

horror of William Shakespeare, and so much to the injury of the tragedy, as it was thought, that a "true and perfect copy," containing much that never at any time was heard on Shakespeare's

stage, was immediately sent to the publisher, who soon issued it cured and perfect of its limbs and absolute in its members, as it had been conceived by its great creator.

*Richard Grant White.*

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## THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY.

### XLVII.

MISS STACKPOLE's other topic was very different; she gave Isabel the latest news about Mr. Bantling. He had been out in the United States the year before, and she was happy to say she had been able to show him considerable attention. She did n't know how much he had enjoyed it, but she would undertake to say it had done him good; he was n't the same man when he left that he was when he came. It had opened his eyes and shown him that England was not everything. He was very much liked over there, and thought extremely simple, — more simple than the English were commonly supposed to be. There were some people who thought him affected; she did n't know whether they meant that his simplicity was an affectation. Some of his questions were too discouraging; he thought all the chambermaids were farmers' daughters, or all the farmers' daughters were chambermaids, she could n't exactly remember which. He had n't seemed able to grasp the school system; it seemed really too much for him. On the whole he had appeared as if there were too much — as if he could only take a small part. The part he had chosen was the hotel system, and the river navigation. He seemed really fascinated with the hotels; he had a photograph of every one he had visited. But the river steamers were his principal interest; he wanted to do nothing but sail on the big boats.

They had traveled together from New York to Milwaukee, stopping at the most interesting cities on the route; and whenever they started afresh he had wanted to know if they could go by the steamer. He seemed to have no idea of geography — had an impression that Baltimore was a western city, and was perpetually expecting to arrive at the Mississippi. He appeared never to have heard of any river in America but the Mississippi, and was unprepared to recognize the existence of the Hudson, though he was obliged to confess at last that it was fully equal to the Rhine. They had spent some pleasant hours in the palace-cars; he was always ordering ice-cream from the colored man. He could never get used to that idea — that you could get ice-cream in the cars. Of course you could n't, nor fans, nor candy, nor anything, in the English cars! He found the heat quite overwhelming, and she had told him that she expected it was the greatest he had ever experienced. He was now in England, hunting; "hunting round," Henrietta called it. These amusements were those of the American Indians; we had left that behind long ago, the pleasures of the chase. It seemed to be generally believed in England that we wore tomahawks and feathers; but such a costume was more in keeping with English habits. Mr. Bantling would not have time to join her in Italy, but when she should go up to Paris again he expected to come over. He wanted very much to

see Versailles again; he was very fond of the ancient *régime*. They did n't agree about that, but that was what she liked Versailles for, that you could see the ancient régime had been swept away. There were no dukes and marquises there now; on the contrary, she remembered one day when there were five American families, all walking round. Mr. Bantling was very anxious that she should take up the subject of England again, and he thought she might get on better with it now; England had changed a good deal within two or three years. He was determined that if she went there she should go to see his sister, Lady Pensil, and that this time the invitation should come to her straight. The mystery of that other one had never been explained.

Caspar Goodwood came at last to the Palazzo Roccanera; he had written Isabel a note beforehand, to ask leave. This was promptly granted; she should be at home at six o'clock that afternoon. She spent the day wondering what he was coming for — what good he expected to get of it. He had presented himself hitherto as a person destitute of the faculty of compromise, who would take what he had asked for, or nothing. Isabel's hospitality, however, asked no questions, and she found no great difficulty in appearing happy enough to deceive him. It was her conviction, at least, that she deceived him, and made him say to himself that he had been misinformed. But she also saw, so she believed, that he was not disappointed, as some other men, she was sure, would have been; he had not come to Rome to look for an opportunity. She never found out what he had come for; he offered her no explanation; there could be none but the very simple one that he wanted to see her. In other words, he had come for his amusement. Isabel followed up this induction with a good deal of eagerness, and was delighted to have found a formula that would lay the

ghost of this gentleman's ancient grievance. If he had come to Rome for his amusement, this was exactly what she wanted; for if he cared for amusement he had got over his heart-ache. If he had got over his heart-ache everything was as it should be, and her responsibilities were at an end. It was true that he took his recreation a little stiffly, but he had never been demonstrative, and Isabel had every reason to believe that he was satisfied with what he saw. Henrietta was not in his confidence, though he was in hers, and Isabel consequently received no side-light upon his state of mind. He had little conversation upon general topics; it came back to her that she had said of him once, years before, "Mr. Goodwood speaks a good deal, but he does n't talk." He spoke a good deal in Rome, but he talked, perhaps, as little as ever; considering, that is, how much there was to talk about. His arrival was not calculated to simplify her relations with her husband, for if Osmond did n't like her friends, Mr. Goodwood had no claim upon his attention save having been one of the first of them. There was nothing for her to say of him but that he was an old friend; this rather meagre synthesis exhausted the facts. She had been obliged to introduce him to Osmond; it was impossible she should not ask him to dinner, to her Thursday evenings, of which she had grown very weary, but to which her husband still held for the sake not so much of inviting people as of not inviting them. To the Thursdays Mr. Goodwood came regularly, solemnly, rather early; he appeared to regard them with a good deal of gravity. Isabel every now and then had a moment of anger; there was something so literal about him; she thought he might know that she did n't know what to do with him. But she could n't call him stupid; he was not that in the least; he was only extraordinarily honest. To be as honest as that made a man very dif-

ferent from most people; one had to be almost equally honest with him. Isabel made this latter reflection at the very time she was flattering herself that she had persuaded him that she was the most light-hearted of women. He never threw any doubt on this point, never asked her any personal questions. He got on much better with Osmond than had seemed probable. Osmond had a great dislike to being counted upon; in such a case he had an irresistible need of disappointing you. It was in virtue of this principle that he gave himself the entertainment of taking a fancy to a perpendicular Bostonian whom he had been depended upon to treat with coldness. He asked Isabel if Mr. Goodwood also had wanted to marry her, and expressed surprise at her not having accepted him. It would have been an excellent thing, like living under a tall belfry, which would strike all the hours and make a queer vibration in the upper air. He declared he liked to talk with the great Goodwood; it was n't easy at first; you had to climb by an interminable steep staircase to the top of the tower; but when you got there you had a big view and felt a little fresh breeze. Osmond, as we know, had delightful qualities, and he gave Caspar Goodwood the benefit of them all. Isabel could see that Mr. Goodwood thought better of her husband than he had ever wished to; he had given her the impression that morning in Florence of being inaccessible to a good impression. Osmond asked him repeatedly to dinner, and Goodwood smoked a cigar with him afterwards, and even desired to be shown his collections. Osmond said to Isabel that he was very original; he was as strong as an English portmanteau. Caspar Goodwood took to riding on the Campagna, and devoted much time to this exercise; it was therefore mainly in the evening that Isabel saw him.

She bethought herself of saying to him one day that if he were willing he

could render her a service. And then she added, smiling, —

“I don't know, however, what right I have to ask a service of you.”

“You are the person in the world who has most right,” he answered. “I have given you assurances that I have never given any one else.”

