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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK AURORA THE MAGNIFICENT ***



Alone in her room later ... she looked at the other portrait

AURORA THE MAGNIFICENT

BY
GERTRUDE HALL

AUTHOR OF "THE TRUTH ABOUT CAMILLA,"
"THE UNKNOWN QUANTITY," ETC.

*ILLUSTRATED BY
GERALD LEAKE*



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TO
MY SISTER GRACE
WITHOUT WHOM THIS BOOK
WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN.
AND TO
MY DEAR HELEN R-,
WITHOUT WHOM IT WOULD
HAVE BEEN
DIFFERENT

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AURORA THE MAGNIFICENT

AURORA

THE MAGNIFICENT

CHAPTER I

Near sunset, one day in early October, not too long ago for some of us to remember with distinctness, Mr. Foss, United States consul at Florence, Italy, took a cab, as on other days, to the Porta Romana. Here, where the out-of-town tariff comes into effect, he paid his man, and set out to walk the rest of the way, thus meeting the various needs he felt: that for economy,—he was a family man with daughters to clothe,—that for exercise,—his wife told him he was growing fat,—and the need in general for an opportunity to think. He had found that walking aided reflection, that walking in beautiful places started the spring of apt and generous ideas. Though in his modest way a scholar, he was not as yet an author, but Florence had inspired him with the desire to write a book.

Just beyond the Roman Gate begins the long Viale dei Colli,—Avenue of the Hills,—which climbs and winds, broad, shady, quiet, between lines of gardens and villas, occupied largely by foreigners, to the Piazzale, whence Michelangelo's boyish colossus gazes with a slight frown across Florence, outspread at his feet. Mr. Foss, as he mounted the easy grade, and noted with a liking unabated after years the pleasantness of each habitation glimpsed through iron railings and embowering green, thought how privileged a person should feel, after all, whose affairs involved residence in Italy.

This recognized good fortune had not been properly tasted before another aspect of the thing presented itself for consideration....

The consul felt a sigh trying to escape him, and turning from the images whose obtrusion had called it up from the depths, directed his attention to a different set of subjects, unwilling at the moment to be troubled.

The glories and iniquities of that great family whose cannon-balls—or pills?—adorn so many of the 'scutcheons on Florentine street-corners and palace-fronts are what he selected as the theme for his meditations, a choice which seems less odd when we know that his book, the labor and pleasure of his spare hours, was a study of the Medici.

He had not been busy many minutes with their supplanted policies and extinct ambitions before these dropped back into the past whence he had drawn them, and his mind gave itself over to an exercise more curious than reconstructing a dead epoch. A shortish, stoutish man, with a beginning of baldness on his crown and gray in his mustache, was trying by the whole force of a sympathetic imagination to fit himself into the shoes, occupy the very skin, of a delicate young girl, to look at the world through her eyes and feel life with her pulses.

Thus absorbed, he hardly saw the posts of his own carriage gate; he passed unnoticed between his flower-beds, up his stone steps and came to himself only when, rubbing the hands he had just washed, he entered the dining-room and saw his wife.

"Where are the girls?" he asked even before kissing her, for the most casual eye must be informed by the blank look of the table that instead of being laid for half a dozen as usual, it was prepared for a meagre two.

Mrs. Foss was fond of sitting in the dining-room, which had a glass door into the garden on the side farthest from the road. There she read her book while waiting for dinnertime and her husband. The good gentleman did not always come directly home from his office. He had the love of dropping into dim churches, of loitering on bridges, of fingering the junk in old shops, but he was considerably never late for dinner.

Mrs. Foss rose to receive her husband's salutation, and while answering his question settled herself at the table; for she had caught sight of a domestic peeping in at the door to see if the masters were there to be served.

"Leslie and Brenda went to call on the Hunts," she gave her account, "and presently the Hunts' man came with a note from Mrs. Hunt, asking if the girls could stay to dine and go to the theater. A box had just been sent them. I was very glad to give my consent. Charlie will probably be one of the party and bring them home. Or perhaps Gerald. Or they will be put in a cab. I was delighted of the diversion for Brenda."

"And where's Lily?"

"She, too, is off having a good time. Fräulein was invited by some German friends who were giving a *Kinder-sinfonie*. Awful things, if you want my opinion. She asked if she might go and take Lily, and the poor child was so eager about it I thought I would just for once let her sit up late. She has so few pleasures of the kind."

Mrs. Foss had helped the soup, with a ladle, out of a tureen.

It was after her husband and she had emptied their soup-plates in companionable silence that, leaning back to wait for the next course, she asked her regular daily question.

"Well, anything new? Anything interesting at the consulate?"

Mr. Foss seemed in good faith to be searching his mind. Then he answered vaguely:

"No; nothing in particular." All at once he smiled a smile of remembrance. "Yes, I saw some Americans to-day." He nodded, after an interval, with an appearance of relish. "The real thing."

"In what way, Jerome? But, first of all, who were they?"

"Wait a moment. I stuck their cards in my pocket to show you. They came to see me at the consulate. No, they are in my other coat. One of them was Mrs. Something Hawthorne, the

other Miss Estelle Something."

"What did they want?"

"Everything—quite frankly everything. They have grown tired of their hotel; they speak nothing but English and don't know a soul. They came to find out from me how to go about getting a house and servants, horses and carriage."

"Did they think that was part of a consul's duty?"

"They didn't think. They cast themselves on the breast of a fellow-countryman. They caught at a plank."

"A house, horses. They are rich, then."

"So one would judge. Oh, yes, they're rich in a jolly, shameless, old-fashioned American way."

"Well, it's a nice way." Mrs. Foss added limitingly: "When they're also generous. One has noticed, however, hasn't one,"—she seemed on second thought to be taking back something of her approval,—"a certain reticence, as a rule, with regard to the display of wealth in people of any real culture?"

"These aren't, my dear. It's as plain as that they're rich. And, for a change, let me whisper to you, I found it pleasant. Not one tiresome word about art did they utter in connection with this, their first, visit to Italy."

"I can see you liked them, but what you have so far said doesn't entirely help me to see why. Rich and ignorant Americans, unfortunately—A light breaks upon me! They were pretty!"

A twinkle came into the consul's eyes, looking over at his wife, as one is amused sometimes by a joke old and obvious.

His pause before answering seemed filled with an effort to visualize the persons in question.

"Upon my word, Etta, I couldn't tell you." He laughed at his inability.

"By that token they were not beauties," said the wife.

"It seems likely you are right. At the same time"—he was still mentally regarding his visitors—"one would never think of wishing them other than they are."

"Describe them if you can. What age women?"

"My dear, there again you have me. Let us say that they are in the flower of life. One of them, so much I did remark, was rather more blooming than the other. Perhaps she was younger."

"The miss?"

"The married one. But perhaps it was only the difference between a rose and—" he searched—"let us say a bunch of mignonette. The rose—here I believe I tread safely on the road of description—had of that flower the roundness and solidity, if nothing else."

"Stout?"

"We will call it well developed, nobly planned. But what would be the good of telling you the color of these ladies' hair and eyes had I noticed it? It will help you much more effectively to pick them out in a crowd to be told they are very American."

"Voices, too, I suppose."

"Of course. You don't strictly mean high and nasal, do you? All I can say with any positiveness is that one of them had what I will call a warm voice—a voice, to make my meaning quite clear, like the crimson heart on a valentine."

"I am enlightened. Was it the mignonette one?"

"No; the hardy-garden rose."

"And what did she say to you in her warm crimson voice?"

"I have told you. She called for help."

"You said, I hope, that your wife and daughters would be very happy to call on them and be of use if they could."

"I did."

The time-tried, well-mated friends were looking over at each other across the table, not expressing any more than at all times the quiet, daily desire of each to further the interests and comforts of the other.

"Where are they staying?" the lady continued to question.

"Hôtel de la Paix."

"And they haven't any letters, introductions, addresses, anything?"

"Apparently not."

"Where are they from?"

"Let me see. Did they mention it? My dear, if they did, I don't recall it."

"New York?"

"No. If I am to guess, I shouldn't guess that."

"Out West?"

"H-m, they might be. No, I guess they're Yankees."

"Boston?"

"If so, not aggressively. Where do most people come from? There's nothing very distinctive about most."

"Perhaps it will be on their cards."

Then the Fosses talked of other things. But when Mrs. Foss, after dinner, went upstairs for her scarf,—it was too cool now to sit out of doors in the evening without a wrap,—she remembered the cards, and took them out of her husband's pocket.

"Miss Estelle Madison," she read. "Mrs. Aurora Hawthorne." There was nothing else. She continued a little longer to look at the bits of pasteboard in her hand. "Well-sounding names, both of them—like names in a play. Mrs. Aurora. She's a widow, then." Mrs. Foss considered.

"Or else divorced."

Jerome Foss sat out in the garden on fine evenings with his cigar, and watched the serene oncoming of the night, because he loved to do this. His wife stayed with him to be company, when, without an old-fashioned ideal of married life, her natural bent would have urged her indoors, where the lamps were, to read or sew or even play patience. But she lingered contentedly and all seemed to her as it should be, with the two of them sitting near each other in their garden chairs before the family door-stone, he smoking, she getting the benefit of it by now and then fanning his smoke toward her face. She liked the odor.

They only spoke to each other, as is common with married people, when they had something to say, and so were often silent for long spaces. That they had talked a great deal lately in the seclusion of their bedroom, away from the ears of the children, was a reason why they should not be very communicative to-night. They had threshed out the matter foremost in their minds so thoroughly that there could be little to add. Now and then, however, when they were alone, scraps of conversation would occur, part of the long discussion continued from day to day; which fragments, isolated from their context, might have sounded odd enough to any one overhearing.

Thus it was to-night. After half an hour without a syllable, Mrs. Foss's voice came out of the dark.

"When I was a young girl, there was a music-master, Jerome," she opened, with no more preface than a shooting-star. "I don't know that he was particularly fascinating, but he seemed so to me. I suppose he was thirty, I was seventeen or eighteen. It was during my year at Miss Meiggs's. Whether he really did anything to win my young affections I can't tell at this distance, but at the time I imagined all sorts of things, that he looked at me differently from the other girls, that his voice was different when he addressed me, that an extreme delicacy was all that kept him from declaring his love. Oh, I used to wish on the first star, and I used to pull daisies to pieces, and I practiced, how I practiced! Well, there was a rich girl in the school, older than I and not nearly so good looking. The moment she graduated he proposed to her. How did I feel? Jerome, the sun went out for good and all the day I heard of their engagement. It was as serious as anything could ever be in this world.—I'm sure I have told you about that music-master before, Jerome.—Well, and what happened? At the age of twenty-two I cheerfully married you. And I was not a scarred and burnt-out crater either, was I?... In the interval, let me not neglect to mention, there had been other flirtations and minor affairs. Thank Heaven, those things pass," the words came out devoutly. "It seems at the time as if only death could end it, but two or three years will do a lot. And it's God's mercy makes it so. How else could life be carried on?"

"In my case, Etta," the consul followed her story, after an interval, "it was a landlady's daughter. I don't believe I have ever spoken of her to you. I was in college, but I boarded outside the buildings. I wrote to my father and begged him to let me go into business so that I could earlier support a wife and family. The wise man let me go down to a fruit-farm in Florida. You have noticed that I know something about orange-growing. It was not quite a year before the dear divinity whose name was Lottie found it too long to wait. I posted home. The room I had once rented from her mother was let to a handsomer man. I took up my studies where I had dropped them, and to all appearance there was little harm done. But for a long time I thought I should die a bachelor."

"I know. Your cousin Fannie told me about it in the early days, before we were engaged. It all goes to show.... And there again was Selina Blackstone, one of my girlhood friends. She had a cough and they thought her lungs affected and sent her South. There she met an unhappy boy in the same case, only he, as it proved, really was in a bad way with his lungs. The poor things fell desperately in love with each other, but her parents wouldn't hear of their marrying, in which course they were right. Now you would have thought from her face that the separation was going to kill her. It didn't, that's all. He died, and she married. And it can't be said of her that she was either shallow, or fickle, or heartless. I knew her very well. Merely, time did the work that time was set to do."

There was in the lady's tone an effect of protest against any view, determination against any theory, but her own.

"There are the cases like Miss Seymour's, however," Mr. Foss brought in softly, as one calls to another's attention a lapse of memory or a slip in logic.

"Miss Seymour? Blanche? What about her?"

"That she is Miss Seymour, my dear, and to my mind a melancholy lesson. Because Nature so plainly had not planned her for an old maid. Her mother—who told me? I think it was Miss Brown—interfered with her marrying the man she wished to, and she has accepted nothing in his place. It has been an empty life. And so it goes. One can't be sure, Etta."

"Jerome," Mrs. Foss's voice rose to a sharper protest and firmer rejection, "those are the cases we simply must not allow ourselves to think about. If we begin to think of cases like that...."

She did not finish and he said no more, but in the darkness through which the fiery point of his cigar continued for some time to glow, it is to be feared the faces of both went on to reflect for nobody to see the working of those thoughts precisely which Mrs. Foss had said with so much emphasis they must guard against.

CHAPTER II

Upon a day not much later in the month—a goodly day which thousands without a doubt were thinking all too short for the useful or merely delectable things they wanted to do—a certain young man in Florence would, if he could, have treated this mellow golden masterpiece of autumn’s like a bad sketch, torn it across and dropped it into the waste-basket. What is one to do with a day when nothing that has been invented seems enough fun to pay for the bother? He did not wish to paint, he did not wish to read, or to play on the piano, as he sometimes did in solitude, with one hand, to solace himself by re-framing a remembered melody. He did not wish to go out, but was restless from staying in. He did not want to see the face of friend or foe, but could no longer endure to be alone.

He stood for a moment in the middle of the floor, with his hands over his face, the ends of his fingers pressing back his eyeballs, and got in his throat a taste of the bitter waters which he felt as a perpetual pool in the center of his heart. Next minute he sneered at himself, like a schoolmaster at a boy who blubbers, and without further paltering put on his hat, took up a very slender cane with a slender grasp of yellow ivory, and ran down the long stairs of his house to the street.

“Air and exercise, air and exercise!” This prescription he repeated to himself, and, surely enough, in a quarter of an hour felt better.

He was on Via Tornabuoni. Passing Giacosa’s, he glanced in to see if it were any one he knew taking tea so early behind the great plate glass window. No, they were chance English. He halted before a shop farther on to look at a display of jewelry, wondering that there should be fools enough in the whole world to support one such dealer in turquoise trinkets that at once drop out their stones; crude, big mosaics, and everlasting little composition-silver copies of the Strozzi lantern.

He crossed the street and entered the bank, where he found the usual table strewn with weeklies and monthlies for the advantage of those clients who must be asked to wait. He seated himself with his face so directed that if an acquaintance should enter, he need not bow, and turned over the magazines one after the other. It hurt him like a direct personal injury to find these authors all alike so shallow, dishonest, giving the public not their thought or their experience, but something, anything, it would buy.

“A little more air and exercise is what I evidently need,” said the young man, and again went out into the streets.

He turned toward the river, and had not followed the Lungarno for more than ten yards before it was with him as when, looking out of the window in despair at the weather, we see a break in the clouds. His step took on alertness; his face lighted in the very nicest way.

The young lady on whom his eyes were fastened from afar did not see him. She came at her usual step, a happy mean between quick and slow, accompanied by a hatless serving-woman carrying a music-roll. She looked straight before her, but her glance was absent. The passers could not but notice her,—she had beauty enough for that, and was besides conspicuous in wearing a costume entirely white,—but she was not noticing them or the eyes that turned to keep her a moment longer in sight. She looked rather shut in herself, rather silent; not really proud and cold, but proud and cold as the feeling and modest and young have to look if they are to keep their sacred precincts from the intrusions of curiosity.

The young man approaching questioned her face to see if it were sad. No, as far as he could tell, she was not in any way troubled. At the same time he knew that it was neither a face nor a nature to be easily read. Still, not to find her visibly sad comforted him.

She did not recognize the young man till he was almost near enough to touch her, and she had heard her name called, “Brenda!”

Then her face showed a genuine, if moderate, pleasure.

“Gerald!”

“What are you doing?” he asked, with the freedom of a familiarity reaching back over long years. He shortened his step to keep time with hers, which she at the same moment lengthened.

“I have been for my singing-lesson.”

“And where are you going?”

“Home.”

“I haven’t seen you for ages.”

“You haven’t come. One never sees you, one never meets you anywhere any more.”

Her English was different from the ordinary in having occasional Italian turns and intonations. His partook of the same defect, but in a lesser degree.

“But I have come,” he stood up for himself, “and you were all out except Lily. Didn’t she tell you I was there? We had a long talk. She told me her plans for the future. She is going to keep a school for poor children. We discussed their diet and their flannels and every point of their bringing-up. We invented things to do on holidays to give them a good time. There is only one thing I can see leaving a doubt of this school coming into being. It is that Lily has moments, she confessed to me, of thinking almost equally well of a castle with a moat and drawbridge and a page to walk before her carrying her prayer-book on a cushion. She’s a funny young one.”

“It’s partly Fräulein.”

“How are they all?”

"Well, thank you. At least, I suppose they are well." She gave a slight laugh at the humor of this. "You could hardly imagine how little I see of them."

"What has happened?"

"They have been going around with some new people, some Americans. They have been helping them to shop, and showing them the way one does things over here. Mother, you know, is always so ready."

"Your mother is a dear."

"Leslie is just like her. But I am sure they both enjoy it, too. They have not been home to lunch for a week."

"And you?"

"Oh, I am not needed where there are already two who do the thing so much better than I could. I have not even seen the people. My day is very full, you know. Piano and singing-lessons, and I am painting again this winter, with Galletti, and I am going to a course of *conferenze* on Italian literature. That involves a lot of reading. There are, besides, the other, the usual things, the—" Her voice stuck; then, as she went on, deepened with the depth of a suppressed impatience. "I wish one might be allowed not to do what is meant for pleasure unless one takes pleasure in it. But going to teas and parties is apparently as much a duty as school or church. Mother and Leslie at least seem to think it so for me."

"I see their point, Brenda dear, don't you?" He was not looking at her as with a gentle brotherliness he spoke this.

"You don't go to many parties yourself, Gerald."

"I am afraid nothing I do is fit to be an example to anybody. But it doesn't matter about me. About you it does. I can't say to you all I think. It would sound fulsome, and from such an old chum might make you laugh. But, being as you are, Brenda, surely your mother is right in thinking of *le monde* as the proper setting for you. You know I'm not fond of *le monde*, but it's because it hasn't enough such ornaments as yourself. With the life that lies before you—"

"Who can possibly know what my life will be?" the girl asked quickly, almost roughly.

"True, Brenda. I dare say I am talking like a fool." He left off, wondering that for a moment he should actually have been speaking on the side of convention.

They walked a few rods in silence. They had crossed the bridge, and were headed for Porta Romana, the handmaiden trotting in their tracks, when at a corner Gerald stopped, and, as if to change the subject, or to regain favor by a felicitous suggestion, said:

"Do you remember my telling you of a painting I came upon in a little old church on this street? *Scuola di Giotto*, they call it, but the thing is undoubtedly Sieneese. Have you the time? Shall we take a moment to see it?"

"I should be glad. If you will walk home with me afterward, Gerald, I might tell Gemma she can go."

There was an exchange of Italian between the young lady and the maid, after which the latter turned, and with a busy, delighted effect about the rear view of her walked back across the bridge to spend her gift of an hour in what diversions we shall never know.

The church was closed. Gerald pulled the bell-handle of the next door. A priest opened to them, and, seeing at a glance what was wanted, guided them through a white-washed corridor to a living-room where a crucifix hung on the wall and the table had a red cloth; by this into a dim and stony sacristy, whence they emerged into the back of a darkling little church, with shadowy candlesticks and kneeling-benches, the whole full of a cold, complex odor of old incense and old humanity and, one could fancy, old prayers.

The priest brought a lighted taper and, crossing to one of the side altars, held it near the painting, which was all that well-dressed people ever came for outside of hours.

The reddish light trembled over the figure of a majestic virgin, in the diadem and mantle of a princess, bearing the palm of martyrs in her hand. It was a very simple and noble face, beautiful in a separate way, which not every one would perceive, so little in common had it with the present-day fair ladies whose photographs are sold.

Gerald had taken the light from the priest's hands and was lifting, lowering, shading it, experimenting, to bring out all that might still be seen of the withdrawn image on its faintly glinting field of gold. His face was keen with interest; the love of beautiful things in this moment of satisfaction smoothed away from it every line of dejection and irritability.

Brenda was examining the picture with an attention equal to his, but, if one might so describe it, of a different color. Her admiration got its life largely from Gerald's, whose tastes in art she was in the habit of adopting blindfold. Of this, however, she was not aware, and gazed doing good to her soul by the conscious and deliberate contemplation of a masterpiece.

"Do you remember a great calm, white figure in the communal palace at Siena?" Gerald asked, "with other figures of Virtues on the same wall? Doesn't this remind you of them?"

Brenda answered abstractedly:

"Yes," and continued to look. "How amazing they are!" she fervently exclaimed. He supposed she meant the saint's hands or eyes, but she explained, "The Italians."

He did not take up the idea either to agree or to dispute; his mind was busy with one Italian only, the painter of the picture before him.

The young girl's interest flagged sooner than his own; he felt her melt from his side while he continued seeking proof in this detail and that of the painter's identity.

When he turned to find her and to follow, she was kneeling on one of the wooden forms, her gloved hands joined, her face toward the high altar.

He approved the courtesy of it, done, as he knew, in order that the priest, who stood aside, waiting for them to finish, should not think these barbarians who came into his church to see a work of art had no respect for his shrines and holies. Having returned the light to the

priest Gerald himself, while waiting for Brenda, took a melancholy religious attitude, his hat and cane held against his breast, and sent his thoughts gropingly upward, where the solitary thing they encountered was his poor mother in heaven. Heaven and the changes undergone by those who enter there he could never make very real to himself. He thought of her as she used to be, affectionate and ill.

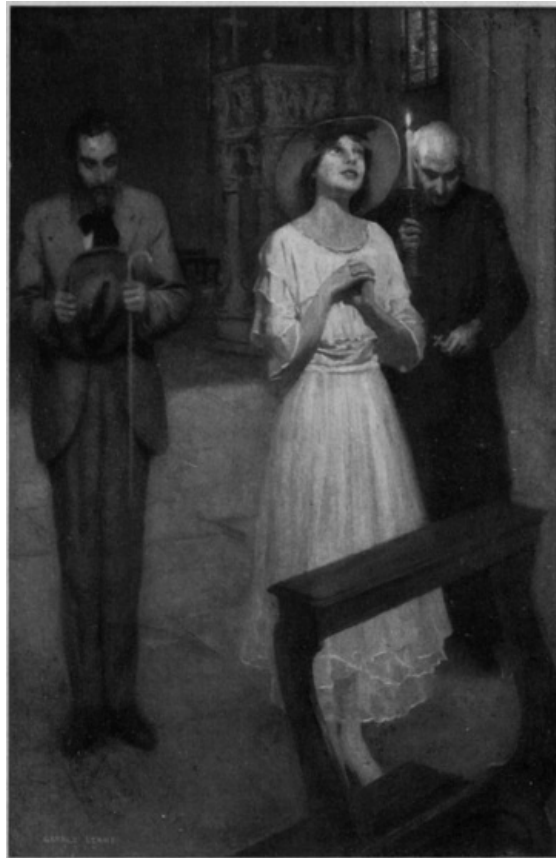
At the stir of Brenda rising from her knees he, too, stirred, ready to depart. She was bowing to the altar, making an obeisance so deep, so beautifully reverent, that the priest could never have guessed she was not a Catholic. After it she still stood a moment, looking toward the sanctuary, like one with last fond words to say after the farewell; and this excess of either regard for the priest's feelings or else a devoutness he had not suspected in her quickened Gerald's attention. And there in the dimness he saw what he had not seen in the broad light of day, that his friend's little face, which had presented the effect of a house with all the blinds drawn down, was lighted up behind the blinds—oh, lighted as if for a feast!

He felt himself at sea. He had thought he knew the circumstances. Some part, of course, nobody could know unless Brenda chose to tell them. But what reason there should be for positive joy—

A suspicion flashed across his mind. He looked at her more closely, and put it away.

She might have been the wisest of the virgins, the one who before any other heard the music of the bridegroom and was first to light her lamp. She stood as if listening to his footsteps.

That such a simile should have been possible to Gerald shows how much the expression of Brenda's face centered attention on itself, for her white serge dress was in the fashion of that year, and it was not a fashion to be remembered with any artistic joy. Gerald was never reconciled to it.



After it she still stood a moment, looking toward the sanctuary

He had the power to detach himself and at will see persons as if he looked at them for the first time. So for a moment he saw Brenda as a thing solely of form and color, a white shape against a ground of gloom, and took new account of the fact that the little girl who had had pigtailed when he first knew her, and gone to the *Diaconesse* with lunch-basket and satchel of books, had from one season to the next, stealthily, as it were, and while his back was turned, become beautiful.

More than that. He was looking at Brenda—he recognized it with a pulse of exquisite interest—in her exact and particular hour. He had surprised a rose at its moment of transition from bud to bloom, that delicate and perfect moment when the natural beauty which women and fruits and flowers have in common, reaching its height, hangs poised—for such a pitifully short time, alas!—before it changes, if not declines, to something less dewily fresh, less heart-movingly untouched, less complete.

The artist could not long in this case be regarding the girl as part of a picture; his human relation to the owner of that lifted profile brought him back to wondering in what the quiet ecstasy it breathed could have its source. He was touched by it, by the whole character, at the moment, of her face, with its strength so nullified by gentleness.

