated just now, — I don't know why," she said, presently. "I don't think you will really object either to your brother or to your niece's marrying, when the time comes for them to do so; and as regards Pansy, I am confident that we shall some day have the pleasure of looking for a husband for her together. Your large acquaintance will be a great help."

"Yes, I am irritated," the countess answered. "You often irritate me. Your own coolness is extraordinary; you are a strange woman."

"It is much better that we should always act together," Madame Merle went on.

"Do you mean that as a threat?" asked the countess, rising.

Madame Merle shook her head, with a smile of sadness. "No indeed, you have not my coolness!"

Isabel and Mr. Osmond were now coming toward them, and Isabel had taken Pansy by the hand.

"Do you pretend to believe he would make her happy?" the countess demanded.

"If he should marry Miss Archer I suppose he would behave like a gentleman."

The countess jerked herself into a succession of attitudes. "Do you mean as most gentlemen behave? That would be much to be thankful for! Of course Osmond 's a gentleman; his own sister need n't be reminded of that. But does he think he can marry any girl he happens to pick out? Osmond 's a gentleman, of course; but I must say I have never, no never, seen any one of Osmond's pretentions! What they are all based upon is more than I can say. I am his own sister; I might be supposed to know. Who is he, if you please? What has he ever done? If there had been anything particularly grand in his origin — if he were made of some superior clay — I suppose I should have got some inkling of it. If there had been any great honors or splendors in the family, I should certainly have made the most of them; they would have been of good use to me. But there is nothing, nothing.

nothing. His parents were charming people of course; but so were yours, I have no doubt. Every one is a charming person nowadays. Even I am a charming person; don't laugh, it has literally been said. As for Osmond, he has always appeared to believe that he is descended from the gods."

"You may say what you please," said Madame Merle, who had listened to this quick outbreak none the less attentively, we may believe, because her eye wandered away from the speaker, and her hands busied themselves with adjusting the knots of ribbon on her dress. "You Osmonds are a fine race, — your blood must flow from some very pure source. Your brother, like an intelligent man, has had the conviction of it, if he has not had the proofs. You are modest about it, but you yourself are extremely distinguished. What do you say about your niece? The child's a little duchess. Nevertheless," Madame Merle added, "it will not be an easy matter for Osmond to marry Miss Archer. But he can try."

"I hope she will refuse him. It will take him down a little."

"We must not forget that he is one of the cleverest of men."

"I have heard you say that before; but I have n't yet discovered what he has done!"

"What he has done? He has never done anything that has had to be undone. And he has known how to wait."

"To wait for Miss Archer's money? How much of it is there?"

"That 's not what I mean," said Madame Merle. "Miss Archer has seventy thousand pounds."

"Well, it is a pity she is so nice," the countess declared. "To be sacrificed, any girl would do. She need n't be superior."

"If she were not superior, your brother would never look at her. He must have the best."

"Yes," rejoined the countess, as they went forward a little to meet the others, "he is very hard to please. That makes me fear for her happiness!"

Henry James, Jr.

CONCERNING DEAD LOVE.

When Love is dead, who writes his epitaph?
Who kisses his shut eyes, and says, "Sleep well"?
We do not ring for him a passing bell;
We cover him with flowers of jest and laugh,
The bitter funeral wine in silence quaff,
And with dull heart-beats toll his secret knell.
His grave is ours, and yet with life we strive,
Endure the years, and grind our daily task;
There is no heaven for Love that could not live,
Earth has but mocked us with this beauteous mask.
And when, in agony, our dry lips ask,
"If God deprive us, wherefore did he give?"
There comes some dreadful question from above,
And whispers by the grave, "Was this poor dead thing Love?"

Rose Terry Cooke.