The service was that he should go and see her cousin Ralph, who was ill at the Hôtel de Paris, alone, and be as kind to him as possible. Mr. Goodwood had never seen him, but he would know who the poor fellow was; if she was not mistaken, Ralph had once invited him to Gardencourt. Caspar remembered the invitation perfectly, and, though he was not supposed to be a man of imagination, had enough to put himself in the place of a poor gentleman who lay dying at a Roman inn. He called at the Hôtel de Paris, and, on being shown into the presence of the master of Gardencourt, found Miss Stackpole sitting beside his sofa. A singular change had, in fact, occurred in this lady's relations with Ralph Touchett. She had not been asked by Isabel to go and see him, but on hearing that he was too ill to come out had immediately gone of her own motion. After this she had paid him a daily visit — always under the conviction that they were great enemies. “Oh, yes, we are intimate enemies,” Ralph used to say; and he accused her freely — as freely as the humor of it would allow — of coming to worry him to death. In reality they became excellent friends, and Henrietta wondered that she should never have liked him before. Ralph liked her exactly as much as he had always done; he had never doubted for a moment that she was an excellent fellow. They talked about everything, and always differed; about everything, that is, but Isabel — a topic as to which Ralph always had a thin forefinger on his lips. On the other hand, Mr. Bantling was a great resource; Ralph was

capable of discussing Mr. Bantling with Henrietta for hours. Discussion was stimulated, of course, by their inevitable difference of view, Ralph having amused himself with taking the ground that the genial ex-guardsmen was a regular Machiavelli. Caspar Goodwood could contribute nothing to such a debate; but after he had been left alone with Touchett, he found there were various other matters they could talk about. It must be admitted that the lady who had just gone out was not one of these; Caspar granted all Miss Stackpole's merits in advance, but had no further remark to make about her. Neither, after the first allusions, did the two men expatiate upon Mrs. Osmond, a theme in which Goodwood perceived as many dangers as his host. He felt very sorry for Ralph; he could not bear to see a pleasant man so helpless. There was help in Goodwood, when once the fountain had been tapped; and he repeated several times his visit to the *Hôtel de Paris*. It seemed to Isabel that she had been very clever; she had disposed of the superfluous Caspar. She had given him an occupation; she had converted him into a care-taker of Ralph. She had a plan of making him travel northward with her cousin as soon as the first mild weather should allow it. Lord Warburton had brought Ralph to Rome, and Mr. Goodwood should take him away. There seemed a happy symmetry in this, and she was now intensely eager that Ralph should leave Rome. She had a constant fear that he would die there, and a horror of this event occurring at an inn, at her door, which he had so rarely entered. Ralph must sink to his last rest in his own dear house, in one of those deep, dim chambers of Gardencourt, where the dark ivy would cluster round the edges of the glimmering window. There seemed to Isabel in these days something sacred about Gardencourt; no chapter of the past was more perfectly irrecoverable.

When she thought of the months she had spent there, the tears rose to her eyes. She flattered herself, as I say, upon her ingenuity, but she had need of all she could muster; for several events occurred which seemed to confront and defy her. The Countess Gemini arrived from Florence — arrived with her trunks, her dresses, her chatter, her little fibs, her frivolity, the strange memory of her lovers. Edward Rosier, who had been away somewhere, — no one, not even Pansy, knew where, — reappeared in Rome and began to write her long letters, which she never answered. Madame Merle returned from Naples and said to her with a strange smile, "What on earth did you do with Lord Warburton?" As if it were any business of hers!

#### XLVIII.

One day, toward the end of February, Ralph Touchett made up his mind to return to England. He had his own reasons for this decision, which he was not bound to communicate; but Henrietta Stackpole, to whom he mentioned his intention, flattered herself that she guessed them. She forbore to express them, however; she only said, after a moment, as she sat by his sofa, —

"I suppose you know that you can't go alone."

"I have no idea of doing that," Ralph answered. "I shall have people with me."

"What do you mean by 'people' ? Servants, whom you pay?"

"Ah," said Ralph, jocosely, "after all, they are human beings."

"Are there any women among them?" Miss Stackpole inquired calmly.

"You speak as if I had a dozen! No, I confess I have not a *soubrette* in my employment."

"Well," said Henrietta, tranquilly, "you can't go to England that way. You must have a woman's care."

"I have had so much of yours for the past fortnight that it will last me a good while."

"You have not had enough of it yet. I guess I will go with you," said Henrietta.

"Go with me?" Ralph slowly raised himself from his sofa.

"Yes; I know you don't like me, but I will go with you all the same. It would be better for your health to lie down again."

Ralph looked at her a little; then he slowly resumed his former posture.

"I like you very much," he said in a moment.

Miss Stackpole gave one of her infrequent laughs.

"You need n't to think that by saying that you can buy me off. I will go with you, and what is more I will take care of you."

"You are a very good woman," said Ralph.

"Wait till I get you safely home before you say that. It won't be easy. But you had better go, all the same."

Before she left him, Ralph said to her, —

"Do you really mean to take care of me?"

"Well, I mean to try."

"I notify you, then, that I submit. Oh, I submit!" And it was perhaps a sign of submission that a few minutes after she had left him alone he burst into a loud fit of laughter. It seemed to him so inconsequent, such a conclusive proof of his having abdicated all functions and renounced all exercise, that he should start on a journey across Europe under the supervision of Miss Stackpole. And the great oddity was that the prospect pleased him; he was gratefully, luxuriously passive. He felt even impatient to start; and indeed he had an immense longing to see his own house again. The end of everything was at hand; it seemed to him that he could stretch out his arm and touch the

goal. But he wished to die at home; it was the only wish he had left — to extend himself in the large quiet room where he had last seen his father lie, and close his eyes upon the summer dawn.

That same day Caspar Goodwood came to see him, and he informed his visitor that Miss Stackpole had taken him up and was to conduct him back to England.

"Ah then," said Caspar, "I am afraid I shall be a fifth wheel to the coach. Mrs. Osmond has made *me* promise to go with you."

"Good heavens — it's the golden age! You are all too kind."

"The kindness on my part is to her; it's hardly to you."

"Granting that, *she* is kind," said Ralph, smiling.

"To get people to go with you? Yes, that's a sort of kindness," Goodwood answered, without lending himself to the joke. "For myself, however," he added, "I will go so far as to say that I would much rather travel with you and Miss Stackpole than with Miss Stackpole alone."

"And you would rather stay here than do either," said Ralph. "There is really no need of your coming. Henrietta is extraordinarily efficient."

"I am sure of that. But I have promised Mrs. Osmond."

"You can easily get her to let you off."

"She would n't let me off for the world. She wants me to look after you, but that is n't the principal thing. The principal thing is that she wants me to leave Rome."

"Ah, you see too much in it," Ralph suggested.

"I bore her," Goodwood went on; "she has nothing to say to me, so she invented that."

"Oh, then, if it's a convenience to her, I certainly will take you with me. Though I don't see why it should be a

convenience," Ralph added in a moment.

"Well," said Caspar Goodwood, simply, "she thinks I am watching her."

"Watching her?"

"Trying to see whether she's happy."

"That's easy to see," said Ralph. "She's the most visibly happy woman I know."

"Exactly so; I am satisfied," Goodwood answered, dryly. For all his dryness, however, he had more to say. "I have been watching her; I was an old friend, and it seemed to me I had the right. She pretends to be happy; that was what she undertook to be; and I thought I should like to see for myself what it amounts to. I have seen," he continued, in a strange voice, "and I don't want to see any more. I am now quite ready to go."