When the will is strong and nature sensitive, what arms has youth with which to prevail? What but the power to keep still and hold on? Nothing was in Brenda's face so marked as

that power, except, in this moment of undisguise, while she thought herself unwatched, its singular happiness, a mingling of tenderness, dedication, hope.

The genuine sympathy he felt for her made Gerald deserving of the intuition that blessed him while he stood there trying to divine. An interpretation of her secret offered itself, worthier of him as of her than the suspicion of erewhile; one so beautiful, indeed, that he felt uplifted by standing in its presence. All he had most cared for in his life, the things that had touched and inspired him,—visions of painters, dreams of poets, scenes of beauty, sweet of human intercourse,—all the influences that make life dignified and fair, seemed in their essence to be in the air around him, like scents of flowers in the dark....

The wish to pray came over him again, yet he wanted to weep, too, because as soon as his heart expanded a little the rusty splinter of a knife corroding there reminded him that lofty sentiments, sincerities, idealisms, have as their fruit in this life—dust, derision! He wondered that without being any older one could feel as old as he did while watching Brenda transfigured by her poor young dream.

Now for the second time she curtsied to the altar. The priest moved, Gerald moved, all three passed up the aisle, to a faint chink of coins in Gerald's pocket where he groped for a fee. At the main altar the priest dipped a rapid genuflexion.

As soon as they were outside Brenda began to talk about the picture, to ask questions, as if the art of the Italians had been of all things nearest to her heart, and Gerald was drawn into holding in the street while they walked a sort of lecture on the primitives.

All the while, in an independent corner of his brain he was reflecting upon the absurdity of supposing that because he was an old familiar of the Fosses, and so fond of them all, he knew anything of their affairs these days, when he saw them so seldom. Ever so many things could have happened without his knowledge. The girls might have new friends and admirers just as they had hats and dresses that he had never seen.

They were making their way while talking toward Porta Romana, and were often obliged to step off the narrow sidewalk to make room for other passers, the street being busy at that time of day.

Brenda was in the midst of an entirely pertinent remark when her voice softly died, like the flame of a candle sucked out by a draft or like a music-box run down. Gerald, looking round for the end of her sentence, saw that she had sighted an acquaintance on the other side of the street.

She nodded, without a smile, slowly. Just so must Beatrice have bowed in these same streets of Florence when she passed the dreamy passionate youth through whom we are acquainted with her name.

Gerald's eyes traveled across the way to see who might be the recipient of the lady's most sweet salute, and hurriedly uncovered to an officer of the Italian army who, holding his hand to his cap, stood at attention till the two had passed.

Was the man pale or was it that one had never before noticed, meeting him indoors and at evening, how strongly the black of his mustache and brows contrasted with his skin? The suspicion that had for a moment troubled Gerald in church returned as a stronger infection. Had Brenda expected this? Did they concert such meetings?

He might have said to himself that a tryst which consisted in crossing glances from opposite sides of the street was very innocent. In a moment he did see that as the villas *fuori la porta* must be reached through the *porta*, a lover whose lady lived on Vial dei Colli might without previous arrangement hope for a glimpse of her by walking in its neighborhood.

As we have seen him doing more than once this afternoon, Gerald here tried to get his clue from Brenda herself, her face, her atmosphere. Yet he knew, as has already been said, that it was Brenda Foss's way to keep these as much as she could from telling anything to the world. This wariness notwithstanding a tinge of unaccustomed rose had spread through the clear white of her cheek; her eyes had in them noticeably more life. Emotion or mere self-consciousness?

On one point only he was satisfied: Brenda had done nothing that involved deceit. Into the very structure of her face, which had almost nothing left of the American look, was built a certain Puritan truthfulness. She could conceal if she must, but hated to shuffle, to prevaricate. She concealed exactly because of that.

"Go on with the Sieneese masters, Gerald," she bade him, collectedly. "I am listening, and learning a lot."

As they passed under the great arch of the Roman Gate, Gerald was saying modestly:

"I don't know anything about them, really. I've just been impressed by a thing or two. This Lorenzetti, for instance—" And so on up the *viale* to the house.

In the drawing-room they found Mrs. Foss and Leslie, who, just home from town, tired and thirsty, had had tea brought to them, and were strengthening themselves before even taking off their hats.

Their welcome to Gerald was mingled with reproaches of the sort that flatters more than it hurts.

"It's perfect ages since we saw you. We thought you had forgotten us. What have you been doing this long, long time?"

"It is you, who are never at home, my dear friends," Gerald took his turn. "I was here a fortnight or so ago. Didn't Lily tell you? Of course she told you, and you have forgotten, so it's I, properly, who should be calling names."

"Have you been quite well, Gerald?" Mrs. Foss asked in her maternal voice, after a more careful look at him.

"Certainly."

"I am glad you have come. I have been on the point more than once of sending for you, but

the days fly so! We have been busy, too."

She had poured cups of tea for Gerald and Brenda. All four were seated and refreshing themselves.

It was a very large room, but a corner had been so arranged as to look shut in and cozy. There stood the tea-table convenient to the sofa and, surrounding it, a few chosen chairs in which one could sink and lean back and be comfortable.

"Have you had a tiring day?" Brenda asked her mother, somewhat as if she were tired herself at the mere thought of such a day as she supposed her mother to have had.

"No," Mrs. Foss answered briskly; "it's rather fun. I don't mean that one doesn't get tired after a fashion. Has Brenda told you, Gerald, how we have lately been occupied?"

"Some new people, I think she said."

"Yes, some nice, funny Americans."

"Funny, you say?"

"I say it fondly, Gerald. Let me tell you a little about them, and you will see what I mean. They are going to spend the winter here and wanted a house. What house do you think they selected?"

"You really mustn't set me riddles, Mrs. Foss."

"For years we have seen it every time we drive to the Cascine, and seen it with a certain curiosity-always deserted, always with closed blinds, in its way the most beautiful house in Florence."

"The most-I can't think what house you mean."

"Of course not, with your tastes. But imagine some nice, rich Americans, without either art education or the smallest affectation of such a thing, and ask yourself what they would like. Why, a big, square, clean-looking, new-looking, wealthy-looking house, of course, set in a nice garden, with, at the end of the garden, a nice stable. I was thankful to find the place had been kept up."

"But is there-on the Lungarno, did you say?"

"It is that house we have called the Haughty Hermitage, Gerald," Brenda helped him.

"Oh, that! But surely one doesn't live in a house like that!"

"Your excellent reason?" inquired Leslie.

"I don't know,"-he hesitated,-"but surely one doesn't live in a house like that!"

They had to laugh at the expression brought into his face by his sense of a mysterious incongruity.

"No," he went on with knitted brows to reject the idea; "a house like that-one doesn't come all the way from America to live in a house which has no more atmosphere than that!"

"Ah, but that's the point, Gerald," said Mrs. Foss. "What you call atmosphere these people avoid as they would an unsanitary odor. Atmosphere! What would you say if you saw the things Leslie and I have been helping them to buy and put into it! I love to buy, you know, even when not for myself. I thought with joy, 'Now I shall at least go through the form of acquiring certain objects I have lusted after for years.' Delightful old things Jerome has discovered in antiquarians' places, and that we shall never be able to afford. Do you think I could persuade them to take one of these? I represented that the worm-holes could be stopped up and varnished over, that the missing bits of inlay, precious crumbs of pearl and ivory, could be replaced, the tapestries renovated. In vain. They want everything new-hygienically new, fresh, and shining. And, Gerald, prejudice apart, the idea is not without its good side. The result is not so bad as you may think. Why, after all, should my taste, your taste, prevail in their house, will you tell me?"

"For no reason in the world. This liberal view comes the easier to me that I do not expect ever to see the interesting treasures you may have collected from Peyron's and Janetti's."

"If it were no worse than that!" put in Leslie, and laughed a covered laugh.

Mrs. Foss explained, after a like little laugh of her own.

"You see, things that we have seen till we have utterly ceased to see them, the things that nobody who really lives in Florence ever dreams of buying, are new to these people. They *love* them. As a result, you can guess. There will be in their apartments alabaster plates with profiles of Dante and Michelangelo on a black center. There will be mosaic tables with magnolias and irises. There will be Pliny's doves. Think of it! There will be green bronze lamps and lizards--"

"And the fruit-tell about that, Mother!" Leslie prompted.

"There will be on the sideboard in the dining-room a perpetual dish of magnificent fruit, marble, realistic to a degree. You know the kind."

"And you could stand by and let them-you and Leslie!" spoke Brenda, in an astonishment almost seriously reproachful.

"My dear," Leslie took up their common defense, "one's feeling in this case is: What does it matter? A little more, a little less.... It all goes together. When they have those curtains, they might as well have that fruit."

"At the same time, my dear children, let me tell you that the effect is not displeasing," insisted Mrs. Foss. "Such at least is my humble opinion. In its way it's all right. They are people of a certain kind, and they have bought what they like, not what they thought they ought to like. Thousands of people, if it were not for you artists perverting them, would be thinking a marble lemon that you can't tell from a real one a rare and dear possession. These people haven't known any artists. They are innocent."

"They're awfully good fun," Leslie started loyally in to make up for anything she had said which might seem to savor of mockery or dispraise. "One enjoys being with them, if they aren't our usual sort. They are in good spirits, really good-good spirits with roots to them. And that's such a treat these days!"

From which it was supposable that Leslie had been living in circles where the gaiety was hollow. The suggestion did not escape Gerald. But, then, Leslie, just turned twenty-four, was rather given to judging *these days* as if she remembered something less modern, an affectation found piquant by her friends in a particularly young-looking, blond girl with a short nose. Gerald might have hoped that her sigh meant nothing had not Leslie, awake to the implication of her remark as soon as she had made it, gone hurriedly on to call attention away from it.

"Yes, it's pleasant to be with them. It's a change. The world seems simple and life easy. Life *is* easy, with all that money. Besides, Mrs. Hawthorne really is something of a dear. After all, if people make much of one, one is pretty sure to like them. Haven't you found it so, Gerald?"

"I don't know. I am trying to remember if there is anybody who has made much of me."

"We have made much of you."

"And don't think I temperately like you. I adore you all, as you well know. You're the only people I do. By that sign there has been nobody else kind enough to make much of me."

"You're so bad lately, Gerald; that's why," Mrs. Foss affectionately chide him. "You never go anywhere. You neglect your friends. What have you been doing with yourself? Is it work?"

"No; not more than usual. I work, but I'm not exactly absorbed-obsessed by it. I don't know-" He seemed to search, and after a moment summed up his vague difficulties: "It seems a case for quoting 'Hamlet.'" He was bending forward, his elbows resting on his knees, as they could do easily, his chair being low and his thin legs long. His thin, long hands played with that slender cane of his, which he had set down and taken up again, while he tried to recall the passage, and mumbled snatches of it: "'This goodly firmament-congregation of vapors-Man delights not me-no, nor'-the rest of it."

"But it won't do, Gerald dear; it won't do at all," Mrs. Foss addressed him anxiously, between scolding and coaxing. "Shake yourself, boy! Force yourself a little; it will be good for you. *Make* yourself go to places till this mood is past. What is it? Bad humor, spleen, hypochondria? It doesn't belong with one of your age. We miss you terribly, dear. Here we have had two of our Fridays, and you have not been. And we have always counted on you. Charming men are scarce at parties the world over. The Hunts have begun their little dances, too. One used to see you there. And at Madame Bentivoglio's. She was asking what had become of you. Promise, Gerald, that we shall see you at our next Friday! We want to make it a nice, gay season. Will you promise? Oh, here's Lily. Why didn't you tell us, Lily, that Gerald had come to see us when we were out?"

A long-legged, limp-looking little girl with spectacles had come in. A minute before she had been passing the door on her way to walk, and catching the sound of a male voice in the drawing-room, insisted upon listening till she had made sure whose it was. At the name Gerald she had pulled away from her governess and burst into the drawing-room.

She stood still a moment after this impulsive entrance, and the governess turned toward Mrs. Foss a face that, benign and enlightened though it was, called up the memory of faces seen in good-humored German comic papers. The expression of her smile said to the company that she was guiltless in the matter of this invasion. Could one use severity toward a little girl who suffered from asthma and weak eyes?

Lily, after her pause, went half shyly, half boldly to Gerald. He did not kiss her,-she was ten years old,-but placed an arm loosely around her as she stood near his knee.

"Did you forget it, Lily?"

"No, Mother, I didn't forget, but I never thought to speak of it. You didn't tell me to, did you, Gerald?"

"No, we had so much else to talk about. Well, Lily, have you decided what color the uniform must be for our orphanage? The thing is important. It makes a great difference in an orphan's disposition whether she goes dressed in a dirty gray or a fine, bright apricot yellow."

"Gerald,"-Lily lowered her voice to make their conversation more private,-"will you be the cuckoo?" As he gazed, she went earnestly on: "We can't find anybody to do the cuckoo. I am going to be the nightingale. Fräulein is going to be the drum. Leslie is going to be the *Wachtel*. Mother is going to be the triangle. Brenda will play the piano. Papa says that if he is to take part he must be the one who sings on the comb and tissue-paper. But I am afraid to let him. You know he hasn't a good ear. That leaves the cuckoo, the comb, and the rattle still to find before we can have our *Kinder-sinfonie*. Which should you like to be, Gerald?"

"What an opening for musical talent! But, my dear little lady, I'm not a bit of good. I can't follow music by note any more than a cuckoo. I am so sorry."

"But, Gerald, all you have to do is-"

"I have told you, Lili," said the governess in German, "that we would take the gardener's boy and drill him for the cuckoo. Come now quickly, dear child; we must go for our walk."

The casual, unimportant talk of ordinary occasions went on after the interruption.

"And what do you hear from that charming friend of yours, the abbé, Gerald?" And, "I hope you have good news from your son, Mrs. Foss." And, "Do you know whether the Seymours have come back from the country?"

Gerald left the Fosses, warmed by his renewed sense of their friendship, and believing that he would go very soon again to see them. But he did not, and his feeling of shame was more definite than his gratitude when he in time received a note from Mrs. Foss, kind as ever, asking him to dine.

CHAPTER III

There was dancing at the Fosses' on two Fridays in the month. It was their contribution toward the gaiety of the winter. They did not often give a formal dinner, and when such an entertainment appeared to be called for from them, planned it with forethought to make it serve as many ends as it would. Every careful housewife will understand.

It was with Leslie that Mrs. Foss talked such matters over. The eldest daughter was so sufficient as adjutant that one did not inquire whether Brenda would have been useful if needed. The latter took no part in the domestic councils which had for object to decide who should be asked to dinner and of what the dinner should consist.

The question whom to invite to meet Professor Longstreet had taken Mrs. Foss and Leslie time and reflection. The Fosses' only son had a great regard for this man, one of the faculty during his period at Harvard, and now that the travels of the professor's sabbatical year brought him to Florence, the family was anxious to entertain him as dear John, studying medicine in far-off Boston, would have wished.

The professor was engaged upon a new translation of the "Divine Comedy." The guests had therefore better be chosen among their literary acquaintance, thought Mrs. Foss. But Leslie was of the opinion that they would do better to make the requisite just any gift or grace, and keep an eye on having the company compose well and the table look beautiful.

When she reminded her mother that a dinner was owing the Balm de Brézés, and that this would be a chance to pay the debt, Mrs. Foss objected:

"But I want to ask Gerald. I felt sorry for him last time he came. We must look after him a little bit, you know."

Leslie did not show herself in any wise disposed to set aside Gerald's claim, but expressed the idea that Gerald probably would not mind meeting the De Brézés now. After all, the memories sweet and sour associated with them had had time to lose their edge. And they could be seated at the opposite end of the table.

It was finally decided to ask the Balm de Brézés, Gerald, the Felixsons, Miss Cecilia Brown, and Gideon Hart, all intelligent, all people who could talk. It was further frugally resolved to have the dinner on a Friday and let it be followed by the usual evening party, thus making the same embellishment of the house do for two occasions, as well as augmenting their visitor's opportunity to make acquaintance with the Anglo-American colony in Florence.

All had been going so well, the guests were in such happy and talkative form, that the minor matter of taking food had dragged, and the diners were not ready to rise when a servant whispered to Mrs. Foss that the first evening guest had arrived.

Mrs. Foss's eyes found those of Leslie, who understood the words soundlessly framed, and excused herself from the table.

In the garnished and waiting drawing-room, lighted with candles, like a shrine, and looking vast, with the furniture taken out of the way, she found the Reverend Arthur Spottiswood, of whom it was not easy to think that eagerness to dance had driven him to come so sharply on time. He looked serious-minded, almost somber, and Leslie, though prepared to be vivacious with peer or pauper, found it all duty and little fun to make conversation with him until the next arrival should come to her relief. The gentleman was Brenda's adorer, but Brenda would never, if she could help it, let him have one moment with her. His love-charged eye inspired in her the simple desire to flee. Singularly, this was, with one notable exception, beautiful Brenda's only conquest, while Leslie, who was just ordinarily pretty and wore a pince-nez, received tribute and proposals from almost every unattached young fellow who drifted inside the circle of her wide invisible net. Boys in particular had to pass through her hands, receive good advice from her, be encouraged in their work, cheered in their distance from home, and refused, and consoled for the refusal, and sent away finally rather improved than otherwise. With very little sentiment, she had a kind and cozy quality, like her mother.

The Satterlees were next to arrive, mother with son and daughter, and Leslie was warm as never before in her welcome to them. The Reverend Arthur was gently shed from her and with pleasure picked up by Isabel Satterlee, who was charmed to have any kind of man to talk with.

Then arrived a group of unrelated people living for the moment at the same pension in town and coming in the same conveyance. Among them was Percy Lavin, who had the extraordinary tenor voice, and along with it an exuberance of confidence in his future that made him as destructive of coherence in company as a large frisking pup. Leslie had at the very first meeting felt that it would be her sacred mission to attend to that young man.

The hired pianist had come, he was unrolling his sheets of dance-music and rolling them the contrary way. Mr. Hunt, the English banker, with his wife and daughters, had come; and Maestro Vannuccini with his signora on his arm; and a glittering young officer or two; and Landini, Hunt's partner; and Charlie Hunt, the banker's nephew.

Charlie, bold through long acquaintance, asked, "Where are the others?"

Leslie told him, whereupon the young man said "Oh!" and his "Oh" sounded blank, whether because it was apparent to him through her answer that there had been indiscretion in his question, or because he wondered at there being a dinner-party in this house and he not asked to it. Leslie paid no attention, for at that moment the diners were beginning to appear.

The drawing-room had two doors in the same wall: people coming from the dining-room would enter by one of these, while those who came from the street entered by the other, after passing through the small reception-room where they left their things, and the larger reception-room intervening between this and the drawing-room. Charlie Hunt, talking with Mrs. Satterlee, let a casual eye roll away from her middle-aged agreeableness to see who was entering by that different door from the one which had given him passage. Curiosity, pure and simple.

Ah, so. Madame Balm de Brézé, spare, sharp, high-nosed, beaked and clawed like a bird—a picked bird. Very elegant. It was clear to Charlie Hunt why with a dinner to give one should care to secure her and her husband. They looked so fiendishly aristocratic.

The Felixsons. Naturally. Felixson had to be asked when the guest of honor was a scholar. Mrs. Felixson's warm brilliancy to-night bore testimony to a good dinner. Abundance of meats and wines always turned her a burning pink. It looked to Charlie like a new frock she was wearing; he did not remember seeing her in it before.

Gideon Hart, the old sculptor. It was his picturesque white hair and beard that people liked to see at their tables, for the old fellow, thought Hunt, was phenomenally a bore. In this case patriotism explained his presence. America quaintly loved his name.

And Cecilia Brown. But was it really Cecilia?... What had she been doing to herself?... Oh. Her hair. Her hair was cropped and curled all over her head like wicked Caracalla's. That was the fashion in England, he had heard, where she had been spending the summer.

But who was this, at the end of the procession, after Mrs. Foss and Brenda and the consul? Hunt had a genuine surprise. Gerald Fane.

Now, wherefore Gerald Fane rather than Charlie Hunt?

Mrs. Foss, coming into the drawing-room, felt a glow of pleasure at the scene meeting her eyes. The occasion, the success of it, had lifted life for her above its usual plane. She could feel how blessed she was in ways she did not sufficiently consider on common days when common cares blinded her. It was a beautiful home, this of hers; here was a beautiful room, with its mirrors and flowers and candle-light and happy guests. She smiled at everybody and everything with a brooding sweetness.

Her sense of herself was satisfactory too at the moment. She felt her dress—an old one, rejuvenated—to be becoming. She was young to have grown children. Her blond hair did not show the silver threads among it. She was as handsome in her older way as she had been when young, and she was sure she was nicer. She had family and friends, all full of regard for her. Her smile reflected the state of her mind and did one good to see.

Her eyes resting upon Brenda—whom the reverend Arthur had tried to capture the moment she appeared, and been baffled—Mrs. Foss in the optimism of her mood said to herself that all would very likely go well in that quarter; they ought not to worry as they did.

The pianist had struck up a polka. One still danced the polka in those days, and the schottische and the dear old lancers, though the waltz was already the favorite.

The floor was at first sparsely, then ever more thickly, sown with hopping and revolving couples. Hunt, one arm curled around a young waist in pink muslin, had enough of his mind to spare from the amount of talk one has breath for while dancing to continue in a line of thought started by an annoying little smart where a shred of skin had been rubbed off his vanity when he saw Gerald come from the dining-room. He mentally looked at himself and looked at Gerald, and after comparing the pictures felt his astonishment increase. He could admit, as an excuse for inviting Gerald instead of himself, that Gerald was an artist, and this dinner had presumably been planned with the idea of having it literary-artistic. But then—an artist! Gerald was so little of one. One never heard of his selling a painting. In the darkest corners of his friends' rooms you sometimes discovered one of his queer things—a gift, hung there as a compliment. One might, furthermore, grant that it did not matter that a man should be agreeable in appearance. But Gerald was not even agreeable in disposition; he did not try to make himself agreeable. What did the Fosses see in him?

The music had worked through a mighty flourish to a banging final chord. Hunt escorted his lady to a chair, took the fan from her hand to fan her with,—himself a little, too,—and while talking let his dark eye stray from her and go roving, as was the habit of his eye.

It plunged through an open door into the quietly lighted library, where the consul and his distinguished guest and a few more of the older or staidier people had withdrawn from the tumult and were having smokes and conversation. They were considering a marble fragment, passing it from hand to hand.

Hunt knew that fragment, and at sight of it looked cynical. The consul, who had discovered it immured in an ancient garden-wall, believed it to have been carved by Orcagna.

Old Hart had it in his hand. What he said could hardly be heard at that distance; he passed it to Gerald with a look that seemed to ask for corroboration. Gerald held it long and gazed seriously, with that conceit in his own judgment which made him sometimes dispute the attributions in no less a gallery than the Uffizi—say that a Verocchio was not a Verocchio, a Giorgione not a Giorgione.

Charlie strained to catch some syllable of what he said. Vainly. The pianist was preluding. Bertie Bentivoglio came to ask the girl in pink to dance with him. From the chair she left empty Charlie moved nearer to the library door, of half a mind to join the group in there. But Gerald, upon whom Leslie had impressed it that he must do his duty and let there be no wall-flowers, when the prelude had developed into a waltz returned the marble into Hart's hand and came to the door. Whereupon Charlie changed his mind and after saying "Hello, Gerald!" turned again, and the young men stood looking over the scene side by side, two figures contrasting in reality nearly as much as they did in Charlie's mental image of them for purposes of comparison.

Any Rosina who sold buttonhole bouquets at the theater door could have seen that Charlie was handsome, with his pale brown smoothness and regularity of feature; the pretty mustache accentuating and not concealing the neat and agreeable mold of his lip; the fine whiteness of his teeth, his civilized and silken look altogether. The defects of his face, if one could call them that, did not appear at first glance or even at second. His forehead had begun to gain on his hair,-it ran up at the sides in two points,-and his slightly prominent eyes were brown in the same sense as a horn button or a bit of chestnut-shell is brown,-while some eyes that we remember were brown like woodland pools with autumn leaves at the bottom! He did not look English, yet did not look quite Italian either. He was in fact both, and the thing evenly balanced. The banker Hunt's brother had married an Italian; Charlie had been born in Italy and hardly ever stirred out of it; on the other hand he had found his society largely among the English and Americans in Florence.

As he stood there, conforming gracefully to a recognized canon of manly beauty, his neighbor Gerald, who would not have been noticed one way or the other for his looks, yet from being beside him took on an indescribable effect of eccentricity. The bone showed plainly around his eye-sockets and at the bridge of his nose. One eyebrow became different from the other the moment he regarded a thing analytically; and when he smiled those who noticed such things could detect that nature had marked him for recognition: there showed beneath his mustache three of the broad front middle teeth whereof two are the common portion. For the remainder, a slight beard veiled the character of his chin and jaw and a little disguised the thinness of his throat. Above a large forehead his dark hair rose on end in a bristling bank, like that of most Italian men at the time. He looked solitary, unsociable, critical, but not altogether ungentle. His forehead was full of the suggestion of thoughts, his gray-blue eyes were full of the reflection of feelings, that you could be comfortably sure he would not trouble you with.

"Well, Gerald, what are you doing with yourself these days?" asked Charlie as they stood looking on, delaying to seek partners for the dance. "Immortal masterpieces?"

This innocuous playfulness somehow jarred. Gerald looked down at Charlie from the side of his eye,-he was by a couple of inches or so the taller,-then asked in his turn, a little crustily:

"Do you really want to know?"

"Why, no, my dear fellow, I don't, if that's your reply. It was not curiosity. I was only showing an amiable interest." His tone conveyed that he had intended no offense and refused to take any; the disagreeableness should be all on the same side.

"Thank you for the interest. I am doing much as usual," Gerald answered, placated.

"Who is this professor from America whom the very select are invited to meet?" Charlie asked after an interval, as if they had been on the best of terms again.

The playfulness again was innocent, again might have been regarded as almost an attempt to flatter; nevertheless it again jarred upon Gerald. It was by an effort that he answered soberly and literally, without betraying that the point of irony had irritated him, as, he did not doubt, it was meant to irritate.

"Another translation of Dante?" Charlie made merry, when Gerald had finished telling as much as he knew about the professor. "I tell you what-I will set myself to translating the 'Divine Comedy'! It will give me distinction, and then-it 's very simple,-I will never show my translation!"

There was surely no harm in this. It was just stupid. Charlie's *esprit* was never of any fineness. He and Gerald had known each other from the days when both went to M. Demonget's school, whence, without having been friends, they had emerged intimates. It would have been ridiculous for either to try to impress the other by the profundity of his thoughts. Charlie was right in thinking of himself as standing in a relation to Gerald that made him free to expose ideas in their undress. And yet it was on this evening and this occasion that Gerald said to himself for the first time definitely that he did not like Charlie Hunt. An antipathy existing perhaps from the beginning had risen to the point where it crossed the threshold of consciousness. No, he neither liked nor thought well of him.

Luckily, it did not much matter, their relations were superficial. Belonging in the same circles they must meet from time to time; but if Gerald avoided him whenever it was decently feasible, he need not often suffer as at this moment from the repressed nervous need to repudiate in explicit terms his person, his society, his manners, his morals, everything that was his. By way of beginning this avoidance, Gerald cast his eyes more particularly about him in search of a partner. Charlie's eyes too were wandering over the small and scattered number of ladies still available to late comers.

Both of them knew every one present. Charlie had picked out with his eye a still youthful mama, who would not, he believed, refuse to dance, but would jest and appear flattered and, when after some hesitation she consented, lean in his arms only a little more heavily than her daughter. Gerald had singled a slender, faded woman in garments of ivory lace, who, seated near Mme. Vannuccini in the far corner of the room, was devoting herself to conversation as if she really had not cared to dance. Gerald was moved to go and give her the chance of refusing, if she were in total earnest. He remembered Blanche Seymour as a passionate dancer still when he began to go to grownup parties.

Now her hair was gray, her face had lines, but she did not look accustomed to them; there was plaintiveness in her expression, as if she had been a young girl, really, made up for an elderly part in theatricals, and did not like her part. It was some sense of this which was attracting Gerald to her across the room. Leslie had ordered him to dance, so dance he must. But the glare of festivity all around him did something to his inner self comparable to a light too bright making the eyes ache. Leslie would have told him that he picked up his party by

the wrong end. The general gaiety instead of infecting him, reinforced his feeling that everybody, beneath the surface, was perplexed, bleeding, afraid of the future, and had good cause to be.

The dinner had been interesting,—he had not been much affected, he was glad to find, by the presence of the De Brézés,—but he had risen from it haunted by the conviction that the Fosses were not happy. Nobody, if one examined into it, was happy; all this pretense was pathetic to the point of dreariness. Gerald knew everybody's affairs to some extent, after spending most of his life in the same community, and a little city where gossip is an elegant occupation. This person had made bad investments; that one was crippled by the necessity to pay a son's debts; this couple did not live in harmony, the husband was said to be infatuated with a dancer. The fact that so much of their own fault entered into people's misfortunes, while rousing rage, forced him to pity, because the limitation of their intelligence had so much to do with people's faults. He was in fact oppressed by the sense of the limits set to all the lives around him in this beautiful little Florence, his home, his love, sometimes his despair: the narrow actual opportunities after the boundless illusions and hopes of youth; the limited outlook, the limited breathing-room, the limited fortunes. Bars at the windows, closed doors on every hand.

It was with the feeling that Miss Seymour was no more truly in holiday spirits than was he that he turned toward her, as toward a spot of shadow amid too fervid sunshine. It would be more congenial, drifting with her to the languid measure of this very modern, morbidly emotional waltz, knowing that, whatever their light talk, they alike felt life to be a sad affair, than going through livelier evolutions with a young person who would secretly desire him to flatter and flirt. An instinct founded less upon male conceit than knowledge of his world drove the young bachelor determined to remain unattached to seek in preference women who would found no smallest hope upon his notice of them.

So, keeping at the edge of the room in order to be out of the way of the dancers, he started on his way to Miss Seymour, while Charlie, whose mood was as different from Gerald's as was his eye,—that brown eye which looked upon the world as a barrel of very passable oysters, of which he would open as many as he could get hold of,—started after.

The approach of a stormily whirling couple, waltzing *all'italiana*, and then another and still another following, forced them to suspend their journey. While they prudently waited, "Who is that?" came from Charlie in a voice of acute curiosity.

Gerald, after half a glance at him, mechanically looked in the same direction.

There stood at the door opening from the reception-room an unknown.

When it was said that our young men knew everybody at the Fosses' soirée, it was not strictly meant that there might not be a person or two whom they had not seen before: a plain little visiting cousin whom the Bentivoglios had begged permission to bring; a new face of a young Italian introduced by a fellow officer. But at the door now, displacing a good deal of air, stood a real and striking unknown, in a Paris dress and diamonds and a smile.

Gerald did not take the trouble to answer Charlie; to himself he said that this was perhaps Mrs. Hawthorne, the Fosses' new friend.

Mrs. Foss had hastened to meet her. Leslie, disengaging herself from a partner, left him standing in the middle of the room while she hastened likewise. It must be Mrs. Hawthorne.

Gerald took back his eyes, and continued on his way to Miss Seymour. But Charlie, always alive to the possibilities of a new acquaintance, always eager to be first in the field, dropped his quest of the mama. With an air of nonchalant abstraction he went to stand in the neighborhood of the new arrival, conveniently at hand for an introduction. He saw then that there were two fine new birds; the light and size of the one had at first obscured the other, though she, too, had on a Paris dress and diamonds and a smile. But the dress—though there could be little difference in the women's age, both were young, without being unripe girls,—was of soberer tones: a sage green moire with pale coffee-colored lace; and the jewels were more modest, and the smile was smaller, its beam did not carry so far, nor was perched on so considerable an eminence.

As he had known she would do, Mrs. Foss after a moment looked about her for men to introduce. And there he was.

Mrs. Hawthorne. Miss Madison.

Leslie had at the same moment brought up Captain Viviani, who spoke a little English, and liked very much to practise it with the charming American ladies, as he told them.

Mrs. Foss lingered awhile, helping the progress of the acquaintance by bits of elucidation and compliment, then, when the thing was under way, withdrew so adroitly that she was not missed. A young man, coming up to importune Leslie for a promised dance, was allowed to carry her off; Miss Madison, assured by the *capitano* that he could dance the American waltz, trusted herself, though a little doubtfully, to his arms; and Charlie was left with Mrs. Hawthorne.

"Shall we take a turn?" he offered.

"Me?" The lady gave him a look sidewise from dewy blue eyes, as if to see whether he were serious. He perceived that she with effort kept her dimples from denting in. He could not be sure what the joke was. But she went on, as if there had been no joke: "I was brought up a Baptist. My pa and ma considered it wicked to dance, so would never let me learn. It doesn't look very wicked to me."

She watched the dancers with an earnestly following eye, preoccupied, he supposed, with the moral aspect of their embraces and gyrations.

"It looks easy enough," she said, with suppressed excitement, immensely fascinated. "I should think anybody could do that. You hop on this foot, you slide, you hop on that foot, you slide. I believe I could do it. No, no, I mustn't let myself be tempted. I don't want to be a

sight." Her voice had wavered; it suddenly came out bold. "My land!" she exclaimed full-bloodedly, "there goes a woman who's not a bit slimmer than me! Look here, let's try. Not right before everybody. I see a side room where it's nice and dark. Come on in there." As, hardly muffling a gleam of peculiar and novel amusement, he escorted her toward the room indicated, she reassured him, "I'm big, but I'm light on my feet."

Charlie was afterward fond of telling that he had taught Mrs. Hawthorne to dance. But the single lesson he gave her did not of a truth take her beyond the point where, holding hands with him, like children, and counting one-two-three, she tried hopping on this foot, then on the other. For Mrs. Foss, who seemed to have specially at heart that the new people should enjoy themselves, in her idea of securing this end, brought one person after the other to be introduced.

How carefully selected these were, or how diplomatically prepared, the good hostess alone could know.

"Oh, I'm having such a good time!" Mrs. Hawthorne sighed from a full and happy heart, later in the evening, having gone to sit beside her hostess on the little corner sofa which that tired woman had selected for a moment's rest. The dancing was passing before them. "It's the loveliest party I ever was to. What delightful friends you have, Mrs. Foss, and what a lot of them! I've made ever so many friends, too, this evening. Mrs. Satterlee has told me about the Home she's interested in, and Miss Seymour about the church-fair, and I've had a good talk with the minister. Those are three nice girls of the banker's, aren't they? Florence, Francesca, and Beatrice, commonly known as Flick, Fran, and Trix, they told me. Mr. Hunt, the nephew, is nice, too; we get on like sliding down-hill. They're all going to come and see me.—Mrs. Foss,—her attention had veered,—“do look at that little fellow playing the piano! Isn't he *great*! But isn't he comical, too! I've been noticing him all the evening. He fascinates me. I never heard such splendid playing. The bouncing parts make my feet twitch to dance, but the sighful, wind-in-the-willow parts make me want to just lean back and close my eyes. I could listen till the cows come home. I call it a wonderful gift.”

Mrs. Foss looked over at the little Italian, the unpretentious musical hack whom one sent for when there was to be dancing, and paid—it was all he asked—so very little. Her eyebrows went up a point as she smiled. It was true, she remarked it for the first time, that his hands flew over the keys with an air of breezy virtuosity. He raised them from the keyboard and brought them down again with the action of a snorting high-stepping horse. When the passage was loud he nearly lifted himself off the stool with pounding; when it was soft he tickled the ivories with the delicacy of raindrops, at the same time diminishing his person till he seemed the size of a fairy. Now and then he tossed his head, as if champing a bit, and the bunch of black frizz over his left temple trembled. A decidedly comic figure he appeared to Mrs. Foss.

"I will tell Signor Ceccherelli what you say," she amiably promised. "I am sure it will please him."

Leslie, whose responsibilities kept her from dancing her young fill at her own parties, sought Mrs. Hawthorne still later in the evening, when she thought that lady might have had enough of Mr. Hunt senior sitting beside her. The heavy old banker was not considered very entertaining, and everybody in Florence knew his way of sticking at the side of a good-looking woman. Lest this one, so evidently making herself pleasant, should be unduly taxed, Leslie stepped in to free her, tactfully interested the banker in a game of cards going on upstairs, and took the place he vacated—took it for just a minute, as a bird perches.

"No, you don't!" Mrs. Hawthorne laid a hand on her arm when she seemed near dashing off to bring somebody else to present. "You've done the social act till you ought to be tired, if you aren't. Sit here by me a moment and take it easy. This party doesn't need any nursing. It's the loveliest party I ever was to."

Leslie looked off in front of her to verify the statement, and unreluctantly settled down on the little sofa to rest awhile. She liked Mrs. Hawthorne. One could not help liking her, as she had had occasion to assert and reassert in defense against a vague body of reasons for not adopting the new-comer into the sacred circle of friends, or launching her on the waters of their little world. Now, as they chatted, she said to herself again that if Mrs. Hawthorne's homeliness of phrase were not a simple thing of playfulness, a disclaimer of the affectation of elegance in talk as stilted, bumptious, unsuited to a proper modesty, it could very well pass for that. Mrs. Hawthorne seldom expressed herself quite seriously. As she seldom looked serious either, one could hardly hear her say it was the loveliest party she ever was to without suspecting her of a humorous intention. By the sly gleam of her eye one should know she was doing it to amuse you, imitating a child, a country-woman, a shop-girl, for the sake of promoting an easy pleasantness. With her bearing of entire dignity, her honest handsomeness, her air of secure and generous wealth, she was truly not one whom the ordinary public would feel disposed to seek reasons for excluding. Leslie and her mother had refrained from presenting to her particular persons in the company. All remarks heard from those who had been presented led to an almost certainty that the new Americans were a success.

"Do look at Estelle!" exclaimed Mrs. Hawthorne. "She's been dancing one dance after the other, and sits there now looking cool as a cucumber. I would have her life if it could make me into a bone like her. Miss Foss,—she was diverted from the envious contemplation of Estelle,—“who is that lovely girl over there?”

"Which one? There are so many to-night!"

"The white one with the knob of dark hair down in her neck. An Italian, I guess. Rather small. See who I mean? There. She's going to speak to the little fellow at the piano."

Leslie looked, but did not at once answer. The girl in white was indeed strangely, at this

moment poignantly, lovely. Some intensity of repressed feeling made her cheek of a white-rose pallor, and her dark eyes, those spots of velvet shadow, mysteriously deep. She had gone where the piano stood in a bower of palm and bamboo, with Signor Ceccherelli seated before it, busy wiping the sweat of his brow. More than one had gone to him that evening to ask for some favorite piece. She was perhaps just requesting him to play *The Blue Danube*, or *La Manola* or *Bavardage*, and it was merely the romantic way of her beauty to express a sense of doom. She spoke quietly to the pianist, who looked at her while she spoke and when she ceased made with his head a motion of assent. She turned and went from the room.

"It is my sister Brenda," said Leslie. "How singular you should not recognize her!"

"I've never met her, my dear. You don't remember. The time I came to tea she was in town taking a music lesson. The time I came to dinner she was in bed with a headache. Well, well, she's not a bit like the rest of you, is she? I took her for an Italian."

"She was only twelve when we came over here, it has somehow molded her. I was seventeen; too old, I fancy, to change. Brenda is going back to America before long, to be with our aunt, father's sister, for whom Brenda was named. It was only decided a day or two ago, when we heard from some friends who are going and will take her under their wing. And if she goes there's no telling when she will come back, you see, because with every change of administration father may be recalled. And Italy has been her home so long, all her friends are here. It's no wonder she doesn't look exactly light of heart."

"No, poor child!"

There was a sympathetic silence, after which, "Who is that?" Mrs. Hawthorne asked, to take their minds off the intrusive sadnesses of life. With her gaze across the room she counted, "One, two, three, four, to the left of the piano, with his hands behind him and a round glass in his eye."

Leslie looked over at a figure of whom it was natural to ask who that was, it so surely looked like Somebody—though Mrs. Hawthorne had very likely asked because, merely, in her eyes he was queer. It was an oldish man, dressed with marked elegance, white tie, white waistcoat, white flower at his lapel. The whole of worldly wisdom dwelt in his weary eye. He had yellow and withered cheeks, black hair with a dash of white above the ears, and a mustache whose thickest part curved over his mouth like a black lacquer box-lid, while its long ends, stiff as thorns of a thorn-tree, projected on either side far beyond his face.

"His name is Balm de Brézé, vicomte. He is by birth a Belgian, I think; the title, however, is French. He has lived mostly in Paris, but now spends about half of his time here. He married a friend of ours, an American. There is Amabel, in ruby velvet, just inside the library door. A good deal younger than he, yet they seem appropriately matched, somehow."

"She looks about as foreign as he does. Who's the one she's talking to, handsome, dark as night? Never saw such a dark skin before except on a cullud puss'n."

"I know. He might be an Arab, only he's very good Tuscan. It's Mr. Landini,—Hunt and Landini."

"Ah, the bankers. They do my business, but I've never seen the heads before to-night."

Mrs. Hawthorne's eyes wandered, as if she said, "Whom else do I want to know about?" and Leslie made internal comment upon the fact that Mrs. Hawthorne's interest was quickened by those individuals precisely whom they had withheld, for reasons, from presenting to her.

Mrs. Hawthorne suddenly pressed closer, and with a little chuckle grasped Leslie's knee, by this affectionate touch to make herself forgiven for the disrespect about to be shown.

"And who's Stickly-prickly?"

Leslie had to laugh, too. Impossible not to know which one was meant of all the people in the direction of Mrs. Hawthorne's glance. He was leaning against the wall between two chairs deserted by the fair, looking off with a slightly mournful indifference at everything and at nothing. His mustache ended in upturned points, his beard was pointed, his hair stood up in little points. He gave the impression besides of one whose nervous temper put out porcupine shafts to keep you off.

"It's one of our very best friends, Mrs. Hawthorne. Dear old Gerald! Mr. Fane. Shall I go get him and bring him over?"

"No, don't. I should be scared of him."

"Let me! His prickles are harmless. He has heard us speak of you so much! See, he is looking over at us wistfully, in a way that plainly suggests our course. Here comes Charlie Hunt, who will keep you amused while I fetch Gerald; then we will go in together and have an ice."

Charlie Hunt, modern moth without fear or shyness, but with a great deal of caution, was indeed returning for the third or fourth time to Mrs. Hawthorne's side, drawn by the sparkle of eyes and tresses and smiles and diamonds. Francesca had already described him that evening to another young lady as dancing attendance on the new American. He dropped into the seat vacated by Leslie, addressed Mrs. Hawthorne as if they had been friends for at least weeks, and made conversation joyfully easy by getting at once on to a playful footing.

Leslie meanwhile steered her course toward Gerald. The music had started up again, men were presenting themselves to maidens with their request for the favor.... Leslie threaded her way between the first on the floor. Her eyes were naturally turned toward the object of her search; some intention toward him was probably apparent in her look. As if he had not seen it, or as if, having seen it, he scented in her approach some conspiracy against his peace, Gerald in a moment during which her eye was not on him quietly vanished.

Missing him, Leslie looked about in some surprise, then entered the door by which inevitably he must have passed. She gave a glance around the library; Gerald did not seem to be there. Mystified, she looked more carefully at the faces to be seen through the thin

tobacco smoke. No, Gerald's was not among them. Gerald, acquainted with the house, knew the door, of course, of the kind frequent in Italian houses, the little door indistinguishable from the wall, by which one could leave the library, and after crossing the landing of the kitchen stairs, reach the dining-room. From the dining-room, then, one could come into the entrance hall, whence go upstairs, or out into the garden, or, as one pleased, back into the drawing-room. Leslie did not think the matter of sufficient importance to pursue the chase farther.

The dancing was suspended while the musician had sandwiches and glasses of a fragrant and delicious-looking but weak punch. The Fosses' waiter knew him well and fraternally attended to his wants.

The dining-room, though large, would not permit all the couples to enter at once, so ices and cakes were borne from the table by cavaliers to expectant ladies in the antechamber, on the stairs, and in the farther rooms.

The musician after eating to his satisfaction took the time for a cigarette, which he enjoyed, not in the library, but in cool and peaceful isolation on the top step of the kitchen stairs. Refreshed, he briskly went back to his piano, persuaded that the young people were sighing to see him there. With new vigor he struck up a march. The crowd in the dining-room thinned.

Mrs. Hawthorne and Miss Madison, with Charlie Hunt and Doctor Chandler, one of the Americans from the pension, lingered on in the corner where, with the migration of so many to the ball-room, all four had been able to find chairs. Mrs. Hawthorne, of the fair moon-face, was as a matter of course eating sweet stuff; Miss Madison, contrariwise, sipped a small cup of black coffee. Miss Madison, no need to say, had a neat jaw-bone to show-collarbones, too. She was not pretty, her features were hardly worth describing, but yet it was an attractive face, as merry as it was fundamentally shrewd, as sensible as it was sprightly. The frank, almost business-like manner of her setting out to have a good time at the party ensured her having at least a lively one, and her partners not finding it slow. She at once and impartially interested herself in the men brought up to her, and sought to interest them. Her flirtatiousness was, however, sedate-in its way, moral-not intended to have any result beyond the enlivenment of the hour.

Miss Madison had been finding exhilaration and delight this evening in dancing, and when presently the alluring strains of a waltz came floating to their ears, she looked at Chandler, and he in the same manner looked at her; whereupon she rose, as if words had been exchanged, took his arm, and they deserted for the ball-room. Charlie Hunt was left ensconced in an intimate nook alone with Mrs. Hawthorne.

But he had hardly a moment in which to enjoy the feeling of advantage this gave him before his cousin Francesca came looking for him. They were going, she said. Father was sleepy, and mother said they must go. If he wanted a lift home, he must hurry up. Charlie had come with them, on the box near the driver, there being five already inside the landau. Gallantry should perhaps have made him answer that rather than be dragged away at this moment he would walk. But gallantry was dumb. Charlie was not fond of walking. It was a great convenience, an economy as well, being permitted to make use of his aunt's carriage.

Having delivered her message, Francesca had gone to put on her things, and Charlie, after expressions of regret over the inevitable, asked Mrs. Hawthorne whither she would wish to be taken before he left.

Let him not bother, she answered; she could find her friends without help.

They separated. Walking slowly, she looked for faces of acquaintances. She glanced in at the ball-room door. They were dancing still, but not nearly so many. She turned into the reception-room, whence she could reënter the ball-room at the other end without danger of collision, and reach that comfortable blue satin sofa, now standing empty. There she would sit looking on till Estelle joined her, when they would set about making their adieux. The carriage must have been waiting for them ever so long.

She had sat a minute, unconsciously smiling to herself, because the sensations and impressions of the evening were all so pleasant, when something occurred to her as desirable to be done. She rose to carry out her idea.

The dancing had stopped; the floor was clear except in the neighborhood of the walls, where couples stood or sat recovering breath and coolness. She started to cross the long room. She did not skirt it because the direct line to her destination was by the middle; she did not go fast because there was no occasion, and it was not her way. She advanced like a goodly galleon pushing along the sea with finely curved bows, all sails set to catch the breeze. Her mind was entirely on her idea, and she did not at first feel herself to be conspicuous. But all the eyes in the room, before she had gone half her way, were fastened upon her, a natural and legitimate mark. One might now without impertinence have the satisfaction of a good look at the newly come American who had taken the big house on the Lungarno; the women might study the fashion of her hair and dress.

She was smiling faintly, but fixedly; she smiled, indeed, all the time, as if smiles had been an indispensable article of wear at a party. The least of her smiles brought dimples into view, and her dimples seemed multitudinous, though there were really only three in her face and one of those irregular things called apple-seeds. Her agreeably blunted features and peachy roundness of cheek belonged to a good-humored, unimposing type, which took on a certain nobility in her case from being carried high on a strong, round neck over a splendid broad breast, partly bare this evening, and seen to be white as milk, as swans'-down, as pearl.

If one had tried to define the look which left one so little doubt as to her nationality, one would perhaps have said it was a combination of fearlessness and accessibility. She feared not you, nor should you fear her; she counted on your friendliness, you might count on hers.

She was a person simple in the main. The colors she had selected to wear accorded with the rest, showing little intricacy of taste. The two silks composing her dress were respectively the blue of a summer morning and the pink of a rose. From cushioned and dimpled shoulders the bodice tapered to as fine a waist as a Paris dressmaker had found possible to bring about in a woman who, despite a veritable yearning to look slender, cared also for freedom to breathe, and, as she said with a sigh, guessed she must make up her mind to be happy without looking like a toothpick. At the back of the waist, the dress leapt suddenly out and away from the dorsal column—every lady's dress did that for a season or two at the time we are telling of, and at every step she took the back of her skirt gave a bob, for the bustle was supplemented by three or four concealed semi-circles of thin steel, reeds we called them, which hit against you as you went and sprang lightly away from your heels.

The arrangement of Mrs. Hawthorne's hair equalled in artificiality the mode of her dress: the front locks were clipped and twisted into little curls, the back locks drawn to the top of the head, where they were disposed in silken loops and rolls, at the top of which, like a flag planted on a hill, stood an aigrette, a sparkle and two whiffs.

It may not sound pretty, it was not, but the eye of that day had become used to it, as eyes have since become used to fashions no prettier, and as Mrs. Hawthorne's hair was of a soft sunny tint it was that evening admired by more than one, as was her intrinsically ugly beautiful gown, which gave a little jerky rebound every time she placed one of those neat solid satin-shod feet before the other in her progress across the now attentive room.

She had taken off her long white gloves to eat a cake—or cakes; she was carrying them loosely swinging from one dimpled hand.

In the middle of the room self-consciousness overtook her. With the awakening sense of eyes upon her, she looked first to one side, then to the other. Her smile broadened while growing by just a tinge sheepish; she seemed to waver and consider turning from her course and finishing her journey close along the wall, like a mouse....

She finally did not, nor yet hurried. She made her smile explain to whoever was looking on that a person was excusable for making this sort of mistake, that it hurt nobody, that one need not and did not care; that she was sure they did not like her any less for it; they would not if they knew how void of offense toward them all was her heart; that having exposed herself to being looked at, she hoped they liked her looks. Her dress was a very good dress, her laces were very good lace, and the maid who had done her hair was considered a first-rate hand at doing hair.

So she was carrying it off, and her smile was only a little self-conscious, only a shade embarrassed, when from among the men standing near the library door, for which she was directly making, there stepped out one to meet her, not unlike a slender needle darting toward a large, rounded magnet as it comes into due range.

More sensitive than she, feeling the situation much more uncomfortably for his countrywoman than she felt it for herself, a foreign-looking fellow, who had not quite forgotten that he was an American, after a moment's hard struggle against his impulse, hastened forward to shorten for her that unaccompanied course across the floor under ten thousand search-lights.

"I'm looking for somebody," said Mrs. Hawthorne, with the smile of a child.

The voice which had made one man think of the crimson heart on a valentine reminded this other of rough velvet.