"Do you know it strikes me as about time you should?" Ralph rejoined. And this was the only conversation these gentlemen ever had about Isabel Osmond.

Henrietta made her preparations for departure, and among them she found it proper to say a few words to the Countess Gemini, who returned at Miss Stackpole's *pension* the visit which this lady had paid her in Florence.

"You were very wrong about Lord Warburton," she remarked, to the countess. "I think it is right you should know that."

"About his making love to Isabel? My poor lady, he was at her house three times a day. He has left traces of his passage!" the countess cried.

"He wished to marry your niece; that's why he came to the house."

The countess stared, and then gave an inconsiderate laugh.

"Is that the story that Isabel tells? It is n't bad, as such things go. If he wishes to marry my niece, pray why does n't he do it? Perhaps he has gone to buy the wedding ring, and will come

back with it next month, after I am gone."

"No, he will not come back. Miss Osmond does n't wish to marry him."

"She is very accommodating! I knew she was fond of Isabel, but I did n't know she carried it so far."

"I don't understand you," said Henrietta, coldly, and reflecting that the countess was unpleasantly perverse. "I really must stick to my point — that Isabel never encouraged the attentions of Lord Warburton."

"My dear friend, what do you and I know about it? All we know is that my brother is capable of everything."

"I don't know what he is capable of," said Henrietta, with dignity.

"It's not her encouraging Lord Warburton that I complain of; it's her sending him away. I want particularly to see him. Do you suppose she thought I would make him faithless?" the countess continued, with audacious insistence. "However, she is only keeping him, one can feel that. The house is full of him there; he is quite in the air. Oh yes, he has left traces; I am sure I shall see him yet."

"Well," said Henrietta, after a little, with one of those inspirations which had made the fortune of her letters to the Interviewer, "perhaps he will be more successful with you than with Isabel!"

When she told her friend of the offer she had made to Ralph, Isabel replied that she could have done nothing that would have pleased her more. It had always been her faith that, at bottom, Ralph and Henrietta were made to understand each other.

"I don't care whether he understands me or not," said Henrietta. "The great thing is that he should n't die in the cars."

"He won't do that," Isabel said, shaking her head, with an extension of faith.

"He won't if I can help it. I see you want us all to go. I don't know what you want to do."

"I want to be alone," said Isabel.

"You won't be that so long as you have got so much company at home."

"Ah, they are part of the comedy. You others are spectators."

"Do you call it a comedy, Isabel Archer?" Henrietta inquired, severely.

"The tragedy, then, if you like. You are all looking at me; it makes me uncomfortable."

Henrietta contemplated her a while.

"You are like the stricken deer, seeking the innermost shade. Oh, you do give me such a sense of helplessness!" she broke out.

"I am not at all helpless. There are many things I mean to do."

"It's not you I am speaking of; it's myself. It's too much, having come on purpose, to leave you just as I find you."

"You don't do that; you leave me much refreshed," Isabel said.

"Very mild refreshment — sour lemonade! I want you to promise me something."

"I can't do that. I shall never make another promise. I made such a solemn one four years ago, and I have succeeded so ill in keeping it."

"You have had no encouragement. In this case I should give you the greatest. Leave your husband before the worst comes; that's what I want you to promise."

"The worst? What do you call the worst?"

"Before your character gets spoiled."

"Do you mean my disposition? It won't get spoiled," Isabel answered, smiling. "I am taking very good care of it. I am extremely struck," she added, turning away, "with the off-hand way in which you speak of a woman leaving her husband. It's easy to see you have never had one!"

"Well," said Henrietta, as if she were beginning an argument, "nothing is more common in our western cities, and it is to them, after all, that we must look in the future." Her argument,

however, does not concern this history, which has too many other threads to unwind. She announced to Ralph Touchett that she was ready to leave Rome by any train that he might designate, and Ralph immediately pulled himself together for departure. Isabel went to see him at the last, and he made the same remark that Henrietta had made. It struck him that Isabel was uncommonly glad to get rid of them all.

For all answer to this she gently laid her hand on his, and said in a low tone, with a quick smile, —

"My dear Ralph!"

It was answer enough, and he was quite contented. But he went on, in the same way, jocosely, ingeniously, "I've seen less of you than I might, but it's better than nothing. And then, I have heard a great deal about you."

"I don't know from whom, leading the life you have done."

"From the voices of the air! Oh, from no one else; I never let other people speak of you. They always say you are 'charming,' and that's so flat."

"I might have seen more of you, certainly," Isabel said. "But when one is married one has so much occupation."

"Fortunately, I am not married. When you come to see me in England, I shall be able to entertain you with all the freedom of a bachelor." He continued to talk as if they should certainly meet again, and succeeded in making the assumption appear almost just. He made no allusion to his term being near, to the probability that he should not outlast the summer. If he preferred it so, Isabel was willing enough; the reality was sufficiently distinct, without their erecting finger-posts in conversation. That had been well enough for the earlier time, though about this, as about his other affairs, Ralph had never been egotistic. Isabel spoke of his journey, of the stages into which he should divide it, of the precautions he should take.

"Henrietta is my greatest precaution," Ralph said. "The conscience of that woman is sublime."

"Certainly, she will be very conscientious."

"Will be? She has been! It's only because she thinks it's her duty that she goes with me. There's a conception of duty for you."

"Yes, it's a generous one," said Isabel, "and it makes me deeply ashamed. I ought to go with you, you know."

"Your husband would n't like that."

"No, he would n't like it. But I might go, all the same."

"I am startled by the boldness of your imagination. Fancy my being a cause of disagreement between a lady and her husband!"

"That's why I don't go," said Isabel simply, but not very lucidly.

Ralph understood well enough, however. "I should think so, with all those occupations you speak of."

"It is n't that. I am afraid," said Isabel. After a pause she repeated, as if to make herself, rather than him, hear the words, "I am afraid."

Ralph could hardly tell what her tone meant; it was so strangely deliberate, apparently so void of emotion. Did she wish to do public penance for a fault of which she had not been convicted? or were her words simply an attempt at enlightened self-analysis? However this might be, Ralph could not resist so easy an opportunity. "Afraid of your husband?" he said, jocosely.

"Afraid of myself!" said Isabel, getting up. She stood there a moment, and then she added, "If I were afraid of my husband, that would be simply my duty. That is what women are expected to be."

"Ah, yes," said Ralph, laughing; "but to make up for it there is always some man awfully afraid of some woman!"

She gave no heed to this jest, but suddenly took a different turn. "With

Henrietta at the head of your little band," she exclaimed abruptly, "there will be nothing left for Mr. Goodwood!"

"Ah, my dear Isabel," Ralph answered, "he's used to that. There is nothing left for Mr. Goodwood!"

Isabel colored, and then she declared, quickly, that she must leave him. They stood together a moment; both her hands were in both of his. "You have been my best friend," she said.

"It was for you that I wanted — that I wanted to live. But I am of no use to you."

Then it came over her more poignantly that she should not see him again. She could not accept that; she could not part with him that way. "If you should send for me I would come," she said at last.

"Your husband won't consent to that."