He showed his eccentric three front teeth in a responding smile that had a touch of the faun, and asked whimsically:

"Will I do?"

"Help me to find Mr. Foss, and you'll do perfectly," she said merrily. "I haven't seen him more than just to shake hands this whole evening, and I do want to have a little talk before I go."

"If I am not mistaken, we shall find him in the library." He offered his arm.

"I may have appeared to be doing something else, Mrs. Hawthorne, but I have really been looking for you the last hour," said the consul when he had been found. "I wanted to have a little talk. How are you enjoying Florence?"

"Oh, we're having an elegant time, thanks to that dear wife of yours and that dear girl, Leslie. I don't know what we should have done without them and you."

"But the city itself, Florence, doesn't it enchant you?"

"We—ell, yes. N-n-n-no. Yes and no. That's it. You want me to tell the truth, don't you? Some of it does, and some of it doesn't. Some of it, I guess, will take me a long time to get used to. It's terribly different from what we expected—I, in particular. You see, I came here because an old friend used to talk so much about it. Florence the Fair! The City of Lilies! He said Italy was the most beautiful country in the world, and Florence the most beautiful city in Italy. So my expectations were way up.—Oh, I don't know; it's hard to tell. I don't exactly remember now what I did expect. I guess my picture of it was something like the New Jerusalem on an Easter day. But I shall get used to this, like to the taste of olives. It must be all right, for the friend I was speaking of had the finest mind I've ever known. I'm green as turnip-tops, of course, but I shall get educated up to it, I suppose. Give me time."

"Mrs. Hawthorne, hear me prophesy," said Mr. Foss. "In six months you will love it all. It's the fate of us who come here from new countries. It will steal in upon you, grow upon you, beset and besot you, till you like no other place in the world so well."

"Will it? Well, if you say so. The Judge—the friend I was speaking of,—said so much of the same kind that the minute I thought of coming to Europe, right after I'd said, 'I'll go to Paris,' I said to myself, 'I'll go to Florence.'"

"Your friend was a judge of places."

"It wasn't he alone influenced me. He was sick a long time, and I used to read aloud to him, and one spell, when his mind for some reason or other was running on Italy, every book he chose had the scene laid here. There were whole pages of description, and anything so lovely, so luscious, as the places and people described I never did dream. I didn't understand more than a quarter, but I swallowed it all and gloated. The woman who wrote those books certainly did have an imagination. O Antonia, let me meet you and have a good look at you so I can tell a-hm, the owner of an imagination when I see one again!"

"Antonia, did you say?" The consul smiled.

"That was the writer's name. You know the books I mean?"

"I have read a work or two of Antonia's, yes. She lives near Florence, you know, on another of these little hills."

"Oh, does she!"

"Her name is Mrs. Grangeon. She is an Englishwoman, with an extraordinary sense of, and feeling for, Italy. She is, at her best, a poet; at her worst, slightly deficient, perhaps, in humor. But her passion for Italy is genuine, and I have no doubt she sees it as glowing as the pictures she makes of it."

"Her books are 'grand, John'! If I never had come here, I never should have appreciated them or her-making up that wonderful world, all pomegranates and jasmin-stars, and curls like clustering blue-black grapes, and staturesque limbs, out of the back of her head. Yes, and the golden dust of centuries, and time's mellow caressing touch-oh, I wish I could remember it all!"

"Mrs. Hawthorne, we must take you in hand. Be it ours to initiate you. Come, what have you been to see?"

"Treasures of art? We haven't had time yet. We've been getting a house fit to live in. When you asked me how I liked Florence, I ought to have begun by that end. I love my house, Mr. Foss. I love my garden. I love the Lungarno. And the Casheeny. And Boboly. And the drive up here. And the stores! I positively dote on those little bits of stores on the jewelers' bridge."

"Well, well, that's quite enough to begin with."

"Now that we're going to have some time to spare, we mean to go sight-seeing like other folks."

"How I wish, dear Mrs. Hawthorne, that I were not such a busy man! But"-Mr. Foss had a look of bright inspiration-"should I on that account be dejected? Here is Mr. Fane-"

He turned to Gerald, who, after bringing up Mrs. Hawthorne, had stood near, a silent third, waiting to act further as her escort by and by. Meanwhile he had been listening with a varied assortment of feelings and a boundless fatigue of spirit.

"Mr. Fane," said the consul, "who is not nearly so busy a man as I, and is the most sympathetic, well-informed cicerone you could find. When we wish to be sure our visiting friends shall see Florence under the best possible circumstances, we turn them over to Mr. Fane."

Gerald's face struggled into a sourish smile, and he bowed ironical thanks for the compliment. Lifting his head, he shot a glance of reproachful interrogation at the consul. Was his friend doing this humorously, to tease him, or was the man simply not thinking?

The consul looked innocent of any sly intention; he was all of a jocund smile; the consul, who should have known better, wore the air of doing him a pleasure and her a pleasure and a pleasure to himself; the air of thinking that any normally constituted young man would be grateful for such a chance.

"I shall be most happy," said Gerald, with irreproachable and misleading politeness.

Mrs. Hawthorne turned to him readily.

"Any time you say. Let me tell you where we live."

CHAPTER IV

The room in which Mrs. Hawthorne went to bed an hour or two after taking leave of the dwindling company at Villa Foss was large and luxurious. Its windows were enormous, arched at the top and reaching the floor. A wrought-iron railing outside made them safe. In the angle of the wall between two of them—it was a corner room—stood a mirror nearly the size of the windows, in a broad frame of carved and gilt wood, resting on a marble shelf that supported besides two alabaster vases holding bunches of roses.

In the corner opposite to the mirror and placed "catty-corner," as the occupier worded it, stood the stateliest of beds, upholstered and draped in heavy watered silk of a dull, even dingy, yellow. Its hangings were gathered at the top into the hollow of a great gold coronet, whence they spread and fell in folds that were looped back with silk cords. The walls were covered by that same texture of dull gold, held in place by tarnished gilt moldings.

Mrs. Hawthorne had wanted all this dusty and faded splendor removed,—it seemed to her the possible lurking-place of mice or worse,—but the agent would not hear of it. The noble landlord was not really eager to let.

So Mrs. Hawthorne, to brighten the room in spite of it, for she wished to keep it for her own, having taken a fancy to the fresco overhead,—that fascinating chariot driven among clouds by a radiant youth surrounded by smiling, flower-scattering maidens,—Mrs. Hawthorne to "gay up" the room, as she said, had hung windows and doors with draperies of her favorite cornflower blue, and covered the chairs with the same. On the floor she had stretched a pearl-gray carpet all aglow with wreaths of roses tied with ribbons of blue; and over the carpet—at the bedside, before the dressing-table, in front of the fireplace—laid down white bear-skins.

To cover further the yellow silk, she had hung in one panel of it a painting of the "Madonna della Seggiola," in another, Carlo Dolci's "Angel of the Annunciation," and in another, Carlo Dolci's Magdalen clasping the box of ointment—all works of art bought in Via dei Fossi, framed in great gilt-wood frames, like the mirror.

The lace curtains under the cornflower blue brocade were like Brussels wedding veils seen through a magnifying glass.

Yes, the room had been made to look bright. It had lamps of cream-colored biscuit, painted with roses and crowned with pink shades; it had polished brass fire-irons. But the point of supreme brightness was the dressing-table, where glittered in orderly display Mrs. Hawthorne's American toilet silver, mirror, trays, brushes, boxes, bottles—solid, shining, richly embossed.

There was just one thing in all the room that looked poor, workaday. It was on the small table at the head of the bed, beside the candle-stick and match-safe, a black book, the commonest kind of Bible, such a Bible as is dispensed by those who have to furnish the sacred writings in large numbers—Sunday schools, for instance.

It was in fact a Sunday-school prize that now lay on the night-stand, in what the sober volume presented to a pious little girl must have thought strange company. Cover to cover with it, cheek by jowl, lay a book on etiquette.

It was for the Bible, however, that Mrs. Hawthorne reached after she had got into bed. She found her place. She read in it every night before sleeping, to keep a promise made long ago, and avoid the reproaches of a person gone from this earth, but who still, she never questioned, could be pleased or displeased with her actions.

She did not always try to understand or follow; when she was sleepy she read merely with her eyes. To-night her mind was too full of personal things to permit of strict attention to the text. As she enumerated the wonders of the House that Solomon built for the Lord, there formed no picture of it in her mind.

"I wonder what knops are," she said to herself drowsily. "I must remember to ask Hattie."

There was a stir. Both doors of her room were open; the little unobtrusive one into the dressing-room for air,—the window there stood wide open through the night,—the large one into the sitting-room so as to leave a free road to Miss Madison's room beyond. Through this now slipped a slender form in a soft, fur-bordered wrapper, and with front locks done up in curling-kids.

"You in bed?"

"Yes; I'm just reading my chapter."

"Livvy gone?"

Livvy, or Miss Deliverance Jones, was the maid they had brought from America, a New York negress of the most faintly colored complexion, with hair mysteriously blond. Her head was egg-shaped, her nose slightly flat, her lip voluptuous, her brown-black eye sad as a homesick monkey's; but she could wind a chocolate veil about her face and stylish hat, and walk forth happy in the fancy that she passed for white. She was an accomplished dressmaker and hair-dresser; she moreover had spent some time in the service of a beauty-doctor. The ladies had secured her just before sailing, and liked her, but did not talk freely when she was present.

"Yes, she's gone."

"I'm not a bit sleepy, are you? I'm too excited. Let's talk."

She climbed on to her friend's bed, gathered her knees to her chin, and hugged them, with the effect of hugging to herself a great happiness.

Mrs. Hawthorne closed her Bible and put it aside. The single candle by which she had been reading showed the shining mirthfulness of the eyes with which the two regarded each other.

"Wasn't it fun?"

"Oh, wasn't it!"

They spoke softly, whether because the suggestion of the late hour was upon them, or they thought, without thinking, that Livvy might still be near. They whispered like school-girls who have come together in forbidden fun.

"I never did have such a good time."

"Nor I, neither. Oh, Hat, *isn't it* fun!"

"*Isn't it*, just!"

"See here, Hat, you've got to teach me to dance. I was almost crazy this evening, I wanted so to be dancing with the rest. Where d'you learn?"

"I went to dancing-school, my dear."

"No! Did you?"

"Yes, I did; all one winter. What are you thinking about? I've been to parties in my life. Not many, but I've been. There was the Home Club party—"

"Yes, of course. I remember how I teased once to go to the Home Club party; but ma wouldn't let me. I hadn't anything to put on, anyhow. But I'd have gone in my shirt if they'd let me. The nearest to a real party I'd been to before to-night was a clam-bake. I don't count church sociables. Out West there used to be celebrations in a sort of bar-room place, but even I couldn't stand those. To think I've always yearned so to have a good time, and now I'm having it! Oh, Hat, wasn't it lovely! That's a mighty nice house of the Fosses. How good it looked, all fixed up! The flowers and candles, one room opening into the other, everything just right. Hat, Mrs. Foss is the finest woman I ever knew, and in my opinion makes the most elegant appearance. She's the one I'd choose to be like if I could. Just watch me copy-cat her. You'll see. 'My dear Mrs. Hawthorne, pray don't speak of the trouble! It's been nothing but a pleasure. Be sure you call upon us whenever we can be of the smallest service.'"

"You've caught her, Nell, you silly thing! Down to the ground."

"I'm going to pattern after her till it comes natural. How sweet they all are! How kind they've been!" Mrs. Hawthorne grew dreamy.

"Your dress, Nell, was a perfect success," the other ran on—"perfect. How did you think mine looked? I'll tell you a compliment I got for you, if you'll tell me one you got for me. If not, I'll save it up in my secret breast till you're ready to make a trade."

"To think," said Mrs. Hawthorne, still engrossed by her dream of absent and bygone things, "that we're the same little girls—and one of them barefoot!—who used to play house together on a sand-heap of old Cape Cod and pin on any old rag that would tail along the ground and play ladies! 'My dear Mrs. Madison, how do you do?'"

"My dear Mrs. Hawthorne, my toes are just as sore as they can be!"

"That comes, my dear Mrs. Madison, of you dancing like a crazy woman from ten o'clock till one, in tight shoes!—Mrs. Hawthorne! Mrs. Madison! Aurora! Estelle! To think, after all these years, we should be playing our old play that we played at Wellfleet and East Boston, only playing it with real things, in Paris and Florence!"

"Nell, I'm so afraid of forgetting and calling you Nell that every time I catch myself near doing it I can feel the cold sweat break out on my brow."

"What would it matter? We aren't impostors, Hat. We're just having fun, and don't want our real names to queer it. If they should slip out when we aren't thinking, they'd simply sound like nicknames we've got for each other. But they won't slip out. I'm too fond of calling you Estelle. Don't you *love* to call me Aurora? Hat, how did I behave, far as you could see?"

"Nell, if I hadn't known you, and had just been seeing you for the first time, I should have said to myself: 'What a fine, good-looking, beautifully dressed, refined, and ladylike woman that is! Wish t' I might make her acquaintance.' And what would you have said, if you'd seen me, never having met me before?"

"I should have said: 'What a bright, smart, intelligent, and rarely beautiful girl! So well dressed, too, and slender as a worm! A queen of society. I do like her looks! She's the spittin' image of my little friend Hattie Carver, the schoolmarm in East Boston, that I used to know!' Oh, Hat, the *queerest* thing! What do you suppose I saw this evening at that lovely house full of lovely people? I was in the library learning to dance. And I looked up and there was what I took to be a young man smoking a cigarette. Next thing, I saw that his dress was low-necked almost down to the waist. Hat, it was a *woman* smoking! a woman with her hair cut short. I never saw anything like it, except an old Irishwoman once, with her pipe."

"Seems to me I've heard of ladies in Europe doing it, and it being considered all right. I *have* heard that some do it in New York, but I guess they're careful not to be seen."

"Well, it does seem a queer thing to do!—Go ahead, Hat; what was the compliment?"

"Sure, now, you've got one for me?"

"Sure."

"It was What's-his-name, the English fellow we see every time we go in to Cook's—Mr. Dysart. Leslie says he comes of a very good family. He said to me, 'How very charming Mrs. Hawthorne is looking this evening!'"

"Hattie, that man's a humbug, that man's leading a double life. He said to me, 'How very charming Miss Madison is looking this evening!' He did."

"Go 'way! You're making it up to save trouble."

"No, I ain't! Stop, Hattie! I know! I *am not*. Confusion upon it! You've made me so nervous when I talk that I can't say ain't without jumping as if I'd sat on a pin!"

"Nell Goodwin, look me square in the eye. How many times did you say ain't at the party

this evening?"

"Not once; I swear it. I was looking out every minute. 'I am not,' I said; 'We are not,' I said; 'He doesn't,' I said; 'He isn't,' I said. There! Between you'n' I, Hat, it's a dreadful nuisance, keeping my mind on the way I talk. I hope I shall come in time to talking lofty without thinking about it. Why do I have to, Hat, after all? I've lived among educated people. Wasn't the Judge highly educated? And nobody ever found fault with my way of talking. My folks all had been to school and read books. And didn't I go to school till I was fourteen? And didn't I graduate from the grammar school with the rest? What's the matter with my natural way of talking?"

"It's all right at home, Nell, but it's different over here. They're a different kind of people we're thrown with."

"This pernicky way of talking never sounds cozy or friendly one bit. We're as good as anybody, of course, but when I say 'I am not, he does not,' I always feel as if I were setting up to be better than the rest!—Oh, it isn't, is it? Oh, do you say so? 'Between you and I' isn't correct? But I thought you told me.... To Jericho, Hattie! How's a feller ever going to get to know?"

"Listen, Nell, while I go over it again. When you say—"

"Ah, no! Not at this time of night, Estelle! Let me live in ignorance till morning! You know all those sorts of things, my dear Estelle, because you're paid by the government to know them. I don't; but I know lots and lots of things that are a sight funnier."

She grabbed one of the pillows and flung it at her friend, who flung it back at her; and the simple creatures laughed.

Aurora re-tied in a bow the blue ribbon that closed the collar of her nightgown, and settled back again, with her arms out on the white satin quilt, flowered with roses and lined with blue. The two braids of her fair hair lay, one on each side, down her big, frank, undisguised bosom.

"You heaping dish of vanilla ice-cream!" said Hattie.

"You stick of rhubarb!" said Nell. "Stop, Hat! Behave! Do you suppose all the people we've invited to come and see us will come?"

"Doctor Chandler will come. And the Hunt girls will come. And Madame Bentivoglio I guess will come."

"Yes, and the Satterlees I'm sure will come. And Mrs. Seymour and her daughter that I said I'd help with the church fair. And the minister; what was it? Spottiswood."

"And won't the Mr. Hunt come that you seemed to be having such a good time with?"

"Yes, he'll come. He'll come to-morrow, I shouldn't wonder. Then that thinnish fellow with the hair like a hearth-brush—did you meet him? Mr. Fane, a great friend of the Fosses. He's coming to take us sight-seeing." She yawned a wide, audible yawn. "I only hope there'll be some fun in it. Confound you, Hat, go to bed!"

CHAPTER V

After the Fosses had helped the lessees of the Haughty Hermitage to make it habitable; found for them a coachman who had a little French and, when told what they desired to buy, would take them to the proper shops; provided them with a butler to the same extent a linguist, through whom Estelle, who in Paris had ambitiously studied a manual of conversation, could give her orders, they not unnaturally became less generous of their company.

But they were not permitted to make the intervals long between visits. The coachman wise in French was perpetually driving his spanking pair to their gates, delivering a message, and waiting to take them down for lunch or dinner with their joyfully welcoming and grateful friends. It was not at all unpleasant. It was not prized preciously,—there was too much of it and too urgently lavished,—but the lavishers were loved for it by two women neither dry-hearted nor world-hardened. Leslie fell into the way, when she was in town and had time, of running in to Aurora's, where it would be cheerful and she looked for a laugh.

Leslie, having reached, as she considered, years of discretion, thought fit to disregard the Florentine rule that young unmarried women must not walk in the streets unattended. She had balanced the two inconveniences: that of staying at home unless some one could go out with her, and that of being spoken to in the street, and decided that it was less unpleasant to hear a strange young man murmur as she passed, "Angel of paradise!" or "Beautiful eyes!"—no grosser insult had ever been offered her,—than to be bothered by a servant at her heels. The fact that she looked American and was understood to be following the custom of her own country secured her against any real misinterpretation.

It was chilly, Novemberish, and within the doors of Florentine domiciles rather colder, for some reason, than in the open air. The Fosses kept their house at a more human temperature than most people, but yet after years of Italy did not heat very thoroughly: one drops into the way of doing as others do, and grows accustomed to putting up with cold in winter. Leslie often expressed the opinion that in America people really exaggerate in the matter of heating their houses. Nevertheless, just for the joy of the eyes and, through the eyes, of the depressed spirit, she was glad to-day of the big fire dancing and crackling in Aurora's chimney-place.

The upstairs sitting-room, where the ladies generally sat, might look rather like a day nursery; yet after one had accepted it, with its chintz of big red flowers and green foliage, its rich strawberry rug and new gold picture-frames, it did seem to brighten one's mood. How think grayly amid that dazzle and glow any more than feel cold before that fire?

Leslie held her hands to the blaze, and with an amiable display of interest inquired of their affairs, the progress made in "getting settled." There was still a good deal to do of a minor sort.

Accounts were given her in a merry duet; purchases were shown; she was told all that had happened since they last saw her, who had called, whom they had been to see.

Casting about in her mind for further things to communicate, Aurora was reminded of a small grievance.

"I thought your friend Mr. Fane was going to come and take us sight-seeing," she said.

"Was it so arranged?"

"So I supposed."

"And he hasn't been?"

"Hide nor hair of him have we seen."

"I meant, hasn't he perhaps called while you were out?"

"He hasn't."

"Strange. It's not like him to be rude. But, then, he's not like himself these days. You must excuse him."

"What's the matter with him? Isn't he well?"

"He's not ill in the usual sense. If he were, we should make him have a doctor and hope to see him cured. It's worse than an illness. He is blue—chronically blue."

"Why?"

"Oh, he has reasons. But the same reasons, of course, would not have made a person of a different temperament change as he has changed."

"I don't suppose you want to tell us what the reasons are?" Very tentatively this was said.

"Why ... ordinarily one would not feel free to do so, but you are sure to hear about it before you have been here long. In Florence, you know, everybody knows everything about everybody else. Not always the truth, but in any case an interesting version. Oh, it behooves one to be careful in Florence if one doesn't wish one's affairs known and talked about. But in the case of Gerald there was nothing secret. Everybody knows him, everybody knew when he was engaged to Violet Van Zandt, everybody knows that she married some one else."

"Oh, the poor boy!"

"It's very simple, you see, commonplace as possible. But it's like the old story of the poem: an old story, yet forever new. And the one to whom it happens has his heart broken, one way or the other."

"And she married some one else?"

Both Aurora and Estelle were craning toward the speaker in a curiosity full of sympathy.

Leslie was used to seeing them hang on her lips. "I do love to hear you talk!" Aurora

candidly said. "It doesn't make any difference whether I know what you're talking about, it fascinates me, the way you say things!" And the compliment disposed Leslie to talk to them no otherwise than she talked with Lady Linbrook or Countess Costetti, leaving them to grasp or not her allusions and fine shades. She was by a number of years the youngest of the three drawn up to the fire; yet some advantage of fluency, collectedness, habit of good society—a neat effect altogether of authority, made her seem in a way the oldest.

"Violet," she began, like a grown person willing to indulge children with a story, "is Madame Balm de Brézé's sister. You saw Madame de Brézé that Friday evening at our house. Violet is very like her, only much younger and a blonde. Amabel is—let us call things by their names in the seclusion of this snug fireside—Amabel is scrawny; Violet was ethereal. Amabel is sharp-featured; Violet's face was delicate and clear-cut. I say *was*, because she has grown much stouter. We have known them since they first came to Florence, and have been friends without being passionately attached. They are Americans, but had lived in Paris since Violet was a baby. They came here, orphans, because it is cheaper. They used to live on the top floor of a stony old palace in Via de' Servi, where they painted fans on silk, sending them to a firm in Paris. Amabel did them exquisitely: shepherds and shepherdesses, corners of old gardens, Cupids—Watteau effects, veritable miniature work. The little sister was beginning to do them well, too; she painted only flowers. Amabel had no objection to Violet marrying Gerald. He was as far as possible from being a good match, but in those days both Amabel and Violet seemed to live in an atmosphere that excluded the consideration of things from a vulgar material point of view. Violet and Gerald were alike in that, and so very much alike in their superfine tastes and ways of thinking. *Nous autres* who live upon this earth wondered how they would keep the pot boiling in case of 'that not remote contingent, *la famille*.' Gerald has an income simply tiny. You would hardly believe how small. We supposed that now he would paint a little more than he ever has done with the idea of pleasing the general public and securing patronage. They were so much in love, anyhow, and made such an interesting pair, that one's old romantic feelings were gratified by seeing them together. They were to wait until she was twenty-one, when a crumb of money in trust for her would fall due. Then Amabel surprises us all by marrying De Brézé. Violet of course lives with them, and with them goes to Paris. And in Paris she becomes Madame Pfaffenheim. *Tout bonnement!*"

"Oh, the wretch, the bad-hearted minx!"

"No," said Leslie, reflectively. She turned from the warmth of the fire and let her eyes rest on the gray sky seen in wide patches through the three great windows, arched at the top and blocked at the bottom by wrought-iron guards, that admitted into the red and green room such very floods of light—"no," Leslie repeated. "One is the sort of person one is. The sin is to pretend. I don't believe Violet knew the sort of person she was until it came to the test. She thought, very likely, that she was all composed of poetry and fine sentiments and eternal love. She wasn't; and there it is. When she had the chance actually to choose, she preferred money, a fine establishment, luxury, and she took them. How ghastly if, with that nature concealed in her behind the pearl and pale roses, she had married poor Gerald! It's much better as it is, don't you agree with me? I call him fortunate beyond words."

"Well, of course; that's one way of looking at it."

"It's his way. Gerald knows just how fortunate he has been, and it's exactly that which makes him so miserable. At first, you understand, he could lay the entire blame on the De Brézés; he was sure they had in some mysterious way constrained her, and though he was angrily, tragically, suicidally wretched, it was one kind of woe—a clean, classic woe, I will call it. He believed it shared by her in the secret of her uncongenial conjugal life. '*Ich grolle nicht*,' he could say, and all that. But a year or two ago she came to Florence with Pfaffenheim on a visit to her sister. I don't know how Gerald felt, whether he tried to avoid her or tried to see her. That he saw her, however, is certain. She is perfectly happy, my dears, in her marriage! And that she should love Pfaffenheim, or be proud of him, is inconceivable. So her happiness rests entirely upon the fact of her riches and worldly consequence."

"Say what you please, I call her a nasty, mean thing!" exclaimed Aurora.

Leslie shrugged her shoulders, as if saying: "Have it your way; but a more philosophical view is possible."

"She was looking very beautiful," she went on. "Much more beautiful than before, but in such a different way! From diaphanous she has become opaque; from airy, solid. She brought a most wonderful wardrobe, and, kept in the background with her husband, two fat babies."

"I should think she would have been ashamed to come back here."

"Oh, no; not Violet. She was enchanted to show herself in her glory to those who remembered her in the modest plumage of her girlhood. Florence did not really like it, because she affected toward Florence the attitude of one who comes to it from places immeasurably grander. You would have thought Florence an amusing little hole where she long ago, by some accident, had spent a month or two. She found us quaint, provincial, old-fashioned. She was witty about us. She criticized us with a freedom and publicity that made her funnier to us than we were funny to her. It was not an endearing thing to do or a very intelligent one. It was, in fact, rather antipathetic."