"Oh yes, I can arrange it."

"I shall keep that for my last pleasure!" said Ralph.

In answer to which she simply kissed him.

It was a Thursday, and that evening Caspar Goodwood came to the Palazzo Roccanera. He was among the first to arrive, and he spent some time in conversation with Gilbert Osmond, who almost always was present when his wife received. They sat down together, and Osmond, talkative, communicative, expansive, seemed possessed with a kind of intellectual gayety. He leaned back with his legs crossed, lounging and chatting, while Goodwood, more restless, but not at all lively, shifted his position, played with his hat, made the little sofa creak beneath him. Osmond's face wore a sharp, aggressive smile; he was like a man whose perceptions had been quickened by good news. He remarked to Goodwood that he was very sorry they were to lose him; he himself should particularly miss him. He saw so few intelligent men — they were surprisingly scarce in Rome. He must be sure to



come back ; there was something very refreshing, to an inveterate Italian like himself, in talking with a genuine outsider.

"I am very fond of Rome, you know," Osmond said ; "but there is nothing I like better than to meet people who have n't that superstition. The modern world is after all very fine. Now you are thoroughly modern, and yet you are not at all flimsy. So many of the moderns we see are such very poor stuff. If they are the children of the future, we are willing to die young. Of course the ancients too are often very tiresome. My wife and I like everything that is really new — not the mere pretense of it. There is nothing new, unfortunately, in ignorance and stupidity. We see plenty of that in forms that offer themselves as a revelation of progress, of light. A revelation of vulgarity ! There is a certain kind of vulgarity which I believe is really new ; I don't think there ever was anything like it before. Indeed, I don't find vulgarity, at all, before the present century. You see a faint menace of it here and there in the last, but to-day the air has grown so dense that delicate things are literally not recognized. Now, we have liked you" — And Osmond hesitated a moment, laying his hand gently on Goodwood's knee and smiling with a mixture of assurance and embarrassment. "I am going to say something extremely offensive and patronizing, but you must let me have the satisfaction of it. We have liked you because — because you have reconciled us a little to the future. If there are to be a certain number of people like you — *à la bonne heure !* I am talking for my wife as well as for myself, you see. She speaks for me ; why should n't I speak for her ? We are as united, you know, as the candlestick and the snuffers. Am I assuming too much when I say that I think I have understood from you that your occupations

have been — a — commercial ? There is a danger in that, you know ; but it's the way you have escaped that strikes us. Excuse me if my little compliment seems in execrable taste ; fortunately my wife does n't hear me. What I mean is that you *might have been* — a — what I was mentioning just now. The whole American world was in a conspiracy to make you so. But you resisted, you have something that saved you. And yet you are so modern, so modern ; the most modern man we know ! We shall always be delighted to see you again."

I have said that Osmond was in good-humor, and these remarks will give ample evidence of the fact. They were infinitely more personal than he usually cared to be, and if Caspar Goodwood had attended to them more closely he might have thought that the defense of delicacy was in rather odd hands. We may believe, however, that Osmond knew very well what he was about, and that if he chose for once to be a little vulgar, he had an excellent reason for the escapade. Goodwood had only a vague sense that he was laying it on somehow ; he scarcely knew where the mixture was applied. Indeed, he scarcely knew what Osmond was talking about ; he wanted to be alone with Isabel, and that idea spoke louder to him than her husband's perfectly modulated voice. He watched her talking with other people, and wondered when she would be at liberty, and whether he might ask her to go into one of the other rooms. His humor was not, like Osmond's, of the best ; there was an element of dull rage in his consciousness of things. Up to this time he had not disliked Osmond personally ; he had only thought him very well informed and obliging, and more than he had supposed like the person whom Isabel Archer would naturally marry. Osmond had won in the open field a great advantage over him, and Goodwood had

too strong a sense of fair play to have been moved to underrate him on that account. He had not tried positively to like him; this was a flight of sentimental benevolence of which, even in the days when he came nearest to reconciling himself to what had happened, Goodwood was quite incapable. He accepted him as a rather brilliant personage of the amateurish kind, afflicted with a redundancy of leisure which it amused him to work off in little refinements of conversation. But he only half trusted him; he could never make out why the deuce Osmond should lavish refinements of any sort upon *him*. It made him suspect that he found some private entertainment in it, and it ministered to a general impression that his successful rival had a fantastical streak in his composition. He knew indeed that Osmond could have no reason to wish him evil; he had nothing to fear from him. He had carried off a supreme advantage, and he could afford to be kind to a man who had lost everything. It was true that Goodwood at times had wished Osmond were dead, and would have liked to kill him; but Osmond had no means of knowing this, for practice had made Goodwood quite perfect in the art of appearing inaccessible to-day to any violent emotion. He cultivated this art in order to deceive himself, but it was others that he deceived first. He cultivated it, moreover, with very limited success; of which there could be no better proof than the deep, dumb irritation that reigned in his soul when he heard Osmond speak of his wife's feelings as if he were commissioned to answer for them. That was all he had an ear for in what his host said to him this evening; he was conscious that Osmond made more of a point even than usual of referring to the conjugal harmony which prevailed at the Palazzo Rocconera. He was more careful than ever to speak as if he and his wife had all things in sweet community, and it were as nat-

ural to each of them to say "we" as to say "I." In all this there was an air of intention which puzzled and angered our poor Bostonian, who could only reflect for his comfort that Mrs. Osmond's relations with her husband were none of his business. He had no proof whatever that her husband misrepresented her, and if he judged her by the surface of things was bound to believe that she liked her life. She had never given him the faintest sign of discontent. Miss Stackpole had told him that she had lost her illusions, but writing for the papers had made Miss Stackpole sensational. She was too fond of early news. Moreover, since her arrival in Rome she had been much on her guard; she had ceased to flash her lantern at him. This, indeed, it may be said for her, would have been quite against her conscience. She had now seen the reality of Isabel's situation, and it had inspired her with a just reserve. Whatever could be done to improve it, the most useful form of assistance would not be to inflame her former lovers with a sense of her wrongs. Miss Stackpole continued to take a deep interest in the state of Mr. Goodwood's feelings, but she showed it at present only by sending him choice extracts, humorous and other, from the American journals, of which she received several by every post, and which she always perused with a pair of scissors in her hand. The articles she cut out she placed in an envelope addressed to Mr. Goodwood, which she left with her own hand at his hotel. He never asked her a question about Isabel; had n't he come five thousand miles to see for himself? He was thus not in the least authorized to think Mrs. Osmond unhappy; but the very absence of authorization operated as an irritant, ministered to the angry pain with which, in spite of his theory that he had ceased to care, he now recognized that, as far as she was concerned, the future had nothing more for him. He had not even the satisfaction of knowing the

truth; apparently, he could not even be trusted to respect her if she *were* unhappy. He was hopeless, he was helpless, he was superfluous. To this last fact she had called his attention by her ingenious plan for making him leave Rome. He had no objection whatever to doing what he could for her cousin, but it made him grind his teeth to think that of all the services she might have asked of him, this was the one she had been eager to select. There had been no danger of her choosing one that would have kept him in Rome!