"Antip—I call it the actions of a *bug!*"

"You can see how it all left Gerald. The Violet he cared for was obviously no more. Worse than that, she had probably never been. Comforting knowledge, isn't it, that for years you have treasured memories that had no reality to start from; that you have suffered agonies of love without any real object. Nauseous! Intolerable! A tragedy that is shown to have been all

along a farce! To a man of imagination, to a person as sincere as Gerald, you can see what it would mean. You can see what it would leave behind it."

"I should think he would just despise her, and shake it off, and forget her as she deserves."

"Your simple device, dear Aurora, is the one he adopted. But to have an empty hollow where your beautiful hoard of pure gold was stored is a thing it takes time to grow used to. He is not an unhappy lover now, certainly; but he is a man who has been robbed, and he has fallen into the habit of low spirits. It is a thousand pities his poor mother and sister could not have been spared to make a home for him. Being too much alone is bad for any one. He shuts himself in with his blues, and they are growing more and more confirmed. Love is a curious thing." Leslie said the latter separately and after a pause, as if from a particular case she had been led to reviewing the whole subject. "It complicates life so," she added, and rose to go.

They teased her to remain and lunch with them. But Leslie was suddenly more tired at the contemplation of life than she had been when she came. The total result of her call had not been to cheer her, for by an uncomfortable stirring within, as soon as she had finished, she was made to repent having talked to outsiders about things so personal, so private, regarding Gerald-Gerald, who was infinitely reserved. It seemed a crime against friendship. That somebody else would have been sure to tell his story did not excuse her.

Leslie's mood to talk was over for that morning and she went home, but not before she had been forced to take a bottle of perfume which she had carelessly picked up off Aurora's toilet-table, sniffed, and praised; also, lifted out of their vase, a bunch of orchids for her mother; and for Lily the box of sweets that had stood invitingly open on the sitting-room table.

Next time Aurora saw Gerald-it was on Viale Principe Amedeo-she waved to him.

He did not see it. He was just aware of a victoria coming down the middle of the street he was preparing to cross and of something fluttering, but that it concerned him he did not suspect.

Then suddenly the victoria, like a huge Jack-in-the-box, shot up a figure, and he recognized Mrs. Hawthorne standing at full height in the moving carriage, and waving both hands, as he must suppose, nobody else being near,-to him.

He lifted his hat. He saw her reach for the coachman and by touch make him aware that she wished to stop. The horses were pulled up. Mrs. Hawthorne, from the seat into which the jerk had thrown her, made beckoning signs to him, laughing the while, and calling, "Mr. Fane! Mr. Fane!"

He went to stand at the carriage-step.

"I thought," said Mrs. Hawthorne, "that you were going to come and take us sight-seeing."

"I thought I was," said Gerald, with that scant smile of his; "but I was not so fortunate as to find you at home."

It was true that he had gone to her door one afternoon, having previously caught a glimpse of her in the heart of the city, shopping.

"You mean to say you came?"

"You did not find my card?"

"No; but it's all right. This is Miss Madison-Mr. Fane. We are together. What have you got to do?"

Gerald looked as if the question had not been quite clear, and he waited for some amplification of it before he could answer.

"Have you got anything very important to do? Aren't you lonesome? Don't you want to jump in and come home with us? Wish you would."

Gerald smiled again in his remote way, and looked as if he knew, as any one would know, that this was not meant to be taken seriously.

"I have just seen a beautiful spectacle," he said, after a vague head-shake that thanked her shadowily for an unreal invitation "A game of *pallone*, which is the nearest to your football that boys have over here. Beautiful bronzed athletes at exercise, a delightful sight, statues in motion. I go to see them whenever I can.-The days are becoming very short, are they not?"

"Yes. Jump in and come home with us. Tell you what we'll do. I'll go down into the kitchen and make some soda biscuits that we'll have hot for supper-with maple syrup. We've had a big box of sugar come."

Gerald again smiled his civil, but joyless, smile, and after another vague head-shake that thanked, but eluded the question, he said: "They are very indigestible; hot bread is not good for the health. At least, that is what they tell us over here. We keep our bread two days before eating it, or longer. But I am afraid I am detaining you."

The horses were jingling their bits, frisking their docked tails. The driver, checking their restless attempts to start, was giving them smothered thunder in Italian. Gerald withdrew by a step from the danger to his shins.

"Oh, jump in!" said Mrs. Hawthorne for the third time. And because his choice lay between saying curtly, "Impossible!" and letting the impatient horses proceed, or else obeying, Gerald, who hated being rude to women, found himself irresolutely climbing in, just long enough, as he intended, to explain that he could not and must not go home with them to the hot biscuits and syrup.



"I thought," said Mrs. Hawthorne, "that you were going to come and take us sight-seeing"

The little third seat had been let down for him; his knees were snugly wedged in between those of the ladies. Aurora was beaming over at him; Estelle was beaming, too. Aurora's smile was a blandishment; Estelle's was a light. The horses were flying toward the Lungarno. And he gave up; he helplessly gave up trying to find an excuse for asking to be set down again and allowed to go his lonely way.

It might be entertaining, he tried to think, to see what they had done to the Hermitage. But no! That was very sure to be revolting. If the evening were to afford entertainment, it must be found in watching this healthy and unhampered being who, just as certain fishes color the water around them, seemed to affect the air in such a way that, coming near enough, you were forced to like her, without ceasing to think her the most impossible person that had ever found her way into cultivated society.

The carriage-wheels crunched gravel; the horses' hoofs rang on the pavement of a columned portico; the door was opened by a man in blue livery.

Entering the wide hall, they faced an ample double staircase, between the converging flights of which stood, closed, a great stately white-and-gold door.

Gerald, as bidden, followed the ladies up the stairs to the cozier sitting-room, where a fire, they hoped, had been kept up. In the beginning dimness of an early twilight he first saw the big red flowers and green, green leaves. He was left a moment alone while the ladies took off their hats, and he sent his eyes traveling around him, prepared really for something worse than they found, though the pictures on the wall called from him the gesture of trying to sweep away an unpleasant dream.

Aurora reappeared from her room in a business-like white apron.

"Now I'm going down to make the biscuit. Oh, no trouble. No trouble at all. I want them myself. I'm homesick for some food that tastes like home. Estelle will entertain you while I'm gone. I sha'n't be but a minute."

Estelle sat in a low arm-chair close to the fire.

Gerald, to whom it did not seem cold enough for a fire, took a seat nearer the windows, whence he could watch the fading sunset-end beyond garden and street, river and hill.

He would have cared less, no doubt, to make himself not too dull company for this stranger, had he known that there, before that fireplace, a few days before, she had been placed in possession of the most intimate facts of his humiliating destiny. Unsuspecting, in a mood rather more amiable than usual, he asked, by way of entering into conversation, whether she and her friend were not New-Englanders. It established the sense of a bond, however light, to find that they and he were almost townsmen. He had been born in Boston, or, at least, near it. His parents had owned a house in Charlestown, where he had lived till he was ten years old. They talked for a while of Boston.

He had heard a singular thing, he said, she might be able to tell him how true: that in Boston a new medical method had arisen by which the sick were said to be made well without the help of drugs. Mind cure, he believed it was called. It seemed very extraordinary, and rather interesting, if it were not all a fraud or a fable, that persons of the most prosaic, as these had been described to him, should go about professing to do for a fee the same thing that saints of old are recorded to have done through their mysterious powers. The subject had come into his mind—he went on making conversation—from recently re-reading a

book of George Sand's, *La Petite Fadette*, in which a cure is performed which seemed to him very similar. If she had not read the book, she must permit him to bring it for her perusal. He talked about the book.

A maid brought in a lighted lamp, and, as is the pleasant custom of the country, wished them a happy evening.

Very soon after it came Aurora, with a dab of flour on one cheek, which the kitchen fire had warmed to a deeper pink.

"There," she said, "they're all ready for the oven. When we took the house, all the stove we had was a big stone block thing with little square holes. The cook fanned them with a turkey-wing. But now we've got a range. Don't you want me to show you over the house? There'll be just time before supper."

"I'm afraid it's all dark," said Estelle. "Let me ring and have them light up. Think of a city house without gas!"

"No, they'd be too long. I can take a lamp."

She went for it to her dressing-room, and came back with one easy to carry, long in the stem and small in the tank, from which, to make it brighter, she had lifted off the shade. Gerald reached to take it from her, but she refused his help.

"The weight's nothing. I want you to be free to look around. Coming, Estelle?"

"I'll join you in a minute."

They went down the wide stairs side by side. She led through a door, at the right, as you entered the house, of the main door.

"Here's one of the parlors. We have four on this floor, between big and little. Four parlors and a dining-room. Doesn't that seem a good many for two lone women?"

The unshaded lamplight showed a crowd of furniture, modern, muffled, expensive, the lack of simplicity in design of which was further rendered dreadful to the artist by every device to make it still less simple, embroidered scarfs thrown over chair-backs, varicolored textiles depending from the mantel-shelf, drooping over the mirror, down pillows of every shape and tint piled in sofa-corners. Nothing was left undecorated. The waste-basket even wore a fat satin bow, like a pet poodle. Every horizontal surface was encumbered with knick-knacks.

"This is where we have people come when we don't know them very well," said Mrs. Hawthorne, hardly concealing her pride. "We couldn't ask the minister to come right upstairs, as we did you. How do you—"

"Mrs. Hawthorne," came hurriedly from Gerald, "I beg you will not ask me how I like it! It is a peculiarity like-like not liking oysters. I can't bear to be asked how I like things."

"How funny! But, then, you're different from other people, aren't you? That's what makes you so interesting."

She preceded him into the next room, which was not so bad as the first for the reason that, as she explained, "they hadn't yet finished with it." He seized the occasion almost eagerly to praise the chairs.

"We found them here when we came," she informed him. "There was a good lot of furniture of this big, bare sort; clumsy, I call it. We stored some of it in the top rooms, but Leslie Foss begged me so to let these stay that we just had the seats covered over with this new stuff and left them."

When she opened the next door and stepped into the space beyond it seemed as if her lamp had dwindled to a taper, the room was so vast. It had nine great windows, five in an unbroken row on the front of the house the entire width of which it occupied. Aurora's light was faintly reflected in a polished floor; it twinkled in the myriad motionless drops of two great crystal chandeliers.

"Ah," exclaimed Gerald in a long sigh. "This is superb!"

"Yes," she said, "but you might as well try to furnish all outdoors. You see that we haven't done anything beyond putting up curtains. We never use it. All those chairs along the walls are going to be regilded when we can get them to come and fetch them. Things move awfully slowly over here, don't they, even if you're willing to pay."

"What a ball-room!"

"Yes. Wish we could give a ball; but we only know about a dozen people. We've got to wait till we know enough at least for two sets of a quadrille."

She was moving across the wide floor, holding her torch-like lamp high the better to illumine the great pale, silent emptiness. No longer hearing his footsteps echoing behind hers, she looked over her shoulder; whereupon he hurriedly joined her, without explaining why he had lagged.

"This," she said, as turning to the left they passed from the ball-room into a small oval room the domed ceiling of which was all tenderly bepainted with Cupids and garlands—"this is almost my favorite."

She set down her lamp on a table of rose-tinged marble, and dropped for a minute on to a little rococo settee.

"The things in here we found just as you see them."

"So I imagined."

"All but the ornaments on the mantel."

"Very astute in me; I divined that, too."

"We liked it, so we left it. Pretty, ain't it? Oh, beg pardon!" She blushed and looked at him sidelong, laughing. "That was a bad break! That came mighty near to being the forbidden question how you like it. All the same, it is pretty, *is it not?*"

"Extremely. Extremely pretty."

"There are going to be some tapestries presently. Oh, don't be afraid! Not those old worsted things full of maggots, but beautiful new ones, painted by hand, all in these same

delicate colors. A story in four scenes, one for each panel. The 'Fountain of Love' is the subject. It sounds to me like something Biblical, Sunday-schoolish, but Mr. Hunt says, no, *it is not.*"

"Mr. Hunt—"

"The nephew, Charlie. You know him, don't you? He's getting them done for me. He's a great friend of mine. He's helped me a lot to buy things."

"Did he help you to buy the pictures?"

"Yes. He knows the dealers, and gets them to make fair prices. I think it perfectly wonderful how cheap everything is over here. He helped me to buy these, too." She lifted the chain of pink corals, graduated from the size of a pea to that of a hazelnut, which with their delicate living color brightened her winter dress. "I can't say, though," she dropped, "that I found these particularly cheap. Hush!" she broke off. "It's Hat! Quick!" she whispered, "let's get behind the door and say 'Boo!' as she comes in."

Amazingly, incredibly to him, this grown woman appeared about to ensconce herself.

"But won't it make her jump?" he asked, supposing it to be Miss Madison for whom the little surprise was intended.

"Of course it'll make her jump. No matter how often I do it, she jumps. That's the fun."

"Mrs. Hawthorne, please!" he begged nervously. "As a very special favor to me, don't! It would make me jump, too-horribly."

She stood listening while the footsteps turned away and faded fruitlessly. With a look of disappointment, as at opportunity missed, she took up her lamp and moved on.

"And here," she said, leaving the oval room by the door opposite to the one they had come through, "is the dining-room. Which takes us back to the hall and completes the circle."

This room, of a fine new Pompeian red, was lighted. The table was set; a butler busied himself at the sideboard. Gerald's eye was caught by the brightness of a china basket piled high with sumptuous fruit, and similarly caught the next moment by the pattern of the curtains, in which the same rampant red lion was innumerable repeated on a ground of wide-meshed lace.

"Wouldn't it be a lovely house to give a party in?" she asked him. "Isn't it exactly right to give a party in? There are two big spare chambers upstairs at the back that would do, one for gentlemen, one for ladies, to lay off their things in. No use; we shall have to give a party."

Having returned upstairs, he was without any false delicacy shown her bedroom and her friend's bedroom and their dressing-rooms, as well as given a peep into the two spare rooms, as yet incompletely furnished, that he might get an idea how beautiful these were going to be when finally industry and good taste had been brought to bear on them.

At dinner, which Mrs. Hawthorne seemed to have a fixed preference for calling supper, it was Gerald who did most of the talking. The ladies abandoned the lead to him, and listened with flattering attention while he called into use his not too sadly rusted social gifts. He related what he knew about the Indian Prince whose monument at the far end of the Cascade had roused their interest. He explained the Misericordia. He asked if they had noticed the wonderful figures of babies over the colonnade of the Foundling Hospital, and told them how the "infantile asylum," as he rendered it, was managed. He tried to amuse them by the episodes from which certain streets in Florence have derived their names, Street of the Dead Woman, Street of the Dissatisfied, Burg of the Blithe.

Whenever he stopped there was silence, which he hastened again to break.

"You talk like Leslie," suddenly remarked Mrs. Hawthorne.

But now came the hot biscuits and the syrup, borne in by the mystified butler at the same time as the more conventional dessert prepared by the cook.

Aurora smiled at the biscuits' beautiful brown and, having broken one to test its lightness, nodded in self-approval.

"They're all right. Now you want to put on lots of butter," she said. "Here, that's not near enough," she reproved him. She reached over, took his biscuit, buttered it as she thought it should be buttered, and returned it to his plate; then, while eating, watched him eat with eyes that expressed her simple love of feeding up any one, man or animal, so lean as he.

There had been shining in Aurora's eyes all this evening, when they rested on him, a look of great kindness, the consequence of knowing how badly life had treated him, and desiring that compensation should be made. He could not fail to feel that warm ray playing over his bleak surface. He could not but think what nice eyes Mrs. Hawthorne had.

When he asked her if she knew how to make many other such delicious things it became her turn to talk. Estelle here joined in, and they exalted the fare of home, affecting the fiction of having found nothing but frogs' legs, cocks' combs, and snails to feed upon since they struck Italy. Blueberry-pie—did Mr. Fane remember it? Fried oysters! Buckwheat cakes!

He said he remembered, but did not confess to any great emotion.

"You wait till Thursday," said Aurora. "It's Thanksgiving. We're going to have chicken-pie, roast turkey, mince-pie, squash-pie, everything but cranberry sauce. We can't get the cranberries. Will you come?"

In haste and confusion he said, alas! it would be impossible, wholly impossible, intimating that he was a man of a thousand engagements and occupations.

But after an interval, and talk of other things, he inquired, with an effect of enormous discretion, whether he might without too great impertinence ask who was coming to eat that wonderful Thanksgiving dinner which her own hands, he must suppose, would largely have to prepare.

"Just the Fosses. All the Fosses."

"Ah, Mr. Foss will feel agreeably like the great Turk."

"You mean he'll be the only man? I guess he can stand it. We thought of asking Charlie Hunt, too, but he's English and would seem an outsider at this particular gathering. Wish you'd come. You're such a friend of theirs. Come on, come!"

"Mrs. Hawthorne, you are so very unusually kind. If you would leave it open, and then when the day arrives, if I should find I could do so without-without--"

"Oh, yes. Come if you can. And be sure, now, you come!"

They were still sitting at the table--dinner had been retarded by the circumstantial round of the house--when music resounding through the echoing rooms stopped the talk.

It was the piano across the hall that had been briskly and powerfully attacked. The "Royal March" of Italy was played, first baldly, then with manifold clinging and wreathing variations.

Aurora signed to the servant to open the dining-room door. All three at the table sat in silence till the end of the piece.

Gerald wondered what the evening caller could be who made the moments of waiting light to himself in this fanciful manner.

"It's Italo," said Mrs. Hawthorne, rising. "I call him Italo because I never can remember his other name. Come, let's go into the parlor."

It was all rosily lighted. Candles set on the piano at each side of the music-rest enkindled glossy high lights on the nose-bump and forehead bosses of Signor Ceccherelli, who at Mrs. Hawthorne's appearance sprang up to salute. She reached him her hand, over which he deeply bowed.

"You're to play all those lovely things I'm so fond of," she directed him. "'The Swallow and the Prisoner,' 'The Butterflies,' 'The Cascade of Pearls.' And don't forget the 'Souvenir of Saint Helena.' Then the one of the soldiers marching off and the soldiers coming home again. All our favorites. Mr. Fane-- Are you acquainted with each other? Italo--you'll have to tell him your name yourself. All I can think of is Checkerberry."

"Yes, yes, we are acquainted," said Gerald, hurriedly. "We have seen each other many times. *Come sta?*"

"Oh, he can speak English."

"A leetle," Ceccherelli modestly admitted.

"He understands everything I say. We have great conversations. He comes every evening when he isn't engaged to play somewhere else."

She went to sit on the gorgeous brocade sofa, arranging herself amid the multitude of cushions so as to listen long and happily. Estelle preferring a straight-backed chair, Gerald took the other corner of Aurora's sofa. Immediately Ceccherelli opened with "Souvenir de Sainte-Hélène." Aurora, respectful to the artist, talked in a whisper.

"He's so talented! You simply couldn't count the pieces he can play. We do enjoy it so! We haven't anything in particular to do evenings if no one calls. We don't often go out. We haven't been here long enough to know many people. And aside from his magnificent playing, the little man is such good company! We do have fun! There, I mustn't talk, I'm keeping you from listening."

Gerald settled back, too, as if to listen, but to do the contrary was his fixed purpose, even though the pianist, at last appreciated, put into his playing so much feeling and force. Gerald's eyes went wandering among the clutter of bric-à-brac, from a green bronze lizard to a mosaic picture of Roman peasants, from a leaning tower of Pisa to a Sorrento box. Then they rose to the paintings. He closed them.

The music was describing a hero's death-bed, besieged by dreams of battle, at moments so noisy that Gerald had to open his eyes again for a look of curiosity at the person who could produce so much sound. As he watched him and his nose, like the magnified beak of a hen,--the nose of a man who loves to talk,--he tried a little to imagine those merry evenings spoken of by Aurora. The fellow looked almost ludicrously solemn at this moment. He took himself and his art right seriously, there could be no doubt of it. His face was a map of the emotions expressed by the music, and wore, besides, according to his conception of the part, the look of a great man unacclaimed by his own generation.

Dio! what an ugly little man!

Gerald closed his eyes again.

The last cannon was fired over the hero's grave, the music stopped. The ladies applauded. Gerald, smiling sickly, clapped his hands, too, without, it might have been observed, making any noise to speak of. Estelle went to the piano to compliment the player more articulately, and loitered there, practising her French while he perfected himself in English, by mutual aid.

"Italo," Mrs. Hawthorne interrupted them, "play that lovely thing of your own now--you know, the one we're so crazy about, that by and by turns into a waltz."

Without laying upon the ladies the tiresome necessity of pressing him, the composer plunged into this masterpiece, and Gerald sat back again, wondering what the little man thought of hearing himself called Italo by the fair *forestiera*. He was dimly troubled, knowing that there is no hope of an Italian ever really understanding the ways of being and doing of American women, and especially an Italian of that class. But then it would be equally difficult to make this American woman understand just how the Italian might misunderstand her.

He permitted himself a direct look at her, where she rested among the cushions, with eyes closed again and a smile diffused all over her face; her whole person, indeed, permeated with the essence of a smile. Extraordinary that, loving music so much, one could so much love such music.

She surprised him by opening her eyes and whispering:

"Don't you want to smoke?" showing that for a moment at least she had not been thinking of music. "You can, if you want to. Here, we've got some. Don't go and think, now, that Estelle and I have taken to smoking. Heavens above! We sent out for them the other night when Charlie Hunt was here."

She reached across the table near her and handed him a box of cigarettes.

He was very glad to light one. To smoke is soothing, and he felt the need of it. Added to his vague distress at the spectacle of such familiarity from these ladies to that impossible little Italian, a ferment of resentment was disquieting him apropos of Hunt-those works of art of which Hunt had facilitated the purchase.

Hunt, of a truth, ever since the first mention of him that evening had been like a fish bone in Gerald's throat.

He checked his thoughts, recognizing that it is not sane or safe to permit oneself to interpret the conduct of a person whom one does not like. The chances of being misled are too great. He uprooted a suspicion dishonoring to both.

Let it be taken for assured, then, that Hunt had in this case no interest to forward beyond his love for making himself important. After all, if the ladies liked bad pictures!... Yet it was a shame that he should frequent their house, be accepted as their friend, invited by them, made much of in their innocent and generous way, then should make fun of them. Permissible, if you choose, to make fun of funny people, but you must not at the same time make use of their kindness. A precept for the perfect gentleman, in Florence or elsewhere: You can make fun of persons, or you can cultivate their friendship, but not both things at once. And Gerald, without proof, felt certain that Charlie Hunt spread good stories about Aurora.

Mrs. Innes, his mother's old friend, meeting him at Vieusseux's reading-room a few days before, had detained him for a chat, and in the course of it asked him if he knew this Mrs. Hawthorne of whom the Fosses appeared so fond. An amusing type, she must be. Seeing that statue of the she-wolf and little Romulus and Remus at the foot of Vial de' Colli, it seemed she had asked what it meant, and said she didn't believe it.

It indefinably hurt him, incommoded some nerve of envenomed sensitiveness-yes, annoyed him like sand in his salad, to think of his country-woman, with the good faith of a dog in her face, so quoted as to make her ridiculous by a fellow wanting in human vitals, like Hunt.

He would have liked, had it been possible, to ask a few frank questions of Mrs. Hawthorne, and find out more certainly what he should think. He would have liked to warn her against trusting her enormous ignorance to one who would have so little good-humor and protectiveness toward that baby-eyed giant-child. Really, instinct ought to teach her better whom to make her confident as respected that grave affair.

Singularly, when next the music stopped, Mrs. Hawthorne, after she with true politeness had taken the box of cigarettes to the other of her guests, spoke of Hunt. Perhaps her thoughts, too, had gone straying, and mysteriously encountered some straying thought of his.

"Charlie Hunt," she said, "is coming on Sunday morning to take us to the picture-galleries. We're going to play hooky from church. His work, don't you see, keeps him at the bank on week days till everything of that sort is closed."

"Mrs. Hawthorne," cried Gerald and sat up in unaffected indignation, while mustache, beard, hair, everything about him appeared to bristle, "I thought I had been engaged to take you sight-seeing! I thought it was to be *my* honor and privilege. Mrs. Hawthorne, my dear friend, if you do not wish deeply to hurt me, deeply to hurt me, you will write to Mr. Hunt at once, this evening, and I will post the letter, that you have thought better of that immoral plan for Sunday morning, and are going to church like a good Christian woman. And tomorrow, Mrs. Hawthorne, at whatever time will be convenient for you, I will come and take you to the Uffizi."

CHAPTER VI

And so because, in his uncalled-for chivalry, he had made himself guide to a lady in a ball-room, Gerald, one thing leading to another, was once more committed to serving as a guide in Florence.

He had filled the part so often, at the appeal of one good friend and another, that he had sworn never again to be caught, cajoled, or hired. He could have hated the Ghiberti doors had such a thing not been impossible. He did rather hate the Santissima Annunziata. And now it was all to do over again.

It might be adduced, as a mitigation of his misfortune, that this was different.

This was sometimes very different.

A singular thing about acquaintance with Mrs. Hawthorne was that it had in a sense no beginning. One started fairly in the middle. No sooner did one meet her than one seemed to have known her long and know her well. Most people found this so. One therefore readily slid into speaking one's mind to Mrs. Hawthorne, dispensing with the formal affectation of a perfect respect for her every act and opinion, secure in the recognition that anger, sulkiness, the self-love that easily takes umbrage, were as far from her breezy sturdiness as the scrupulosities of an anxious refinement.

That one could say what one pleased to Mrs. Hawthorne put more life into intercourse with her, naturally, than there would have been if, with her limitations, one had been forced to be entirely and tamely circumspect.

"Mrs. Hawthorne," cried Gerald, "do me the very real favor, will you, like a dear good woman, of not calling the most venerable of the primitives Simma Bewey!"

It was astonishing what things Gerald Fane could say without losing his effect of a complete, even considerate politeness.

"But that's the way it's written," said Mrs. Hawthorne.

"You will pardon the liberty I take of contradicting you; it is not. It gives me goose-flesh. Cimabue!"

"Very well. I'll try to remember. But it doesn't matter what I call him; his Madonna is no beauty. Do you mean to tell me there was a time when people admired faces like that? She gives me a pain."

"That is not the point; her beauty is not the point. Besides, she is beautiful."

"Oh, very well. If you'd like to have me look like her, I can."

She tipped her head to one side, lengthened her jaw, pointed her hand, and by a knack she had for mimicry made herself vaguely resemble the large-eyed, small-mouthed, pale and serious Lady of Heaven before whose portrait by the old master this dialogue took place.

"It is really a very poor joke, Mrs. Hawthorne," Gerald said, with mouth distorted by the conflict between laughter and disgust. "To travesty a dignified and sacred thing is a very poor pastime. Of course I laugh. Miss Madison laughs, and I laugh. I think very poorly of it, all the same. You would do much better to frame your mind to an attitude of respect and try to understand. I can't say, though, that I think it unnatural you should not at first appreciate the earliest old masters. We will go to look at something more obvious."

"Wait a moment. These fascinate me, they're so queer and so awful. I tell you those old codgers of the time you say these belong to had strong nerves and stomachs. All these wounds and dripping blood and hollow ribs and criminals being boiled in caldrons, and having their heads cut off and arrows shot into them!... I guess you're right; we'd better move on to something more cheerful."

Miss Madison was never guilty of the foolishness that fell from Mrs. Hawthorne's gross and unconcerned ignorance. Miss Madison took modesty and tact with her, as well as keenness of eye, when she went to picture-galleries and museums. But this, strange to say, did not make her the more acceptable companion of the two to their guide. What Miss Madison did never seemed so important as what her larger, weightier friend did. The one personality to a singular extent eclipsed the other, who was accustomed to this to the point of not feeling it. A laughing lack of conceit in both women marvelously simplified their relation.

Gerald, in choosing pictures for their enjoyment, avoided with a conscientiousness of very special brand to halt with them before paintings fit to please their unpracticed eyes but which he did not think worthy of admiration. He likewise passed Venuses, Eves, Truths, all nudities, without remark or pause, acquainted of old with the simple-minded prudery of certain Americans, and not disrespectful to it.

"Mrs. Hawthorne," he said, "to be ignorant is no sin. One may have been doing beautiful, gracious, useful and merciful things while others were cultivating the arts and sciences. But ignorance on any subject is not in itself beautiful or desirable. One should therefore not be complacent in it, proud of it. With a little humility, Mrs. Hawthorne, what can one not hope to accomplish? Now, please, Mrs. Hawthorne, drop all preconception, and use your eyes. Look at that angel."

"Do you mean to tell me I could live long enough to think that angel beautiful? With those Chinese eyes?... Give it up, my friend, why do you want to bother?"

"Because, Mrs. Hawthorne, you have essentially a good brain. You are at the back of all a very intelligent woman—"

"Go 'way with you! You know that if you feed me taffy enough you can make me see and

say anything you want."

"-a very intelligent woman. And I am so constituted that I simply cannot go on living in the same world with a really intelligent woman-my friend, besides-who does not see the difference between Raphael and Guido Reni, and likes one exactly as well as the other. I ache to change it!"

"Go ahead. We don't want you to die. But I'm afraid it'll take surgery. You'll have to drill a hole in my thick head to get the things you mean into that good brain so full of real intelligence."

"If you wouldn't be flippant!"

"What's that?"

"If you would bring reverence to the study of things done by great people, and that people of great taste and learning have collected for our joy and improvement!"

"See here! Don't you want me to have a little fun while we do Florence? I don't see how I can stand it, if we're to be solemn as those old saints with mouldy green complexions."

"We're not to be solemn. I have done these galleries solemnly times enough, Heaven knows. But we're to be attentive, respectful, of an open and receptive mind. We're not to say outrageous things in the mere desire to shock our guide, or tease him."

"You don't mean to say you think that I-?"

"It's not funny."

"It mayn't be funny-but it's fun! Go on and lecture. You haven't got a bit of fun in you."

"Yes, I have!" said Gerald, and with a creeping smile-grudging at first, then brighter-looking Mrs. Hawthorne in the eye, while such fun as lived in him traveled over the bridge of their glances, and she was permitted to get a glimpse of his underlying relish.

"All I ask of you, Mrs. Hawthorne," he said, finally, "is that you will not let your innocence on these subjects appear when you are with others. I don't say pretend. Just keep still, be silent! It does not matter when you are with me. When you are with me I beg of you to be yourself. But with others.... You would become the talk of the town, and-" he shuddered, "I should most horribly hate it!"

"Mrs. Hawthorne," he said, with a quiver of annoyance in his voice a few days later, "did I not implore you not to let it be known in Florence how you are affected by the proudest treasures of her world-famous collections?"

"Yes, you told me. But I didn't promise."

"And now I am asked-with laughter and mockery-whether I have seen Mrs. Hawthorne giving an imitation of a Madonna by Simma Bewey, and heard Mrs. Hawthorne on the subject of G. Ottow and Others."

"Didn't you say-with laughter? Well, then, it's all right. Don't you care. I just got to training and did it to make them a little sport. Didn't they tell you about my Native of Italy eating Macaroni?"

"Mrs. Hawthorne, you are just a bad big school-girl-a bad big school-girl-"

"Hark, from the tomb!" said Mrs. Hawthorne, in lieu of anything more scintillating.

"A bad big school-girl, and I will have nothing more to do with you. If you delight in being the talk of the town, all you have to do is allow your friend Mr. Hunt in his spare hours to take you to see such things as I have not yet had the honor of showing you."

"Blessed if I-Look here, you aren't mad in earnest? Sooner'n lose you, I won't say another word. There! I've been Tchee-mah-boo-eh's Madonna for the last time. Don't be cross with little T. T.-Talk of the Town!"

"If you had any discrimination, any reticence ..."

"No reticence? Does that mean can't keep anything to myself? You don't know me!"

"You even tell your age."

"You aren't going to find fault with me for *that*?"

"Yes. At your age one should know better. It is part of your general and too great frankness."

They upon occasions came near quarreling, but not seriously, her disposition to quarrel was so small. Yet, two could not be outspoken and one of them irritable, and those rocks never even be grazed.

She unwarily enlarged to him one day upon her disappointment in Florence. By this time, she said, she was growing used to it, she didn't notice so much the things she didn't like. But at first, with her expectation high, her imagination inflamed by the Judge's and Antonia's eloquence, the narrow streets, in some of them no sidewalks even, the gloomy bars at the windows, the muddy river with the dirty old houses huddled on the bank, the stuffy churches with the average height of the Italian populace marked on the pillars by a dubious grindy brown tint, the dreadful beggars, the black fingernails, the smells....

"Mrs. Hawthorne!" came from Gerald, who with difficulty had let her go on thus far, "those were all you noticed, were they? In the most wonderful city in the whole world, those are all you find to talk about! The narrow streets, the beggars, the smells. Mrs. Hawthorne-" he nearly trembled with the effort to keep calm, "this is obviously not the place for you. You should have gone to ... to Switzerland! Instead of a sunburned hill-side, with sober silver olives and solemn black cypresses, and a pair of beautiful calm white oxen plowing, you would have seen a nice grass-green pasture, at the foot of blinding peaks, cut by an arsenic-green stream, on whose bank a red and white cow feeding! Then among the habitations all would have been well-regulated, the churches swept, perhaps even ventilated, the people washed, clean aprons, clean caps, no beggars, no disorder, no crimes. And there would have been no disturbing manifestations of genius, either; no troublesome masterpieces or other

evidences of a little fire in the blood. It would have suited you perfectly."

"I guess you mean that to be cutting, don't you?"

"Let me try to tell you how much I liked New York, when I went back there some years ago after an absence of ten or eleven years. I had some idea, you know, of perhaps returning to live in America. Well, I shivered. I shut my eyes. I held my ears. I fled. I remained just the time I was forced to by the affairs of my poor mother and, as I tell you, I fled!"

"Why, what's the matter with New York?"

"I will tell you what is the matter with New York, with Boston, with all the places in America that I have seen again since I was grown up--"

"No! Stop! Don't say anything against America. It's the one way to make me mad.-I didn't know you felt the same way about Florence. You aren't an Italian, are you? It's because we're both alike Americans that we sit here fighting so chummily."

CHAPTER VII

Lending her spacious front room for the Christmas bazaar in aid of the church, and beholding it full of bustle and brightness, was the thing that brought to the acute stage Mrs. Hawthorne's longing to see her whole house the scene of some huge good time: she sent out innumerable invitations to a ball. Mrs. Foss's card was inclosed with hers. It was a farewell party given for Brenda, whose day of sailing was very near. The frequent inquiry how Brenda should be crossing the ocean so late in the year met with the answer that her traveling companions had a brother whose wedding had been timed thus awkwardly for them.

On the morning of the day before the ball Gerald came to see Mrs. Hawthorne. He was still intrusting the servant with his message when Aurora, leaning over the railing of the hallway above, called down to him, "Come right upstairs!"

He was aware of unusual activities all around—workmen, the sound of hammering, housemaids plying brooms and brushes. Leslie Foss, with her hat on, looked from the dining-room and said, "Hello, Gerald!" too busy for anything more. Fräulein seemed to be with her, helping at something.

The great central white-and-gold door, to-day open, permitted a glimpse, as he started up the stairs, of a man on a step-ladder fitting tall wax-candles into one of the great chandeliers. From unseen quarters floated Estelle's voice, saying, "*Ploo bah! Nong, ploo hoe!*"

Mrs. Hawthorne met him at the head of the stairs. The slight disorder of her hair, usually so tidy, pointed to unusual exertions on her part, also. Her face was flushed with excitement and, to judge by her wreathing smiles, with happiness.

"I saw you coming," she greeted him. "*Riverisco! Beata Lei! Mamma mia!* And do you know how I saw you? Come here."

She led the way to the back, where the window-door stood open on to the roof of the portico, which formed a terrace.

"See? I've had it glassed in for to-morrow night. We couldn't say we hadn't plenty of rooms before, and plenty of room in them. That's just the trouble: there aren't any nooks in this big, square house. So I've made one. This is Flirtation Alcove. Here a loving couple can come to cool off after dancing and look up at the stars together. Oh, it's going to be so pretty! You can't tell anything about it as it looks now; I've only got these few things in it. But the gardeners are going to bring all sorts of tall plants and flowers in pots. Just wait till to-morrow night!"

"You are very busy, I am afraid, Mrs. Hawthorne. I ought not to take your time."

"Can't you sit down a minute?"

"I have come to ask a favor."

"I guess I can say it's granted even before you ask."

"I should like to retract my refusal of your very kind invitation for to-morrow evening. I have explained to you my weak avoidance of crowds. I have determined to overcome it in this case, and I want your permission to bring a friend."

"That? How can you ask? Bring ten! Bring twenty! Bring as many as you've got! As for coming yourself, I'm tickled to death that you've reconsidered."

"It's not quite as simple as it seems, Mrs. Hawthorne. I shall have to tell you more."

At her indication, he took the other half of the little dumpling sofa which had seemed to her an appropriate piece of furniture for Flirtation Alcove, and which, with a rug on the floor, formed so far its only decoration. In the clear, bare morning light of outdoors, which bathed them, she still looked triumphantly fresh, but he looked tired.

"It is Lieutenant Giglioli for whom I have come to beg an invitation. You perhaps know whom I mean."

"Let me see. I can't tell. Quite a few officers have been introduced, but I never can get their names."

"Hasn't Mrs. Foss or Leslie ever spoken of him?"

"Not so far as I can remember. In what way do you mean?"

"They evidently have not." He seemed to be given pause by this and need to gather force from reflection before going on, as he did after a moment, overcoming his repugnance. "He is the reason for poor Brenda being packed off to America."

"Oh, is that it?"

"He came to see me last evening and spent most of the night talking of her. We were barely acquainted before; but he knew I am a close friend of the Fosses, and in that necessity to ease their hearts with talk which Italians seem to feel he chose me. I felt sorry for him."

"She's turned him down?"

"No; she loves him."

Again Gerald stopped, as after making a communication of great gravity. Mrs. Hawthorne, listening with breathless interest, made no sound that urged him to go on. The fact he had announced seemed solemn to both alike, with the vision floating between them of Brenda's white-rose face and deer's eyes, the feeling they had in common that Brenda, for indefinable reasons, was not like ordinary mortals, and that what she felt was more significant, more important.

"But he has nothing beside his officer's pay," Gerald went on when the surprise of his revelation had been allowed time to pass, "and she on her side has nothing but what her parents might give her, who, you probably know, have no great abundance. His proposals

were made to them, as is the custom in this country, and have been formally declined."

He left it to her to appreciate the situation created by this, and, while thinking on his side, ran the point of the slender cane which he had not abandoned round and round the same figure of the rug-pattern at their feet.

"They are both too poor. I see," said Mrs. Hawthorne; but added quickly, as if she had not really seen: "It seems sort of funny, though, doesn't it, to let that keep them, if they're fond of each other?"

"Oh, it's not that. However fond, they couldn't marry without her bringing her husband a fixed portion. It is the law in this country, in the case of officers of the army,--to keep up the dignity of that impressive body, you understand. In the case of a lieutenant the *dote*, or dowry, must be forty thousand francs. I learned the exact sum for the first time last night."

"How much is that? Let me see,"--Mrs. Hawthorne did mental arithmetic, rather quickly for a woman,--"eight thousand dollars. And the Fosses can't give it."

"Of their ability to give it if they wished to I am no judge. I dare say they could, though with their son John going before long to hang out his shingle, as they call it, I doubt if it could be without bleeding themselves. But they are not convinced that the sacrifice ought to be made." He frowned at the pattern on the rug, and suddenly cut at it impatiently with his stick. "It is a singular story, in which everybody is right and the result wrong, horribly wrong!"

"Oh, dear me!" sighed Mrs. Hawthorne, feeling with him even before understanding.

"I ought perhaps to say," he corrected, "everybody is good and well-meaning, but has been unwise. And everybody now has to pay."

"I've thought right along that the Fosses had some reason for not being very happy," said Mrs. Hawthorne, "and I guessed it was something about Brenda. But they never said anything, and I didn't try to make out. Brenda doesn't take to me, somehow, as the others do. I'm not her kind, of course; but I do adore her from afar. She's so beautiful! She's like a person in a story-book, who at the end dies, looking at the sunset over the sea, or else marries the prince."

"Yes, Brenda is wonderful."

"I never should take her for an American."

"She's not like one, and yet she is. She has grown up in this country and breathed in its ideas and feelings till she even looks Italian. Her parents are the sort of Americans that fifty years of foreign countries wouldn't budge; but they began later. Still, it is because Brenda is American, after all, that cruelties are being committed. Her family have taken it for granted that one of them couldn't really be in love with an Italian, least of all that joke, a dapper and decorative Italian officer that a girl buys at a fixed price for her husband. And Brenda can't say to them: 'But I am. I am in love with just such a man. The happiness of my life depends upon your finding the vulgar sum of money with which to buy him for me.' Because of the American-ness all round, Brenda can't say that to them, and because she doesn't say it, they are in doubt, they only half apprehend, they don't understand. The one thing they are sure of is that to marry a foreigner is a mistake. And the one safe thing they see to do, when Brenda's face, combined with her entire reserve toward them, has begun to torment them seriously, is to send her away where, if the truth be that she mysteriously is 'interested in' an Italian, the change of scene may help to put him out of her head."

"So that's why they're sending her home!"

"There are no better or dearer people in the world, kind, true, just; but"--Gerald held in, and showed how much he hated to make any sort of reservation--"in this they have been to blame. They bring growing girls to Italy, where, such is their confidence in I don't know what quality supposed to be inherent and to produce immunity from love of Italian men, they never dream that there might happen to them an Italian son-in-law."

He gave her a moment to realize how rash this was; then hurried, as if wishing to get through as quickly as possible with the disagreeable, if not disgraceful, task of criticizing his friends and of gossiping:

"During the progress of the affair Mrs. Foss lets all go on as the little affairs and flirtations of her own youth were allowed to go on at home. She likes her daughters to be admired. It is only proper they should make conquests, have beaux. Leslie has had flirtations with Italians as well as with others, and come out of them without impairing that sense of humor which permits her to see as funny that one should succumb to the attractions of one of those only half-understood men, who may either be playing a comedy of love while in truth pursuing a fortune, or, if in earnest, are rather alarming, with the hint of jealous ferocity in their eyes. With Mrs. Foss's knowledge, Brenda, during a whole summer at the seaside, receives Giglioli's letters, written at first, or partly, in English, which he is learning with her help. With this excuse of English, it is a correspondence and courtship *dans toutes les règles*. Brenda is not asked by an American mother to show her letters or his. Giglioli, with his traditions, could not have imagined such a thing if the parents were unwilling to receive him as a suitor. Brenda herself--one will never know about Brenda, how it began, what she thought or hoped. She is very young; no doubt she did hope. Children seldom know much about their parents' means. She very likely thought hers could make her the present of a dowry, as they had made her other presents. But when she discovered their attitude toward the whole matter, with dignity and delicacy she let all be as they desired, incapable of pressing them to tax their resources to give her a thing their prejudice is so strongly set against. They did what they thought best, and have hung in doubt ever since as to whether it was best; for though Brenda gives her confidence to none of them, and they do not press her to give it, with that respect for a child's liberty which is also American, they are growing more and more uneasy with the suspicion that it was serious on her part, too. They love her

extraordinarily, and she has always dearly loved them. They show their love by protecting her youth from a step she may repent. She shows hers by being strong, poor love, and trying not to grieve them with the revelation of her heart. And they are making one another wretched."

For a moment Mrs. Hawthorne had nothing to say, busy with pondering what she had heard. "I don't see how, if she really loves this Italian, she could give him up so gracefully," she finally said.

"She has not given him up, Mrs. Hawthorne," said Gerald. "Believe me, she has not. She has some plan, some dream, for bringing about the good end in time without aid from her parents. I am sure of it. No, she has not given him up." He had before him, vivid in memory, the image of Brenda in the little church, and was looking at that, though his eyes were on Mrs. Hawthorne's friendly and attentive face. "She is at the wonderful hour of her love," he said, "when the world is transfigured and life lifted above the every-day into regions of poetry; when the simple fact of his existence justifies the plan of creation, when to wait a hundred years for him would seem no more difficult than to wait a day, and to perform the labors of Hercules no more than breaking off so many roses. She is sure of him, the immortality of his passion, as she is sure of herself. So they are above circumstances, and nothing that friend or foe can do should trouble their essential serenity."

"How wonderful!" breathed Mrs. Hawthorne, after a little silence in which Gerald had been thinking with a very sickness of sympathy of Brenda and the sinister propensity of the Fates for bringing to nothing the most valiant dreams and hopes; and Mrs. Hawthorne had been thinking entirely of Gerald, whose own heart was so much more certainly revealed by what he said than could be anybody else's.

"Unfortunately,"-he turned abruptly to another part of his subject,-"he is not of the same temperament. She has some project, I imagine, for earning the money for her dowry, poor child, by music, singing, painting. But he does not know her vows of fidelity, because her parents did use their authority so far as gently to request her not to write to him or see him; and she promised, and a promise with Brenda is binding. And he has felt his honor involved in not writing or meeting her. But, though separated, they have been in the same city; they could hope to catch a glimpse of each other now and then. Heaven only knows how often he has stood to see her pass, or watched her window, and lived on such things as unhappy lovers find to live on. After all, the faith that when he dreamed of her she dreamed of him, that as he kissed a glove she kissed a silver button, was a life, something to go on with. I dare say, too, he cherished the hope of some miracle,-it is so natural to hope!... But now they are sending her away, and it seems to him the black end of everything."

"I see. And what you want is--"

"To be driven half a world apart for indefinite periods, more than probably forever, without one look, one word of leave-taking, is truly too much. Granted that they are not to have each other, they ought not to be torn in two like a bleeding body. Let them have to remember a few last beautiful moments!"

Mrs. Hawthorne had become pensive. He watched her sidewise, trying to divine what turn her thoughts were taking. Her prolonged silence made him uneasy.

"It wouldn't be wrong, you think?" she asked finally. "Mrs. Foss wouldn't be cross with us?"

"If it is wrong, my dear Mrs. Hawthorne, let it be wrong!" he cried impetuously. "If any one is cross, we will bow our heads meekly-after having done what we regarded as merciful. Let us not permit a cruelty it was in our power to prevent!"

But Mrs. Hawthorne continued to disquiet him by hesitating, while her face suggested the travels of her thought all around and in and out of the question under consideration.

"You don't think it would perhaps be cruel to Brenda?" she laid before him another difficulty in the way of making up her mind. "Mightn't it just ruin the evening for her, with the painfulness of good-bys? Or, if she doesn't in the least expect him, the shock of the surprise?"

"If I know that beautiful girl, passionate as an Italian under her American self-control, it will be the blessed shock of an answered prayer. She prays nightly, never doubt it, that Heaven may manage for her just such a surprise."

He was growing afraid of the calm common sense that tried to see the thing from every side and weight the merits of each person's point of view. Feeling it intolerable to be refused, he suddenly appealed to her pity, away from her justice.

"Oh, Mrs. Hawthorne, life is so unkind, and to be always wise simply deadly! A few memories to treasure are all the good we finally have of our miserable days, and to catch at a moment of gold without care that it will have to be paid for is the only way to have in our hands in all our lives anything but copper and lead; yes, dull lead, common copper." He covered his face and pressed his eyes, in a way he had when the world seemed too hopeless and baffling; then as suddenly straightened up, remarking more quietly, "The Fosses are too wise."

"They have my sympathy, I must say, Mr. Fane," Mrs. Hawthorne hurriedly defended herself against being moved. "I should be just as much afraid as they to have my daughter marry a foreigner."

"Mrs. Hawthorne, you ought to be afraid to have your daughter marry anybody." He gathered heat again and vehemence. "As regards Italians, we are all one mass of superstitions. We are always comparing our best with their bad. As a matter of truth, our best and their best and the best the world over are one as good as the other, and our worst can't be exceeded by anything Italy can show. If you make the difficulty that we are different, our point of view different, I object that Brenda's is not so different. The international

marriages that turn out well make no noise, but there are plenty of them. I have seen any number in the ordinary middle classes. No, parents are twice as old as their children; that is the trouble and always will be. The older people by prudence secure a certain thing, but it's not the thing youth wanted. The older see a certain thing as preferable, because they are old; but the young were right for themselves, for a time, at least, until they, too, grew old and saw a long peace and comfort as superior to a brief love and rapture. Brenda is not shallow or changeable; it may be her one chance of happiness that her parents in their anxious affection are trying to remove her from, and which she will cling to with every invisible fiber of her being until she conquers, or turns into a dismal old maid. Brenda is not like other girls. Love is serious to her. She never played with it as Leslie has always done, and as American girls do, yes, in Massachusetts and Virginia alike. She is an earnest, simple, sincere, constant nature, very much, in fact, like him."

"You seem to like him. Is he such a fine man really?"

"I don't know a finer, in his way."

"Good looking?"

"Mrs. Hawthorne, what a frivolous question! But he is. He is one of the most completely handsome men I know. Rather short, that's all."

"Oh, what a pity!"

"But, if you must insist on that sort of symmetry, Brenda is not tall. He is a kind of Italian, more common than one thinks, that doesn't get into literature, having nothing exciting, mysterious, wicked, or even conspicuously picturesque about him. After being a good son,—they are very often good sons,—he will be a good husband and a good father, like his own father before him. He is without vanity, while looking like a square-built, stocky, responsible Romeo. Devoted to duty, passionate for order, absolutely punctilious in matters of honor and courtesy, he is a good citizen, a good soldier. He belongs to excellent people, I gathered, whose fortune, once larger, is very small. They live in the Abruzzi, I think he said. He is the eldest son and hope of the house. His gratitude to them comes first of all, he made me understand. He would be an *indegno*, unworthy of esteem and love, if that were not so. He had never cared for pleasures, he told me; even in the time not demanded by the service he studied. He wished to be useful to his country; he looked for the advancement to be gained by solid capacity in military things. He felt older than his years, he said, from being the eldest of the family and always carrying responsibilities. He committed no follies of youth, had no quarrels, made no debts. His companions sometimes laughed at him for this prosaic seriousness. But he had friends, for he is of a manly, modest sort. One evening during Carnival last year certain of these friends dropped in on their way to a dance, a costume party at the house of Americans, and seeing him so absorbed by duties and studies, thought it a lark to tempt him from these and take him along. And he, to astonish them for once, he says, let it happen, they assuring him that he would be well received if presented as their friend. One of them had on two costumes, one on top of the other, of which he lent him one, a monk's frock and cowl. So they went. At the ball was Brenda as the Snow-queen. And the fatal thing happened at very first sight of her. It is a repetition of *Romeo and Juliet*, as you see. He had shunned women as the rivals of duty and work. He believes his instantaneous adoration owing to the fact that Brenda so far surpassed all he had ever known,—a being entirely formed of light and snow and fragrance.... I am using his words. Her very name is sweet to Italian lips. He permitted himself the dreams of other men. He permitted himself to hope. And then!... These things he told me with actual tears in the finest dark eyes I have perhaps ever seen, and without seeming any the less manly for them. He told me, and I believed him. He came to me, poor fellow, because it was the nearest he could come to Brenda, and he trusted, I suppose, that I would tell her he had been. It was a way of sending her a message. He talked more than half the night, walking the floor, then throwing himself into a chair and grasping his head. I can't tell you all he said, but it filled me with pity and respect. It made me his friend."