To-night, what he was chiefly thinking of was that he was to leave her to-morrow, and that he had gained nothing by coming but the knowledge that he was as superfluous as ever. About herself he had gained no knowledge; she was imperturbable, impenetrable. He felt the old bitterness, which he had tried so hard to swallow, rise again in his throat, and he knew that there are disappointments which last as long as life. Osmond went on talking; Goodwood was vaguely aware that he was touching again upon his perfect intimacy with his wife. It seemed to him for a moment that Osmond had a kind of demonic imagination; it was impossible that without malice he should have selected so unusual a topic. But what did it matter, after all, whether he were demonic or not, and whether she loved him or hated him? She might hate him to the death without Goodwood's gaining by it.

"You travel, by the bye, with Touchett," Osmond said. "I suppose that means that you will move slowly."

"I don't know; I shall do just as he likes."

"You are very accommodating. We are immensely obliged to you; you must really let me say it. My wife has probably expressed to you what we feel. Touchett has been on our minds all winter; it has looked more than once as if he would never leave

Rome. He ought never to have come; it's worse than an imprudence for people in that state to travel; it's a kind of indelicacy. I would n't for the world be under such an obligation to Touchett as he has been to — to my wife and me. Other people inevitably have to look after him, and every one is n't so generous as you."

"I have nothing else to do," said Caspar, dryly.

Osmond looked at him a moment, askance. "You ought to marry, and then you would have plenty to do! It is true that in that case you would n't be quite so available for deeds of mercy."

"Do you find that as a married man you are so much occupied?"

"Ah, you see, being married is in itself an occupation. It is n't always active; it's often passive; but that takes even more attention. Then my wife and I do so many things together. We read, we study, we make music, we walk, we drive, — we talk even, as when we first knew each other. I delight, to this hour, in my wife's conversation. If you are ever bored, get married. Your wife indeed may bore you, in that case; but you will never bore yourself. You will always have something to say to yourself — always have a subject of reflection."

"I am not bored," said Goodwood. "I have plenty to think about and to say to myself."

"More than to say to others!" Osmond exclaimed, with a light laugh. "Where shall you go next? I mean after you have consigned Touchett to his natural care-takers; I believe his mother is at last coming back to look after him. That little lady is superb; she neglects her duties with a finish! Perhaps you will spend the summer in England."

"I don't know; I have no plans."

"Happy man! That's a little nude, but it's very free."

"Oh yes, I'm very free."

"Free to come back to Rome, I hope," said Osmond, as he saw a group of new visitors enter the room. "Remember that when you do come, we count upon you!"

Goodwood had meant to go away early, but the evening elapsed without his having a chance to speak to Isabel otherwise than as one of several associated interlocutors. There was something perverse in the inveteracy with which she avoided him; Goodwood's unquenchable rancor discovered an intention where there was certainly no appearance of one. There was absolutely no appearance of one. She met his eye with her sweet, hospitable smile, which seemed almost to ask that he would come and help her to entertain some of her visitors. To such suggestions, however, he only opposed a stiff impatience. He wandered about and waited; he talked to the few people he knew, who found him for the first time rather self-contradictory. This was indeed rare with Caspar Goodwood, though he often contradicted others. There was often music at the Palazzo Roccamerina, and it was usually very good. Under cover of the music he managed to contain himself; but toward the end, when he saw the people beginning to go, he drew near to Isabel and asked her in a low tone if he might not speak to her in one of the other rooms, which he had just assured himself was empty.

She smiled as if she wished to oblige him, but found herself absolutely prevented. "I'm afraid it's impossible. People are saying good-night, and I must be where they can see me."

"I shall wait till they are all gone, then!"

She hesitated a moment. "Ah, that will be delightful!" she exclaimed.

And he waited, though it took a long time yet. There were several people, at the end, who seemed tethered to the carpet. The Countess Gemini, who was

never herself till midnight, as she said, displayed no consciousness that the entertainment was over; she had still a little circle of gentlemen in front of the fire, who every now and then broke into an united laugh. Osmond had disappeared — he never bade good-by to people; and as the countess was extending her range, according to her custom at this period of the evening, Isabel had sent Pansy to bed. Isabel sat a little apart; she too appeared to wish that her sister-in-law would sound a lower note and let the last loiterers depart in peace.

"May I not say a word to you now?"

Goodwood presently asked her.

She got up, immediately, smiling. "Certainly, we will go somewhere else, if you like."

They went together, leaving the countess with her little circle, and for a moment after they had crossed the threshold neither of them spoke. Isabel would not sit down; she stood in the middle of the room slowly fanning herself, with the same familiar grace. She seemed to be waiting for him to speak. Now that he was alone with her, all the passion that he had never stifled surged into his senses; it hummed in his eyes and made things swim around him. The bright, empty room grew dim and blurred, and through the rustling tissue he saw Isabel hover before him with gleaming eyes and parted lips. If he had seen more distinctly he would have perceived that her smile was fixed and a trifle forced, — that she was frightened at what she saw in his own face.

"I suppose you wish to bid me good-by?" she said.

"Yes — but I don't like it. I don't want to leave Rome," he answered, with almost plaintive honesty.

"I can well imagine. It is wonderfully good of you. I can't tell you how kind I think you."

For a moment more he said nothing. "With a few words like that you make me go."

"You must come back some day," Isabel rejoined, brightly.

"Some day? You mean as long a time hence as possible."

"Oh no; I don't mean all that."

"What *do* you mean? I don't understand! But I said I would go, and I will go," Goodwood added.

"Come back whenever you like," said Isabel, with attempted lightness.

"I don't care a straw for your cousin!" Caspar broke out.

"Is that what you wished to tell me?"

"No, no; I did n't want to tell you anything; I wanted to ask you" — he paused a moment, and then — "what have you really made of your life?" he said, in a low, quick tone. He paused again, as if for an answer; but she said nothing, and he went on: "I can't understand, I can't penetrate you! What am I to believe — what do you want me to think?" Still she said nothing; she only stood looking at him, now quite without pretending to smile. "I am told you are unhappy, and if you are I should like to know it. That would be something for me. But you yourself say you are happy, and you are somehow so still, so smooth. You are completely changed. You conceal everything; I have n't really come near you."

"You come very near," Isabel said, gently, but in a tone of warning.

"And yet I don't touch you! I want to know the truth. Have you done well?"

"You ask a great deal."

"Yes — I have always asked a great deal. Of course you won't tell me. I shall never know, if you can help it. And then, it's none of my business." He had spoken with a visible effort to control himself, to give a considerate form to an inconsiderate state of mind. But the sense that it was his last chance, that he loved her and had lost her, that she would think him a fool whatever he should say, suddenly gave him a lash and added a deep vibration to his low

voice. "You are perfectly inscrutable, and that's what makes me think you have something to hide. I say that I don't care a straw for your cousin, but I don't mean that I don't like him. I mean that it is n't because I like him that I go away with him. I would go if he were an idiot, and you should have asked me. If you should ask me, I would go to Patagonia to-morrow. Why do you want me to leave the place? You must have some reason for that; if you were as contented as you pretend you are, you would n't care. I would rather know the truth about you, even if it's damnable, than have come here for nothing. That is n't what I came for. I thought I should n't care. I came because I wanted to assure myself that I need n't think of you any more. I have n't thought of anything else, and you are quite right to wish me to go away. But if I must go, there is no harm in my letting myself out for a single moment, is there? If you are really hurt — if *he* hurts you — nothing *I* say will hurt you. When I tell you I love you, it's simply what I came for. I thought it was for something else; but it was for that. I should n't say it if I did n't believe I should never see you again. It's the last time — let me pluck a single flower! I have no right to say that, I know; and you have no right to listen. But you don't listen; you never listen, you are always thinking of something else. After this I must go, of course; so I shall at least have a reason. Your asking me is no reason, not a real one. I can't judge by your husband," he went on, irrelevantly, almost incoherently, "I don't understand him; he tells me you adore each other. Why does he tell me that? What business is it of mine? When I say that to you, you look strange. But you always look strange. Yes, you have something to hide. It's none of my business — very true. But I love you," said Caspar Goodwood.

As he said, she looked strange. She turned her eyes to the door by which they had entered, and raised her fan as if in warning.

"You have behaved so well; don't spoil it," she said, softly.

"No one hears me. It's wonderful what you try to put me off with. I love you as I have never loved you."

"I know it. I knew it as soon as you consented to go."

"You can't help it — of course not. You would if you could, but you can't, unfortunately. Unfortunately for me, I mean. I ask nothing — nothing, that is, that I should n't. But I do ask one sole satisfaction — that you tell me — that you tell me" —

"That I tell you what?"

"Whether I may pity you."

"Should you like that?" Isabel asked, trying to smile again.

"To pity you? Most assuredly! That at least would be doing something. I would give my life to it."

She raised her fan to her face, which it covered, all except her eyes. They rested a moment on his.

"Don't give your life to it; but give a thought to it every now and then."

And with that Isabel went back to the Countess Gemini.

### XLIX.

Madame Merle had not made her appearance at the Palazzo Roccanera, on the evening of that Thursday of which I have narrated some of the incidents, and Isabel, though she observed her absence, was not surprised by it. Things had passed between them which added no stimulus to sociability, and to appreciate which we must glance a little backward. It has been mentioned that Madame Merle returned from Naples shortly after Lord Warburton had left Rome, and that on her first meeting with Isabel (whom, to do her justice, she came

immediately to see) her first utterance was an inquiry as to the whereabouts of this nobleman, for whom she appeared to hold her dear friend accountable.

"Please don't talk of him," said Isabel, for answer; "we have heard so much of him of late."

Madame Merle bent her head on one side a little, protestingly, and smiled in the left corner of her mouth.

"You have heard, yes. But you must remember that I have not, in Naples. I hoped to find him here, and to be able to congratulate Pansy."

"You may congratulate Pansy still; but not on marrying Lord Warburton."

"How you say that! Don't you know I had set my heart on it?" Madame Merle asked, with a great deal of spirit, but still with the intonation of good-humor.

Isabel was discomposed, but she was determined to be good-humored, too.

"You should n't have gone to Naples, then. You should have stayed here to watch the affair."

"I had too much confidence in you. But do you think it is too late?"

"You had better ask Pansy," said Isabel.

"I shall ask her what you have said to her."

These words seemed to justify the impulse of self-defense aroused on Isabel's part by her perceiving that her visitor's attitude was a critical one. Madame Merle, as we know, had been very discreet hitherto; she had never criticised; she had been excessively afraid of intermeddling. But apparently she had only reserved herself for this occasion; for she had a dangerous quickness in her eye, and an air of irritation which even her admirable smile was not able to transmute. She had suffered a disappointment which excited Isabel's surprise — our heroine having no knowledge of her zealous interest in Pansy's marriage; and she betrayed it in a manner which quickened Mrs. Osmond's

alarm. More clearly than ever before, Isabel heard a cold, mocking voice proceed from she knew not where, in the dim void that surrounded her, and declare that this bright, strong, definite, worldly woman, this incarnation of the practical, the personal, the immediate, was a powerful agent in her destiny. She was nearer to her than Isabel had yet discovered, and her nearness was not the charming accident that she had so long thought. The sense of accident indeed had died within her that day when she happened to be struck with the manner in which Madame Merle and her own husband sat together in private. No definite suspicion had as yet taken its place; but it was enough to make her look at this lady with a different eye to have been led to reflect that there was more intention in her past behavior than she had allowed for at the time. Ah, yes, there had been intention, there had been intention, Isabel said to herself; and she seemed to wake from a long, pernicious dream. What was it that brought it home to her that Madame Merle's intention had not been good? Nothing but the mistrust which had lately taken body, and which married itself now to the fruitful wonder produced by her visitor's challenge on behalf of poor Pansy. There was something in this challenge which at the very outset excited an answering defiance; a nameless vitality which Isabel now saw to have been absent from her friend's professions of delicacy and caution. Madame Merle had been unwilling to interfere, certainly, but only so long as there was nothing to interfere with. It will perhaps seem to the reader that Isabel went fast in casting doubt, on mere suspicion, on a sincerity proved by several years of good offices. She moved quickly, indeed, and with reason, for a strange truth was filtering into her soul. Madame Merle's interest was identical with Osmond's; that was enough.

"I think Pansy will tell you nothing

that will feed your resentment," she said, in answer to her companion's last remark.

"I have no resentment. I have only a great desire to retrieve the situation. Do you think his lordship has left us forever?"

"I can't tell you; I don't understand you. It's all over; please let it rest. Osmond has talked to me a great deal about it, and I have nothing more to say or to hear. I have no doubt," Isabel added, "that he will be very happy to discuss the subject with you."

"I know what he thinks; he came to see me last evening."

"As soon as you had arrived? Then you know all about it, and you need n't apply to me for information."

"It is n't information I want. At bottom, it's sympathy. I had set my heart on that marriage; the idea did what so few things do — it satisfied the imagination."

"Your imagination, yes. But not that of the persons concerned."

"You mean by that, of course, that I am not concerned. Of course not directly. But when one is such an old friend, one can't help having something at stake. You forget how long I have known Pansy. You mean, of course," Madame Merle added, "that *you* are one of the persons concerned."

"No; that's the last thing I mean. I am very weary of it all."

Madame Merle hesitated a little. "Ah yes, your work's done."

"Take care what you say," said Isabel, very gravely.

"Oh, I take care; never perhaps more than when it appears least. Your husband judges you severely."

Isabel made for a moment no answer to this; she felt choked with bitterness. It was not the insolence of Madame Merle's informing her that Osmond had been taking her into his confidence as against his wife that struck her most; for she was not quick to believe that

this was meant for insolence. Madame Merle was very rarely insolent, and only when it was exactly right. It was not right now, or at least it was not right yet. What touched Isabel like a drop of corrosive acid upon an open wound was the knowledge that Osmond dishonored her in his words as well as in his thoughts.

"Should you like to know how I judge him?" she asked at last.

"No, because you would never tell me. And it would be painful for me to know."

There was a pause, and for the first time since she had known her, Isabel thought Madame Merle disagreeable. She wished she would leave her.

"Remember how attractive Pansy is, and don't despair," she said abruptly, with a desire that this should close their interview.

But Madame Merle's expansive presence underwent no contraction. She only gathered her mantle about her, and with the movement scattered upon the air a faint, agreeable fragrance.