Mrs. Hawthorne looked soft and sympathetic, but far away, and when he stopped did not speak, engrossed, it was to be hoped, by the story just told.

He continued, though discouraged:

"He wanted to know if I thought he would be guilty of an unpardonable breach should he ask permission to write her one letter before she left. This parting without farewell is the last bitter touch to his tragedy. Brenda, when it had been decided that she should leave, sent word to him by that little pianist who comes here. Again through the same channel he received word that the day of departure was fixed. Can you think what it means, Mrs. Hawthorne? Have you in your experience or imagination the wherewith to form any conception, dear Mrs. Hawthorne, of what it means? The day of departure fixed! The day of parting! Do you realize? No more sight or sound of each other! The end! The sea between! Silence! And it is to befall on Saturday of this week, and we are at Wednesday!"

"All right, Mr. Fane; bring him!" she said in haste. "You've made me want to cry. I mustn't let myself cry; it makes my nose red. What did you say his name is?"

"Giglioli."

"Spell it. Gig-no, it's no use. What's the other part of his name?"

"Manlio."

"That's a little better. I guess he'll have to be Manlio to me. Bring him along, whatever happens, and then let's pray hard to have everything happen right."

Not much later on the same day Mrs. Hawthorne's brougham might have been seen climbing Viale dei Colli, with the lady inside, alone, engaged in meditation.

"It would be a pity," she was thinking, as she alighted before Villa Foss, "that a little matter of eight thousand dollars should stand in the way of perfect bliss!"

CHAPTER VIII

So many forces had been enlisted, into so many hands the white card given, to make Mrs. Hawthorne's ball a success, that it could hardly fail to be somewhat splendid. On a platform raised in one corner of the ball-room sat the little orchestra assembled and conducted by Signor Ceccherelli, who, from his mien, might have been the creator of these musicians and originator of all music.

Charlie Hunt was floor-master, and busy enough. Another might perhaps have done as much and not appeared so busy. The cotillion especially gave him a great deal to do. Everybody understood that he had planned all the figures and bought the favors. Some received an impression that the ball was entirely managed by him, who was such a very great friend of the hostess's. Some even carried home an idea that the hostess never did anything without consulting him, and more often than not besought him to do it for her.

This sounds cruder than it actually was. Charlie was looking most handsome and high-bred. Animation shone from his eyes, his teeth, his skin, over which he now and then swept a fine white silk handkerchief. He danced devotedly every minute during which he was not engaged in making others dance. Mrs. Hawthorne, gazing after him with a benignant smile, was truly grateful to him for putting into her party so much "go." It was his atmosphere rather than his words—though he did drop words, but not many or really in bad taste—that made him appear the one indispensable person in the house.

Mrs. Foss stood near the central door with Mrs. Hawthorne, receiving. She had not omitted from her list one acquaintance in Florence of the suitable class. Everybody was there; the style of invitation-card sent had suggested a grand occasion.

All the persons she had seen at the Fosses on the first Friday evening at their house Mrs. Hawthorne saw again, and many more. Balm de Brézé, with a gallantry of old style, bent his black-lacquer mustache over her glove. The dark Landini pressed her hand with a pinch the warmth of which pricked her attention, and she found his eyes fixed on her with more the air of seeing her than is common at a first meeting.

Suddenly her heart thumped like a school-girl's. Gerald was coming, and with him an officer who must surely be Manlio. She tried to keep down her emotion, but the pink of her face deepened, a trembling seized her smile.

The Italian was as white as paper, his mustache and brows made spots of ink on it; his eyes were as deep and still as wells in the night. She could hardly doubt that his heart was in a tumult, but he spoke without disaster to his voice, thanking her in a formal phrase. She perceived, from a distinct advantage over him in height, how faultlessly handsome he was in a quiet, unmagnetic way. Never had she seen anything to equal the whiteness of his teeth except her pearls in their black velvet case.

After having paid his duty to her, he remained for some minutes speaking with Mrs. Foss, who appeared as kind, while he appeared as calm and natural, as if time had moved back, and they were still at last spring and the beginning of his visits. Of all concerned Aurora was the least collected.

"I can't help it!" she murmured to Gerald, while the other two were talking together. "I'm all of a tremble. I feel as if I were Brenda; and at the same time I feel as if I were him—or he."

Mrs. Foss turned to them to say she believed everybody had arrived, and with Giglioli moved away from the door. Gerald asked Mrs. Hawthorne if they should waltz, but she refused, because she ought to be looking after the people who were not dancing and seeing that every one had a good time. She should dance only once that evening, she told him, and it should be with Mr. Foss, who had promised to dance at her party if she would promise to dance with him.

Mr. Foss was seen approaching, and Mrs. Hawthorne smiled and sparkled in anticipation of the jokes they would exchange on her fairy weight and his youthful limberness.

Gerald sent his eyes around the room to see if any one were free whom it would be a sort of duty to ask to dance. He did not look for pleasure from dancing, the less so that Charlie Hunt, on the perpetual jump, and dancing with a perfection almost unmanly, had brought the exercise into temporary discredit with him. Miss Madison was dancing, Miss Seymour was dancing, Leslie was dancing, Brenda—his eyes were unable to find. In a doorway, and not quite as festive in looks as the majority, which gave to the room the effect of an animated flower-bed, he perceived a figure in snuff-brown silk, just in front of which, soberly watching the dancers, was a little girl in a short dress of embroidered white, a blue hair-ribbon and blue enamel locket. At once dropping his search for a partner, Gerald went to join this pair, thinking, as he approached, that Lily without her spectacles was beginning to have a look of Brenda,—a Brenda with less beauty, but more originality; more—what could one call it?—geniality, perhaps.

"Oh, Gerald!"—the little girl caught his hand without ceasing for more than a second to watch the ball-room floor,—*"I have promised to go home willingly at ten o'clock!"* It was spoken in a gentle wail.

"My child," said Fräulein, "you must begin to prepare, for I fear it cannot be far from ten."

"Oh, Fräulein, don't keep talking about it! *Please!*"

"When you leave this pleasure, Lili, remember, there will be still that other pleasure of the long ride home in the night and the moonlight."

"Yes." Lily, glad again, turned wholly to Gerald, the music having stopped. "Mrs.

Hawthorne told mother that if she would let me come I should be taken home in her own carriage, with all the furs around us and a hot water-box for our feet, so that we never could catch cold. Wasn't it sweet of her? And we've both already had ices and cakes, before anybody else, because she said we must. Don't you think she's sweet, Gerald?"

"Sweet as honey," he said.

"Oh, Gerald,"-Lily's tone was fairly lamentable,-"have you seen the baskets of favors that are going to be given away by and by? There are roses of red silk, and lilies of white velvet, and chocolate cigars, and fans, and bonbonnières, and silver bangles! Then funny ones of little monkeys and ducks and things. And I have to go home willingly, cheerfully, promptly, at ten o'clock!"

"Lily, if any lady is so good and so misguided as to honor me with a favor, I will bring it to you in my pocket to-morrow or soon after, I promise."

"What hour is it, Herr Fane?" asked Fräulein over Lily's head.

Gerald drew out his watch and hesitated, sincerely sorry.

"To be exact, it is three minutes and three quarters to ten," he said.

Lily's mouth dropped open, and out of the small dark hollow one could fear for a second that a cry of protest or revolt might come; but the very next moment it was seen that Lily had returned to be the best child in the world and the most honorable.

"Good night, Gerald!" she said, with a wistfully willing, cheerful, ready face. "You won't forget?"

He was left in the oval room, and as the dancers who had come in to occupy its seats seemed all to be in pairs, he remained aloof. He took the occasion to have a look at the panels, which he had not before seen, the tapestries, which were not tapestries, but paintings on rep. He remembered-the Fountain of Love, not Biblical.

The fountain, surely enough, spouted from a marble dolphin squeezed in the chubby arms of a marble Love, and was four times repeated, at different hours of the day and seasons of the year. In spring, at dawn, a maiden filled her cup at it. At noon, in summer, the same maiden and a youth drank from it with cheeks close together. In autumn, at sunset, the maiden, sadder of countenance, stared at the fountain, visibly wrapped in memories. In winter the fountain stood solitary and frozen, Cupid had a hood of snow, the purplish twilight landscape was drowned in melancholy.

Gerald's mind made an excursion from the things before him to the studio where those facile works of art had been produced. The place was imaginary, and the artist not altogether clear, but the features of the second figure which he saw, the visitor at the studio, were well-known to him, and the sentiments of the artist receiving the order to treat a subject in four large panels for a rich *forestiera* not difficult to estimate.

The ball had been raging, if one may so express it, for several hours, the feast was at its height, when Aurora, confused with the richness and multiplicity of her impressions, and aware of a happy fatigue, withdrew from her guests to be for a few minutes just a quiet looker-on. She chose as her retreat a spot at the curve of the stairs, where she felt herself in the midst of everything and yet isolated. Her back was toward the persons going up and down; she leaned on the sloping balustrade, and breathed and rested and hoped no one would notice her for a little while, all being delightfully engaged.

She could see a little way into the ball-room, where certain younger couples, mad for dancing, were making the most of the time when the floor was relatively empty, the supper-room being proportionately full. Supper over, the cotillion would begin. She could see Leslie, in Nile-green crape, eating an ice out in the hall with that American boy, the singer, whose conceit, by his looks, had not yet been made to totter. She could hear the merry sound of spoons and glasses, and knew what good things were being consumed. All the house was involved in festivity, and resounding with it. In the upstairs sitting-room were card-tables. In the improvised conservatory opposite one large dim lantern glowed softly amid palms and flowers. To Aurora every goose present that evening was a swan. There were frumpy dresses more than a few,-there always are,-and there was the usual proportion of plain girls and uninteresting men, but she did not see those. She saw a crowd more brilliant and beautiful and fit to be loved than had ever before been assembled beneath one roof. Her heart felt very large, very soft, very light.

All evening it had seemed to her rather as if she walked in a dream. More than ever now, as she stopped to take account of all the wonderfulness surrounding her, it felt to her like a dream; so that she said to herself, "This is I, Nell-is it possible? Is it possible that this is I-Nell?"

And no doubt because she had been too excitedly happy and was tired, and the time had come for some degree of reaction, her joy fell, withered like a child's collapsing pink balloon, when, contrasting the present with the past for the sake of seeing the things before her as more rarely full of wonder and charm, she saw those other things. Memories she did not willingly call up rose of themselves, and forced her to give them her attention in the midst of that scene of flowers, light, music. The brightness, the flavor, went out of these as if under an unkind magic.

"It's a wonder," she thought, "that I can ever be as happy as I am. I do wonder at myself how I can do it to rejoice."

But the next minute she was smiling again, sweetly, heart-wholly, forgetfully. She had caught sight of Gerald looking at her as if about to approach.

"Who are you going to dance the cotillion with?" she asked gaily.

"You, Mrs. Hawthorne, with your kind consent."

"No, I couldn't do it. I only dance a little bit, just what Estelle has taught me since we've been here. I don't keep step very well; I walk all over my partner's feet. Besides, it wouldn't do, because I've already refused to dance with Mr. Landini."

"Sit it out with me, then, I implore you, if you positively do not wish to dance."

"Oh, but you must dance! I want you to. I want to behold you all stuck over with favors."

"It's true that I must have a few favors for Lily; but couldn't a good fairy arrange it, and then we let the others heat themselves while we keep cool and rest? I feared a moment ago that you were feeling tired, Mrs. Hawthorne."

"Look!" she whispered, interrupting him.

He imperceptibly turned in the direction of her stolen glance. Two figures were ascending the opposite flight of stairs, looking at each other while they inaudibly talked: Brenda, in filmy white diversified by a thread of silver; Manlio, carrying over his arm, and in his absorption letting trail a little, a white scarf beautiful with silver embroideries; in his hand a white pearl fan. Brenda's face was angelic, nothing less. When the young and rose-lipped cherubim are full of celestial sensations and adoring, eternal thoughts, they must look as Brenda did at that moment. Manlio's head was so turned that his night-black hair alone was presented to our friends. Slowly the pair mounted and was lost to sight.

Neither Gerald nor Mrs. Hawthorne made any comment. Gerald, after a silence, spoke of Lily's increasing resemblance to her sister. Mrs. Hawthorne was reminded that they must go to select some favors for Lily, and led the way.

They sat together through the cotillion, and Gerald, because he had seen the shadow of sadness on Mrs. Hawthorne's face, tried more than usual to be a sympathetic companion, easy to talk to, easy to get on with. He was always quick to see such things.

No trace of it remained. Her dimples were in full play, but he found it according to his humor to continue uncritical, inexpressively tender, toward this big, bonny child who never curbed the expression of a complete kindness toward himself.

More interesting to them than any other dancers were naturally Brenda and Manlio, partners for the cotillion. Certainly the plot for giving those two a few beautiful last hours together was proving a success. Brenda was calmly, collectedly luminous; Manlio, uplifted to the point of not quite knowing what he did. Radiant and desperate, he looked to Gerald, who found his state explained by the facts as he knew them.

"Poor things! Poor dears!" he thought, with the cold to-morrow in view, yet retained his conviction of having done the unhappy lovers on the whole a good turn.

He had been glad to find the Fosses sharing his point of view that to forbid Giglioli a sight of Brenda before the long parting would have been unnecessarily cruel. Mrs. Hawthorne, it seemed to him, had lost sight of what was to follow. She was exclusively delighted with their joy of the evening, she gave no thought to their misery next day. It was amazing to him, the extent to which she had forgotten.

So he said aloud, "Poor things! Poor dears!" and discovered that it was not forgetfulness exactly in Mrs. Hawthorne, but that general optimism which insists on believing in a loophole of possibility through which things can slip and somehow turn out right after all.

The party was over. The musicians had laid their instruments in coffin-like black boxes and were getting into their overcoats. The candles were burned to the end, the flowers looked tired, the place all at once amazingly empty. The last half dozen people were standing and laughing with Mrs. Hawthorne and Miss Madison around Percy Lavin while he told a final good story when one of the guests who had departed some time before returned.

Mrs. Hawthorne caught sight of the figure in closed coat, tall hat, and white silk muffler as soon as it entered the house, for the group of laughers stood near the ball-room door, and this was only separated from the inner house door by the wide hall. Without waiting for the end of the comic story Mrs. Hawthorne hurried to the guest, whose reason for returning she wished to know, though it so easily might have been only his forgotten cane.

That it was nothing of the kind she at once perceived. He looked upset.

"May I speak with you a moment?" he asked at once.

They stepped into the nearest room, still brightly lighted, but deserted.

"What's the matter?" she inquired, prepared by his face for news of trouble.

"Mrs. Hawthorne, we've done it!" said Gerald. "Giglioli tells me that he's giving up the army, and Brenda has promised to marry him!" He was on the verge of laughing hysterically.

"Oh!" Mrs. Hawthorne paused to watch him, and wonder why they should not without further to-do rejoice and triumph. "Well? What's wrong with that?"

"Oh, Mrs. Hawthorne, it's deadly!" he exclaimed with conviction. "If it were a simple solution, why shouldn't it have been suggested before?"

"It did suggest itself to me, in the quiet of my inside, you know."

"But you, dear lady, can't be supposed to understand. Oh, it's either too, too beautiful, or else too, too bad! And in this dear world of ours the probability is that it's too bad. He was taken off his feet by his emotion; he offered her what he will feel later he had no right to offer—a good deal more than his life. But it shows, doesn't it, that he does immensely love her? To throw into the balance everything—his career, his family, his country—and offer them up! To cut his throat for a kiss."

"You're quite right; I can't understand," she hurried in. "What makes you say 'cut his throat'? Couldn't he go into some other business just as well as the army?"

"All in the world he's fitted for is the army. Do you see that beautiful fellow going to America, for instance, and earning a living as a teacher of Italian, or as the representative of some tobacco interest? There is no way of earning a proper living over here, you know. Oh,

I'm afraid he will feel, when he wakes up, like a deserter toward his country and an ingrate toward his family and even toward Brenda like a misguider of her youth."

"But, look here, isn't there a chance that having each other will make up to them for everything else?"

"That of course was their sentiment at the moment of doing it. We did the work so well, Mrs. Hawthorne, that their passion, raised to a beautiful madness, would make them see anything as possible to be done so long as it gave them to each other, obviated the horrible necessity to part. Oh, it is touching, but dreadful! What were we dreaming? The thing I so greatly fear is that when he comes to himself he will feel dishonored, and Italians do not bear that easily, if at all."

"Now, see here, don't you go imagining things and worry. And don't you let that young man worry. He isn't leaving the army to-morrow or the day after, is he?"

"No. In the natural course of things, I suppose, it will take some time."

"Well, I don't at all relish, myself, the idea of seeing that beautiful fellow, as you say, in every-day clothes—the sort they wear over here—after seeing him all glorious in silver braid and stars. No. I just can't bear to think of him giving them up. At the same time I don't agree with you that he had better have given up his girl than them. And I don't believe she will mind about his clothes one way or the other."

"But there is his family, a thousand obligations—he spoke of them himself."

"Perhaps the Fosses, now this has happened and they see how much in earnest the blessed creatures are, will sell some of their stock in California gold-mines and afford the dowry you spoke of."

"But Giglioli will blush at this forcing of their hand."

"Now, see here, you keep that young man cool. He hasn't done anything to be ashamed of. Brenda knows her own mind, and I don't believe her father and mother would stand in the way of her marrying a tramp if he was honest and her heart set on him. You tell that young man, in your own way, to sit tight and put his trust in the Lord."

Gerald's nervous laughter for a moment got the better of him. He covered his face to check it, then, tearing away his hands, made the gesture of releasing a pack of tugging hounds too strong for him to hold. Let them be off and at the devil!

"I didn't come here looking for comfort, dear Mrs. Hawthorne. Your optimism is constitutional, you know, rather than enlightened. I merely came to tell my accomplice the result of our meddling with destiny. 'Accomplice' is a manner of speaking. Don't suppose I forget that I alone am to blame. Good night. I must go back to him where I left him, with his head among the stars and clouds, and his feet perhaps beginning to burn already with the heat of the nether fire. As you say, 'let's be cheerful, let's hope for the best!' Ha!"

CHAPTER IX

Brenda, reaching home after the ball, had asked her parents to hear a thing she must tell them, and, very pale, informed them of the manner in which she had taken the direction of her life into her own hands. At the sight of their faces something had melted within her; she had trusted to them at last all that was in her heart, so that father and mother, greatly moved, felt as if they had found their child again rather than lost her. At the almost incredible spectacle of tears in her father's eyes Brenda had crept into his arms, against his breast, and lain there so still, so silent, that it seemed unnatural. They perceived that she had fainted.

She left for America on the date that had been set, but a term was fixed for her visit; April was to see her back in Florence.

Her engagement was not announced. Mr. Foss, talking of it with his wife, expressed liking and respect for their prospective son-in-law. His confidence in the man had been increased by an action that seemed to him quite in the American spirit. No doubt Giglioli would prove a good business man, just as he had been a good soldier, the chief requisites in all walks of life being a clear head, a heart in its place, and the will to work.

Mrs. Foss was secretly unhappy during these conversations. The model wife had never before kept anything from her husband nor taken any step without his sanction, and she was ashamed now of the duplicity she was forced to practice. She strengthened herself by the assurance that in so doing she was really sparing Jerome, saving him possible moments of indecision, or conflict with himself. She was saving Brenda from the same troubles, if not worse: such perhaps as seeing her brilliant hero made into an unsuccessful struggle-for-lifer. She, the mother, would swallow by her single self all the mental discomforts that might have been the general portion, and, nobody being any the wiser, shoulder hardily for their sakes the consciousness of an obligation which might to the others have poisoned a gift, if not made it impossible to accept. No member of her family, it seemed to Mrs. Foss, knew quite as well as she how simple, native, and without self-conceit was Aurora Hawthorne's generosity; so that taking from her was hardly different, in a sense, from giving her something. You did not have to pay with gratitude. You paid, first and last and all the time, with affection.

Gerald, who had seen as beset with difficulty the rôle of friend which he might be called upon to play, heard with relief that Giglioli had obtained leave of absence and gone to see his family. With Brenda over the seas, and Manlio in the Abruzzi, the subject of their attachment and future could fall a little into the background, crowded out by the nearer things.

The fact became of some consequence to Gerald that in his relation to Mrs. Hawthorne he was so largely a taker. He did not count as any return for her hospitalities the time he gave to sight-seeing with her and her friend; he was modest with regard to his own contributions.

He had in truth not desired to fall into Mrs. Hawthorne's debt. He would have liked best to keep away from her; but fate, likewise character, set snares for him. After he had stayed away for a certain length of time, the thought would rise to trouble him, "She will feel hurt," and all against the voice of good sense, such a reason as that had power with Gerald. He would then call, and her welcome would be so kind, her heartiness so warming, that he would stay to dinner, and promise to go somewhere with them on the following day, after which he would dine with them again.

So now the gentlemanly wish defined itself in him to show by some token that he did not take favors all as a matter of course.

He would have liked to make her an offering a little exquisite, a little rare, which she might recognize as possessing these points and accordingly prize. To bestow anything concrete would have been folly. A few possessions he had which he would have thought worthy of the acceptance of queens: a tear phial of true Roman glass, a Japanese print or two, a few coins that were old already when Christ was young. And he would have parted with any one of these treasures to Mrs. Hawthorne, though not wholly without a pang: first, because he liked her, and then because he had eaten as it seemed to him a good deal of her bread and syrup. But she would not have cared for these things; while bereaving himself, he would have enriched her not at all.

The duty of doing something for Mrs. Hawthorne's pleasure was felt even by Charlie Hunt, who took her to a concert. When Gerald heard of it, he searched more persistently and, fate aiding, found something which might give the lady amusement, he thought, and would certainly afford an opportunity that would hardly have come her way without his good offices.

The morning mail brought him a note relating to his project; he did not wait for afternoon to communicate its contents.

It was eleven when he rang at Mrs. Hawthorne's door. He had hardly finished asking the servant whether the signora were at home when he heard her voice upstairs, singing behind closed doors.

She had said so many times, when he went through the formality of having himself announced and waiting for permission to present himself, "Why didn't you come right up?" that this morning he said to the servant, "It imports not to advise her. I shall mount." Did the servant look faintly ironical, or did Gerald mistakenly imagine it?

The tune she sang sounded familiar. It must be a hymn, he decided, but could not remember what hymn, or even be sure it was one he had heard before, hymns are so much alike. He stopped at the sitting-room door and waited, listening to the big, free, untrained velvet voice, true throughout the low and medium registers, flat on the upper notes, the singer having carelessly pitched her hymn too high. He could hear the lines now, given with a swing that made them curl over at the ends, and with a punch on certain of the syllables, irrespective of their meaning:

“Feed me *with*-the heavenly manna
In this *barr-en* wilderness;
Be my *shield*, my sword, my banner,
Be the Lord-my righteousness!”

When she came to the words,

“Death of death and hell’s destruction,”

a bang and rattling ensued, as if some one were taking a practical hand in that work. The heavenly ferryman was thereupon besought with vigor to land her safe on Canaan’s side, and the singing ceased.

Gerald stood waiting, if perchance there might be another verse, and wondered, while waiting, at the sounds he heard in the room, easy to recognize, but difficult to explain. When it seemed certain that the music was at an end, he, after hesitating for some minutes longer, gently tapped.

“Oh, come in!” was shouted from inside. “*Entrez*, will you? *Avanti!*”

He opened the door a little way, discreetly, and put in his head, ready to draw it back at once should he see his morning call as befalling inopportunistly.

Aurora was so far from expecting him that for a second or two she actually did not recognize him, and waited to understand what was wanted of her. Her head was tied in a white cloth, her sleeves were turned back, she had on an apron, and she held a broom. The furniture was pushed together out of the corners, some of it covered with sheets; the windows were open. No mistake possible. Aurora was sweeping.

A burst of laughter rang; the broom-handle knocked on the floor.

“Yes, I’m sweeping,” she cried. “Come right in! You find me practising one of my accomplishments. I can’t play the piano, I can’t speak languages, I can’t paint bunches of flowers on black velvet; but I can sweep, I can cook, I can wash dishes-or babies, one just as well as the other, and I can nurse the sick.”

“I am afraid I have come at an inconvenient moment.”

“Not at all. I’m glad to see you. I was most through, anyhow.”

She had pulled the cloth off her head, and was patting her hair before the glass. She turned down her cuffs, untied her apron, and came to shake hands, smiling as usual.

“You caught me,” she said. “When I feel a certain way, I’ve got to work off steam, and there’s nothing that does it like sweeping.”

“I beg of you-I beg of you to let me close those windows for you!”

“All right. I’m awfully hot, but I guess the room’s cold. We can have a fire in a minute. Everything’s there to make it.”

“I beg you will not trouble! I shall only remain a moment and leave you to finish.”

“No, now, no; don’t go and leave me. I was only sweeping to be doing something. To clean the room wasn’t my real object. I took their work from Zaira and Vitale, who are the ones to do it usually, in a way that’s new to me, with damp sawdust. It’s nearly finished, anyhow. All I’ve got to do is fold the sheets and push things back into their places.”

“Oh, Mrs. Hawthorne, please, please, allow me-”

He tried to help her, winking to the fact that she was as strong as he, if not stronger.