"I don't despair," she answered; "I feel encouraged. And I did n't come to scold you; I came, if possible, to learn the truth. I know you will tell it if I ask you. It's an immense blessing with you, that one can count upon that. No, you won't believe what a comfort I take in it."

"What truth do you speak of?" Isabel asked, wondering.

"Just this: whether Lord Warburton changed his mind quite of his own movement, or because you recommended it. To please himself, I mean, or to please you. Think of the confidence I must still have in you, in spite of having lost a little of it," Madame Merle continued with a smile, "to ask such a question as that!" She sat looking at Isabel a moment, to judge of the effect of her words, and then she went on: "Now don't be heroic, don't be unreasonable, don't take offense. It seems to

me I do you an honor in speaking so. I don't know another woman to whom I would do it. I have n't the least idea that any other woman would tell me the truth. And don't you see how well it is that your husband should know it? It is true that he does n't appear to have had any tact whatever in trying to extract it; he has indulged in gratuitous suppositions. But that does n't alter the fact that it would make a difference in his view of his daughter's prospects to know distinctly what really occurred. If Lord Warburton simply got tired of the poor child, that's one thing; it's a pity. If he gave her up to please you, it's another. That's a pity, too; but in a different way. Then, in the latter case, you would perhaps make an attempt to find your pleasure in a new appeal to your friend."

Madame Merle had proceeded very deliberately, watching her companion and apparently thinking she could proceed safely. As she went on, Isabel grew pale; she clasped her hands more tightly in her lap. It was not that Madame Merle had at last thought it the right time to be insolent; for this was not what was most apparent. It was a worse horror than that. "Who are you — what are you?" Isabel murmured. "What have you to do with my husband?" It was strange that, for the moment, she drew as near to him as if she had loved him.

"Ah, then, you take it heroically! I am very sorry. Don't think, however, that I shall do so."

"What have you to do with me?" Isabel went on.

Madame Merle slowly got up, stroking her muff, but not removing her eyes from Isabel's face.

"Everything!" she answered.

Isabel sat there looking up at her without rising; her face was almost a prayer to be enlightened. But the light of her visitor's eyes seemed only a darkness.



"Oh, misery!" she murmured 'at last; and she fell back, covering her face with her hands. It had come over her like a high-surgng wave that Mrs. Touchett was right. Madame Merle had married her! Before she uncovered her face again, this lady had left the room.

Isabel took a drive alone, that afternoon; she wished to be far away, under the sky, where she could descend from her carriage and tread upon the daisies. She had long before this taken old Rome into her confidence, for in a world of ruins the ruin of her happiness seemed a less unnatural catastrophe. She rested her weariness upon things that had crumbled for centuries and yet still were upright; she dropped her secret sadness into the silence of lonely places, where its very modern quality detached itself and grew objective, so that as she sat in a sun-warmed angle on a winter's day, or stood in a mouldy church to which no one came, she could almost smile at it and think of its smallness. Small it was, in the large Roman record, and her haunting sense of the continuity of the human lot easily carried her from the less to the greater. She had become deeply, tenderly acquainted with Rome; it interfused and moderated her passion. But she had grown to think of it chiefly as the place where people had suffered. This was what came to her in the starved churches, where the marble columns, transferred from pagan ruins, seemed to offer her a companionship in endurance, and the musty incense to be a compound of long-unanswered prayers. There was no gentler nor less consistent heretic than Isabel; the firmest of worshipers, gazing at dark altar-pictures or clustered candles, could not have felt more intimately the suggestiveness of these objects, nor have been more liable at such moments to a spiritual visitation. Pansy, as we know, was almost always her companion, and of late the Countess Gemini, balancing a pink parasol, had lent brilliancy to their equipage; but she still

occasionally found herself alone when it suited her mood, and where it suited the place. On such occasions she had several resorts; the most accessible of which, perhaps, was a seat on the low parapet which edges the wide, grassy space lying before the high, cold front of St. John Lateran; where you look across the Campagna at the far-trailing outline of the Alban Mount, and at that mighty plain, between, which is still so full of all that has vanished from it. After the departure of her cousin and his companions she wandered about more than usual; she carried her sombre spirit from one familiar shrine to the other. Even when Pansy and the countess were with her, she felt the touch of a vanished world. The carriage, passing out of the walls of Rome, rolled through narrow lanes, where the wild honeysuckle had begun to tangle itself in the hedges, or waited for her in quiet places where the fields lay near, while she strolled further and further over the flower-freckled turf, or sat on a stone that had once had a use, and gazed through the veil of her personal sadness at the splendid sadness of the scene, at the dense, warm light, the far gradations and soft confusions of color, the motionless shepherds in lonely attitudes, the hills where the cloud-shadows had the lightness of a blush.

On the afternoon I began with speaking of, she had taken a resolution not to think of Madame Merle; but the resolution proved vain, and this lady's image hovered constantly before her. She asked herself, with an almost childlike horror of the supposition, whether to this intimate friend of several years the great historical epithet of *wicked* was to be applied. She knew the idea only by the Bible and other literary works; to the best of her belief she had no personal acquaintance with wickedness. She had desired a large acquaintance with human life, and in spite of her having flattered herself that she culti-

vated it with some success, this elementary privilege had been denied her. Perhaps it was not wicked — in the historic sense — to be false; for that was what Madame Merle had been. Isabel's Aunt Lydia had made this discovery long before, and had mentioned it to her niece; but Isabel had flattered herself at this time that she had a much richer view of things, especially of the spontaneity of her own career and the nobleness of her own interpretations, than poor, stiffly-reasoning Mrs. Touchett. Madame Merle had done what she wanted; she had brought about the union of her two friends; a reflection which could not fail to make it a matter of wonder that she should have desired such an event. There were people who had the match-making passion, like the votaries of art for art; but Madame Merle, great artist as she was, was scarcely one of these. She thought too ill of marriage, too ill even of life; she had desired that marriage, but she had not desired others. She therefore had had an idea of gain, and Isabel asked herself where she had found her profit. It took her, naturally, a long time to discover, and even then her discovery was very incomplete. It came back to her that Madame Merle, though she had seemed to like her from the first of their meeting at Gardencourt, had been doubly affectionate after Mr. Touchett's death, and after learning that her young friend was a victim of the good old man's benevolence. She had found her profit not in the gross device of borrowing money from Isabel, but in the more refined idea of introducing one of her intimates to the young girl's fortune. She had naturally chosen her closest intimate, and it was already vivid enough to Isabel that Gilbert Osmond occupied this position. She found herself confronted in this manner with the conviction that the man in the world whom she had supposed to be the least sordid had married her for her money. Strange

to say, it had never before occurred to her; if she had thought a good deal of harm of Osmond, she had not done him this particular injury. This was the worst she could think of, and she had been saying to herself that the worst was still to come. A man might marry a woman for her money, very well; the thing was often done. But at least he should let her know! She wondered whether, if he wanted her money, her money to-day would satisfy him. Would he take her money and let her go? Ah, if Mr. Touchett's great charity would help her to-day, it would be blessed indeed! It was not slow to occur to her that if Madame Merle had wished to do Osmond a service, his recognition of the fact must have lost its warmth. What must be his feelings to-day in regard to his too zealous benefactress, and what expression must they have found on the part of such a master of irony? It is a singular, but a characteristic, fact that before Isabel returned from her silent drive she had broken its silence by the soft exclamation, —

“Poor Madame Merle!”

Her exclamation would perhaps have been justified if on this same afternoon she had been concealed behind one of the valuable curtains of time-softened damask which dressed the interesting little salon of the lady to whom it referred; the carefully-arranged apartment to which we once paid a visit in company with the discreet Mr. Rosier. In that apartment, towards six o'clock, Gilbert Osmond was seated, and his hostess stood before him as Isabel had seen her stand on an occasion commemorated in this history with an emphasis appropriate not so much to its apparent as to its real importance.

“I don't believe you are unhappy; I believe you like it,” said Madame Merle.

“Did I say I was unhappy?” Osmond asked, with a face grave enough to suggest that he might have been so.

"No, but you don't say the contrary, as you ought in common gratitude."

"Don't talk about gratitude," Osmond returned, dryly. "And don't aggravate me," he added, in a moment.

Madame Merle slowly seated herself, with her arms folded and her white hands arranged as a support to one of them, and an ornament, as it were, to the other. She looked exquisitely calm, but impressively sad.

"On your side, don't try to frighten me," she said. "I wonder whether you know some of my thoughts."

"No more than I can help. I have quite enough of my own."

"That's because they are so delightful."

Osmond rested his head against the back of his chair and looked at his companion for a long time, with a kind of cynical directness which seemed also partly an expression of fatigue.

"You do aggravate me," he remarked in a moment. "I am very tired."

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"When I fatigue myself it's for you. I have given you an interest; that's a great gift."

"Do you call it an interest?" Osmond inquired, languidly.

"Certainly, since it helps you to pass your time."

"The time has never seemed longer to me than this winter."

"You have never looked better; you have never been so agreeable, so brilliant."

"Damn my brilliancy!" Osmond murmured, thoughtfully. "How little, after all, you know me!"

"If I don't know you, I know nothing," said Madame Merle, smiling. "You have the feeling of complete success."

"No, I shall not have that till I have made you stop judging me."

"I did that long ago. I speak from old knowledge. But you express yourself more, too."

Osmond hesitated a moment. "I wish you would express yourself less!"

"You wish to condemn me to silence? Remember that I have never been a chatterbox. At any rate, there are three or four things that I should like to say to you first. Your wife does n't know what to do with herself," she went on, with a change of tone.

"Excuse me; she knows perfectly. She has a line sharply marked out. She means to carry out her ideas."

"Her ideas, to-day, must be remarkable."

"Certainly they are. She has more of them than ever."

"She was unable to show me any this morning," said Madame Merle. "She seemed in a very simple, almost in a stupid, state of mind. She was completely bewildered."

"You had better say at once that she was pathetic."

"Ah no, I don't want to encourage you too much."

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"The matter — the matter" — And here Madame Merle stopped. Then she went on, with a sudden outbreak of passion, a burst of summer thunder in a clear sky, "The matter is that I would give my right hand to be able to weep, and that I can't!"

"What good would it do you to weep?"

"It would make me feel as I felt before I knew you."

"If I have dried your tears, that's something. But I have seen you shed them."

"Oh, I believe you will make me cry still. I have a great hope of that. I was vile, this morning; I was horrid," said Madame Merle.

"If Isabel was in the stupid state of mind you mention, she probably did n't perceive it," Osmond answered.

"It was precisely my devilry that stupefied her. I could n't help it; I was full of something bad. Perhaps it was something good; I don't know. You have not only dried up my tears; you have dried up my soul."

"It is not I, then, that am responsible for my wife's condition," Osmond said. "It is pleasant to think that I shall get the benefit of your influence upon her. Don't you know the soul is an immortal principle? How can it suffer alteration?"

"I don't believe at all that it's an immortal principle. I believe it can perfectly be destroyed. That's what has happened to mine, which was a very good one to start with; and it's you I have to thank for it. You are very bad," Madame Merle added, gravely.

"Is this the way we are to end?" Osmond asked, with the same studied coldness.

"I don't know how we are to end. I wish I did! How do bad people end? You have made me bad."

"I don't understand you. You seem to me quite good enough," said Osmond, his conscious indifference giving an extreme effect to the words.

Madame Merle's self-possession tended on the contrary to diminish, and she was nearer losing it than on any occasion on which we have had the pleasure of meeting her. Her eye brightened, even flashed; her smile betrayed a painful effort.

"Good enough for anything that I have done with myself? I suppose that's what you mean."

"Good enough to be always charming!" Osmond exclaimed, smiling too.

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mured; and, sitting there in her ripe freshness, she had recourse to the same gesture that she had provoked on Isabel's part in the morning; she bent her face and covered it with her hands.

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She dropped her hands quickly. "No, you have taken your revenge otherwise — you have taken it on *her*."

Osmond threw back his head further; he looked awhile at the ceiling, and might have been supposed to be appealing in an informal way to the heavenly powers. "Oh, the imagination of women! It's always vulgar at bottom. You talk of revenge like a third-rate novelist."

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"I am rather curious to know what you call my triumph."

"You have made your wife afraid of you."

Osmond changed his position; he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and looking awhile at a beautiful old Persian rug at his feet. He had an air of refusing to accept any one's valuation of anything, even of time, and of preferring to abide by his own; a peculiarity which made him at moments an irritating person to converse with. "Isabel is not afraid of me, and it's not what I wish," he said at last. "To what do you wish to provoke me when you say such things as that?"

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"I think you are very simple." And Madame Merle kept her eye upon her cup. "I have come to that with time. I judged you, as I say, of old; but it is only since your marriage that I have understood you. I have seen better what you have been to your wife than I ever saw what you were for me. Please be very careful of that precious object."

"It already has a small crack," said Osmond, dryly, as he put it down. "If you did n't understand me before I married, it was cruelly rash of you to put me into such a box. However, I took a fancy to my box myself; I thought it would be a comfortable fit. I asked very little; I only asked that she should like me."

"That she should like you so much!"

"So much, of course; in such a case one asks the maximum. That she should adore me, if you will. Oh yes, I wanted that."

"I never adored you," said Madame Merle.

"Ah, but you pretended to!"

"It is true that you never accused me of being a comfortable fit," Madame Merle went on.

"My wife has declined — declined to do anything of the sort," said Osmond. "If you are determined to make a tragedy of that, the tragedy is hardly for her."

"The tragedy is for me!" Madame Merle exclaimed, rising, with a long, low sigh, but giving a glance at the same time at the contents of her mantel-shelf. "It appears that I am to be severely taught the disadvantages of a false position."

"You express yourself like a sentence in a copy-book. We must look for our comfort where we can find it. If my wife does n't like me, at least my child does. I shall look for compensations in Pansy. Fortunately I have n't a fault to find with her."

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Osmond took up his hat and his umbrella, and after giving the former article two or three strokes with his coat-cuff, "On the whole, I think," he said, "you had better leave it to me."

After he had left her, Madame Merle went and lifted from the mantel-shelf the attenuated coffee-cup in which he had mentioned the existence of a crack; but she looked at it rather abstractedly. "Have I been so vile all for nothing?" she murmured to herself.

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