The room in a minute looked as usual, and she knelt in front of the hearth, piling up a kindling of pine-cones and little fagots, on which she laid a picturesque old root of olive-wood.

“You seem to be alone,” he remarked.

“Yes; Estelle’s gone out.”

He was not sorry to hear it. Miss Madison, whom he entirely liked, affected him curiously, or, to express the matter more exactly, in a curious degree failed to affect him at all. Her personality did not bite on his consciousness. Unless some chance left them on each other’s hands, he had difficulty in remembering her presence. It was not that she was colorless; not by any means. She obviously had character, brightness, individuality, even charm; but so far as he was concerned she might have had none of these. Particularly when her big friend was by Gerald ceased to see her. He recognized the danger of her negative effect on him, and often made a point of devoting to her a special amount of attention, being toward her of an unnatural amiability, trying thus to keep her ignorant of the extent to which she did not exist for him. Now he suddenly remembered that from the choice little treat provided for Mrs. Hawthorne Miss Madison had been left out-forgotten. He was dismayed. Then a pleasant side to the affair revealed itself by a dim gleam. He was mortified by his forgetfulness, but the ladies were after all not Siamese twins.

“You must wonder what brought me at this unusual time of day,” he said.

“Any time’s good that brings you. But what in particular was it?”

“I wanted to ask you to keep free next Saturday afternoon and, if you will be so good, spend it in part with me. I should like to take you to Mrs. Grangeon’s.”

“Mrs. Grangeon’s...?”

“Don’t you remember? Antonia! It is Antonia’s real name. On the first evening of our

acquaintance you had a good deal to say about her. If I remember rightly, you expressed then a desire to meet her—see her face.”

“Yes, yes. Antonia, of course.”

“She is a figure of importance here in Florence. She is in truth a very gifted woman—in her way, great, and of wide reputation. And she is clever, except in just some little spots. Geniuses, one has observed, are seldom quite free from such spots. She has kept herself very much to herself now for several years, so that an occasion to see her is grasped eagerly. This affair of hers on Saturday is the first thing of the kind in an age. Her villa at Bellosguardo is most interesting and full of interesting things. And the view from her terrace is worthy of a pilgrimage. You perceive, Mrs. Hawthorne, that I am doing what I can to *faire valoir* the scrap of entertainment I have to offer.”

“I think it perfectly lovely of you! Of course I’ll go, and delighted to. And see how it fits in—” She kindled to joyful enthusiasm. “We’ve just bought a lot of her books. We realized we’d got to have some books to make this room look finished off. We bought hers in paper covers and have had them beautifully bound. Just look here.” She went to take a specimen from the bookcase, a white parchment volume with gold tooling, a crimson fleur-de-lys painted on the front cover. “Aren’t they lovely? An idea! We’ll take some of them up to her and ask her to write her name in them. Wouldn’t that be flattering?”

“Ye ... es.”

“I’ve been trying to read some of it over since these came home from the binder’s. My! Aren’t those people of hers wonderful—where you’d think the ladies never could have a stomache-ache nor the gentlemen a corn!”

“I hope Miss Madison will not think I forgot her,” he disingenuously said, “when in replying to Mrs. Grangeon’s invitation I begged permission to bring you, and that she will do me the honor some day very soon—”

“Oh, Estelle won’t mind!”

The mention of Estelle seemed to change the color of Mrs. Hawthorne’s thoughts, casting a shadow over them.

“Estelle and I had a spat this morning,” she told him.

“Oh!”

“That’s why I was sweeping and why she’s gone for a walk by herself.”

“I’m so sorry!” was all he found to say.

“It doesn’t amount to anything,” she cheered him. “We’ve had times of quarreling all our lives, and we’ve known each other since we were children. Her aunt and my grandmother had houses side by side in the country; there was just a fence between our yards. That’s how we first came to be friends. All our lives we’ve had the way of sometimes saying what the other doesn’t like. And do you know what’s always at the bottom of it? That each one thinks she knows what would be most for the other’s good to do, and we get so mad because the other won’t do what we ourselves think would be best for her! Just as some people abuse you because you’re a pig, we as likely as not abuse the other because she isn’t a pig. One of the biggest fights we ever had was because once late at night, when she was dead tired, tired as a yellow dog, I wanted her to sit still and let me pack for her, or, anyhow, let me help her pack. And she said I was as tired as she,—as if that was possible!—and if I didn’t go to bed and get some rest myself and let her alone to get through her packing as she pleased if it was daylight before she finished she should have a fit. And from one thing to another we went on getting madder and madder till we said things you would have thought made it impossible for us ever to speak to each other again. But the first thing next morning, when we opened our eyes, we just looked at each other and began to laugh. Another time we fought like cats and dogs because I wanted to give her something and she refused to take it.”

“I don’t call those quarrels, Mrs. Hawthorne.”

“You would if you could hear us; you would have if you could have heard us this morning. And it was only a little one. You see, two people aren’t best friends for nothing. It gives you a sort of freedom; you aren’t a bit afraid. And when you know it’s only the other’s good you have at heart, it makes you awfully firm and fast-set in your point of view. I don’t mind telling you that I’m always the one in the wrong.”

“Are you?”

“Of course I am. But I like to have my way, even if it’s wrong. Hear me talk! How that does sound! And I was brought up so strict! But it’s so. I want to do as I please. I want to have fun. It began this morning with Hat saying I spent too much money.”

“Did she say that? How unreasonable, how far-fetched!”

“‘What’s the good of having it,’ I said, ‘if I can’t spend it?’”

“‘You’d buy anything,’ she said, ‘that anybody wanted you to buy, if it was a mangy stuffed monkey. It isn’t generosity,’ she said; ‘it’s just weakness.’”

“‘Oh, suck an orange!’ I said, ‘Chew gum! It’s anything you choose to call it. But when a thing takes my fancy, I’m going right on to buy it. And if it enables a greasy little Italian to buy himself and his children more garlic,’ I said, ‘that’s not going to stop me,’ I said. I don’t mind showing you”—she dropped her selections from the morning’s dialogue—“the thing I bought which started our little discussion. The artist who made it brought it himself to show me.”

She went to take the object referred to from her desk, and held it before him, examining it at the same time as he did.

“Do you see what it is? Can you tell at once?”

“H-m, I’m not sure. Is it intended for a portrait of Queen Margherita?”

“Right you are! Of course that’s what it is. It’s a picture of the queen, done by hand with pen and ink; but that’s not all. If you should take a magnifying glass, you would see that

every line is a line of writing—fine, fine pen-writing, the very finest possible, and if you begin reading at this pearl of her crown, and just follow through all the quirligiggles and everything to the end, you will have read the whole history of Italy in a condensed form! Isn't it wonderful? Don't you think it extraordinary, a real curiosity? Don't you think I was right to buy it?"

"My opinion on that point, dear Mrs. Hawthorne, would rather depend on what you paid for it."

"Oh, would it?" She lost impetus, and gave a moment to reflection. "Well, I shall never know, then, for I'm not going to tell you. One's enough blaming me for extravagance."

"My dear Mrs. Hawthorne, pray don't suppose me bold enough to—"

"Oh, you're bold enough, my friend. But while I like my friends to speak their minds, I've had just enough of it for one day, d' you see? I've had enough, in fact, to make me sort of homesick."

She looked it, and not as far as could be from tears. The small vexation of his failure to think her treasure worth anything she might have paid for it, the intimation that he might join the camp of the enemy in finding her extravagant, had acted apparently as a last straw.

"Oh, Mrs. Hawthorne, I beg of you not to feel homesick!" he cried, compunctious and really eager. "It's such a poor compliment to Florence and to us, you know, us Florentines, who owe you so much for bringing among us this winter your splendid laughter and good spirits and the dimples which it does us so much good to see."

"No," she said ruefully, "you can't rub me the right way till I'm contented here as I was yesterday. Florence is all right, and the Florentines are mighty polite; but—" She looked at the fire a moment, while he tried, and failed, to find something effectively soothing to say. "In the State of Massachusetts there's a sort of spit running into the sea, and on a sand hill of this there's a little shingled house that never had a drop of paint outside of it nor of plumbing inside; but there's an old well at the back, deep as they dig them, with, on the hottest day, ice-water at the bottom. The yard is pretty well scratched up by the hens, but there are a few things in it you can't kill out—some lilacs and some tiger-lilies and a darling, ragged, straggling old strawberry-bush. Outside the fence, hosts of Bouncing Bets—you know what they are, don't you? The front door has some nice neat blinds, always closed, like those of the best room, except for weddings and funerals; but the back door is open, and when you sit on the step you can look off down an old slope of apple-orchard and over across it at the neighbors' roofs and chimneys. And there, Geraldino, is where Auroretta would like to be."

He had the impulse to reach out and touch the ends of his fingers to her hand, fondly, as one might do to a child, but he prudently refrained. His eyes, however, dwelled on her with a smile that conveyed sympathy. He said, after her, amusedly:

"Auroretta!"

She brightened.

"After I've been bad," she said, "I always am blue."

But within the hour he had come near quarreling with her, he also, and on more than one score.

It began with his making a pleasant remark upon her voice, which seemed to him worth cultivating. She brushed aside the idea of devoting study to the art of singing.

"But," she said, "Italo has brought me some songs. He plays them over and shows me how to sing them. We have lots of fun." To give him an example, she broke forth, adapting her peculiarly American pronunciation to Ceccherelli's peculiarly Italian intonations, "*Non so resistere, sei troppo bella!*"

Gerald winced and darkened.

"Then there's this one," she went on, "*Mia piccirella, deh, vieni allo mare!* Do you want to hear me sing it like Miss Felixson, together with her dog, which always bursts out howling before she's done? I've heard them three times, and can do the couple of them to a T."

"Please don't!" he hurriedly requested. "I hope," he added doubtfully, "that you won't do it to amuse any of your other friends, either." As she did not quickly assure him that she neither had done, nor ever would dream of doing, such a low thing, he went on, with the liberty of speech that amazingly prevailed between them: "Extraordinary as it seems, you would be perfectly capable of it. And it would be a grave mistake."

"I've done it for Italo when he was playing my accompaniment. For nobody else."

"Mrs. Hawthorne, if that little man has become your singing-master, will you not intrust me with the honorable charge of likewise teaching you something? No, not painting. I should like to drill you in the pronunciation of that little man's name. It is Ceccherelli. Cec-che-rel-li. *Cec-che-rel-li.*"

She shook her head.

"No use. I've got accustomed to the other now."

He felt a spark dropped among the recesses where his inflammable temper was kept.

"Before you know it the fellow will be calling you Aurora!" he said, repressing the outburst of his wrath at this possibility.

"He does, my friend," she answered him quietly. "He can't say Hawthorne. Do you hear him saying Hawthorne? He calls me Signora Aurora."

"Then why not call him Signor Italo?"

"At this time of day? It would be too formal. He would wonder what he'd done to offend me."

Gerald was reminded that since Christmas Ceccherelli had been wearing, instead of his silver turnip, a fine gold watch, her overt gift and his frank boast, which he conspicuously

extracted from its chamois-skin case every time he needed to know the hour.

"Mrs. Hawthorne," said Gerald, "you have repeatedly said that you have what you call lots of fun with Ceccherelli. Would you mind giving me an idea of what the fun consists in? I wish to have light—that I may do the man justice. Left to myself, I should judge him to be the dullest, commonest, cheapest of inexpressibly vulgar, insignificant, pretentious, ugly, and probably dishonest, little men." The adjectives came rolling out irrepressibly.

"Perhaps he is," Aurora said serenely; "but haven't you noticed, Stickly-prickly, that about some things you and I don't feel alike? Italo plays the piano in a way that perfectly delights me, he's good-hearted, and he makes me laugh. Isn't that enough?"

"In short, you like him. You like so many people, Mrs. Hawthorne, and of such various kinds, that though one is bound to be glad to be among your friends, one needn't—need one?—feel exactly flattered."

She seemed to consider this, but instead of taking it up, went on with the subject of Italo.

"He entertains me. He knows all about everybody in Florence and tells me."

"He gossips, you mean."

Again she considered a moment before going on.

"Funny, when I don't know the people, or just know them by sight, and they and the life are all so foreign and apart from me, gossip about them doesn't seem the same as gossip at home. It's more like Antonia's novels, condensed and told in the queerest English! It was some time before I could make out what he meant when he said two gentlemen had fought a duel because one of them had found the other nasconding in his garden-house. The one thus found obstinated himself, says Italo, to maintain that he had come to make a copy of the architectural design over the door. But as he didn't seem to have any pencil—"

"Mrs. Hawthorne, how can you be amused by such disgusting stuff?"

She gazed at him inquiringly, with very blue eyes and a look of innocence, real or put on, then laughed.

"I am, just. I can't tell you the how of it. Do you know Italo's sister Clotilde?"

"I have not that advantage, no."

"You soon will have, if you care for it, for she's coming to live with us."

He stared.

"Yes, she's coming to keep house. She speaks English quite well, because she's had so much to do with English and Americans, being a teacher of Italian and French. It began with Italo wanting us to take lessons of her. But, bless you, I don't want to study! I can pick up all I need without. We said, however, 'Bring her to see us.' And he did. She's real nice."

"Does she resemble her brother?"

"In some ways. I've an idea, though, that you'd like her better than you seem to do him. I believe we shall be very well satisfied with her, and shall save money. Since we seem to have got on to the subject of money to-day: Luigi, the butler, who has everything under him now, Estelle says is a caution to snakes, the way he robs us. Now, we're easy-going and, I dare say, fools; but not darn, darn fools. It's a mistake to think we wouldn't see a thing big's a mountain, and that you could cheat us the way that handsome, fine-mannered, dignified villain Loo-ee-gy thinks he can. So we're going to put in his place a nice woman who is, in part, our friend, and will care to see that we're dealt fairly with. Clotilde doesn't seem to mind giving up her lessons to come and be a sort of elegant housekeeper for us."

"I understand."

"Charlie Hunt is disgusted about it, because when we complained of Luigi before him, he said he would find us exactly the right person to take his place. But, you see, we didn't wait. I don't see that we were bound to. What do you think?"

"It is a case, dear Mrs. Hawthorne, where I must not allow myself to say what I think."

"Personally, I must say I was rather glad to have Clotilde step in as she did, because I don't mind telling you—you won't tell anybody else?—I find just the least little bit of a disposition in that young man Charlie to run things in this house. D'you know what I mean? I suppose it's the way he's made. He has been awfully kind, and helped a lot in all sorts of ways, and I like him ever so much; but I was glad to check him just a little, and put who I pleased over my own servants, and then go on just as good friends with him as ever."

"Mrs. Hawthorne, why don't you make Mrs. Foss your adviser in all such matters? She is so kind always and of such good counsel. It would be so much the safest thing."

"Of course; but it was she who found Luigi for us, you see. She can't always know. As far as Charlie Hunt is concerned, I don't want you to think that we think any less of him than before. He's good and kind as can be, and does ever so many nice things for us. We were at his apartment the other day, where he had a tea-party expressly for us, with his cousins there, and Mr. Landini and two or three others. And then when he heard me say I like dogs he promised to give me a dog, one of those lovely clown dogs,—poodles,—with their hair cut in a fancy pattern, when he can lay his hand on a real beauty."

"Mrs. Hawthorne"—Gerald almost lifted himself off his seat with the emphasis of his cry,—“Don't let him give you a dog!”

She looked at him in amazement.

"Why, what's wrong?"

"Don't! don't! Can't you see that you must not let him give you a dog?"

"No, I can't. Why on earth?"

"After what you said a few minutes ago," he stammered, feeling blindly for reasons, "which shows that you have something to complain of in his conduct toward you, you ought not to allow him to give you a dog. A dog—you don't understand, and I can't make you. It will be too awful!"

"You surely are the queerest man I have ever known," she said sincerely.

To which he did not reply.

He restrained himself from blurting out that Charlie Hunt, for such and such reasons, could never deserve the extreme privilege of giving her a dog. Leslie had once casually spoken the true word about Charlie. "Charlie has no real inside," she had said, and continued, nevertheless, to like him well enough. He was young, handsome, in his way attractive. Most people liked him to just that extent-well enough; few went beyond, unless early in the acquaintance. He so systematically did what would be most useful to himself that it was difficult to preserve illusions about his powers of devotion or unselfishness. He had lived as one of the family with his aunt and cousins till he found himself desiring an increase of personal liberty; then an occasion presenting itself to make a really good arrangement with an Italian family of decent middle class with their best rooms to let, he had set up bachelor quarters, and ceasing to be an inmate of his aunt's house, retained unusually little sense of tie with it.

"Charlie might be nicer about going to places with us," Francesca openly grumbled, "seeing he's the nearest we've got to a brother."

All this was formlessly in Gerald's mind-this and much more-when his spirit groaned that Charlie should be giving Aurora a dog.

Mrs. Hawthorne was looking at him, trying to make him out. She could not. One thing, however, was plain, and it being so plain simplified all. He felt actual pain because Charlie Hunt was going to give her a dog. The wherefore it was vain to seek. But she had no desire to give pain of any kind, even by way of teasing him, to this funnily sensitive fellow whose shoulders looked so sharp under his coat.

"All right," she said. "If he says anything more about it, I'll tell him I've changed my mind and don't want a dog. Are you satisfied? And then if you won't tell me what the objection is to my having one, I shall have to sit down and try to guess."

Gerald, upon obtaining so easily what he had wanted apparently to the point of tragedy, looked sheepish, ashamed of himself. His thanks were given in a slowly returning smile.

"I shouldn't think it would be so difficult," he said.

Antonia had been very friendly to Gerald at the period of their first acquaintance. She had cared for his painting, specimens of which had come to her notice through Amabel Van Zandt, and distinguished the at that time very young artist to the extent of inviting him to her villa, showing interest in his talent and future, making him talk. From one year to the next, other things had taken up her mind to his exclusion. He had continued, however, to pay his respects, if she were at home, at least once in the season, and retained gratitude toward her, along with the presumption that he could never be to her the same exactly as the first-come outsider. He remembered At Homes of hers attended in the old days, and saw every reason why Mrs. Hawthorne should enjoy one of these, none why it should not enjoy her. On the contrary. Making full allowance for the fact that he had grown accustomed to her manner and mode, Mrs. Hawthorne had yet seemed to him lately of a circumspection not to be surpassed. When alone with him and Estelle, she was one person; when in company, she was another, not a little like Mrs. Foss, retaining enough of her own irrepressible self to seem just acceptably original. Antonia, the novelist, declared a fondness for people out of the ordinary, the conventional. Gerald thought the American might interest her. But if she did not, little depends, at a reception, upon the hostess being charmed with individual guests; he still believed that Aurora would have a good time-he meant to ensure her doing this.

Aurora had, as she described it, dressed herself to kill, and was looking, Estelle told her, perfectly stunning. She had on velvets and furs, pearls and plumes. She had wished at one and the same time to make Gerald Fane proud of her and do honor to Antonia's party. Concealed in her muff was a white parchment volume-muffs were small in those days. A similar volume had been stuffed into each of Gerald's overcoat pockets.

Gerald, as has been said, remembered At Homes of Antonia's, and had in mind an image of what he might expect to see.

He perceived at once that to-day all was different. This was immensely choice, the most so afforded by Florence. That he had been invited showed Antonia's estimate of him still as a person of artistic significance; also, he modestly decided, the difficulty one had to make up an assemblage solely of notabilities. Her permission to bring a friend showed flattering faith in his taste.

Persons were there whom one but seldom saw anywhere; the persons whom one saw everywhere were conspicuously absent. Among a majority of English, there was a sprinkling of Italian nobility, mostly older people. Antonia had lived for many years in Florence. There was a very able historian, allied to the English through his wife; there was an old General of the wars of liberation; there was a Church dignitary of infinite elegance and high rank: all serious people who did not go to teas, and whose coming to this one was a compliment to Antonia. The exceptional woman's right to the like homage was established; her celebration of Italy was by Italy, in the persons of such sons of hers as got an inkling of their debt, gracefully acknowledged.

Gerald, entering the large drawing-room with Aurora, at first wondered, then understood. The interesting Princess Rostopchine, on a visit to Florence, was present-woman of accomplishments in every branch-painter, sculptress, musician, author; a beauty into the bargain, and lady-in-waiting for many years to a queen.

She was no longer in the freshness of youth; her beauty had been left a little bony, a little fatigued and bloodless; her eyelids drooped over the brilliant intelligence of her eyes. The poetry of her looks was increased by her costume. In wise disdain of the fashion, she went robed rather than dressed; her things clung and trailed and undulated; they were gray as cobwebs, dim as pressed orchids. She was as fascinating as at any time in her life-perhaps

more so, because she cared to be.

Antonia, who had made her acquaintance at Aix-les-bains, was under her spell. The reception was given to honor her, rather than to enable Antonia, as Gerald had at first supposed, to see her friends again after several years of absence and neglect.

A niece of Antonia's received, and invited guests to be refreshed with tea, while Antonia and the Princess sat side by side, and now talked together, now with others, who of themselves approached, or whom Antonia invited to join them. The conversation was part of the time in French, which Antonia spoke fluently, but for the greater part in English, which the princess spoke well, as Russians speak every language.

Gerald was watching for the favorable moment to present Aurora; they therefore stood within earshot. While he talked to keep her diverted, he was aware that his companion less than half listened to him, absorbed in Antonia and the princess.

A princess and a famous writer! Aurora had never set eyes on a princess before, nor, to her knowledge, on an author. They hypnotized her, those two. Their conversation was far beyond Leslie's, she did not understand any of it, though every syllable reached her ear. The marked Englishness of Antonia's speech caused an almost necessity in Aurora to say the words after her, echoing their peculiarity. Her lips unconsciously moved.

Aurora's eyes were busy as well as her ears. Antonia was clad in a tea-gown-Aurora thought it was a wrapper. The tea-gown had long lain in a chest, while Antonia was on her travels, and the great woman's eyes, fixed on more important things, had not perceived when it was taken out for her wear to-day that it was crushed and ruffled. Aurora believed it had been recovered from the ash-can, and her breast was filled with awe. It was with unqualified and childlike admiration that she gazed at the two women whose soaring superiority she unenviably felt.

As it seemed unbecoming as yet to interrupt their conversation, Gerald looked around him in search of acquaintances whom to present to Aurora while waiting.

Balm de Brézé first met his eye-the vicomte was Antonia's landlord-but Gerald discriminated against him. He next spied Hamilton Spencer and Carlo Guerra, both genial fellows, left Aurora's side for an instant and brought them up.

Aurora called back her attention and gave it to them. A certain success of smiles and bright eyes she was almost sure to have, with men. Gerald went off to get her some tea, took it to her, and finding her in the midst of a sufficiently lively time with her new acquaintances, returned to Antonia's niece at the tea-table for a chat and cup of tea. While hearing the news from this unassuming elderly girl, he could keep an eye on Mrs. Hawthorne at a distance, and catch any facial signal for help.

Aurora was drinking her tea, holding her cup like a real lady, with her little finger delicately curled back. Aurora's figure stood out from among those surrounding her like a thing of a different make, an earthen jar among glass vases, a Swede among Japanese.

Aurora was out of place, it could not be blinked; and that she was so visible, in her able-bodied comeliness, her supremacy of dimples, her extremely good corset, increased the offense. So did also the native assurance of her eye-which had something at all times of a jovial sea-captain, with his foot on his own deck.

Gerald looked from her to Antonia, slightly uneasy. Antonia's face had characteristics of a man's, but along with them indications above all feminine. Power and caprice in the great woman went linked. He saw her while listening to the princess turn her head toward the quarter of the room tintured by Aurora's unmodified presence, as if taking account of the voice and accent of the stranger in her house.

This seemed to him his opportunity, and excusing himself from Miss Grangeon, he started toward Aurora.

"There are more ways than one of skinning a cat!" came floating to him in Aurora's deep-piled voice, borne on her frank laugh, as he approached.

He found her having a very good time, but ready to call an end to it and go to be presented.

"I'm awfully nervous!" she whispered to Gerald, but that was a manner of speech. Aurora's nerves were author-proof. She meant that she was impressed by the greatness of the moment. She picked up her three books from the table near by, held them with her left arm so that her right hand might be free to clasp Antonia's, and, smiling as a basket of chips-thus did she later describe herself-advanced toward the crowning honor of the day.

Antonia saw her coming and narrowed her eyes the better to see. Antonia's face, at no time in her life soft, was as much like granite at this moment as it had the moment before been like old white soap; her eyes, fixed on the approaching pair, turned stonily unseeing.

Gerald bravely went through with the introduction, and tried to warm the atmosphere with winged words. Aurora's hand was all ready to shake.

Antonia's hand did not go forth to meet it, but Aurora, elate and overflowing, was not put off by this.

"I can never tell you"-she gushed, "how pleased I am to meet you-how honored I feel. Nor can I ever tell you how perfectly wonderful I think your books. Perfectly wonderful.... Perfectly wond ... Perf ... See what I've brought. These three that I'm going to leave for you to write in, if you'll be so very kind. It would increase their value for me I never can tell you how much."

"My dear Madam," said Antonia, "I never inscribe a book that I have not myself presented. I am not acquainted with the phrase in which it is done. The value of my autograph will be enormously increased hereafter for collectors by the fact that when I receive requests for it I drop them into the waste-basket. Yes, I merely keep the stamps."

"Oh!"

"Yes."

"Oh!" more faintly.

"Yes!" more firmly.

Turning her back to Aurora, Antonia once more addressed Princess Rostopchine. "Vera Sergeievna, you were saying..."

The only sign Aurora gave of being flabbergasted was forgetting the books she held. They slid with noise to the floor. As Gerald picked them up, "Did I ever tell you"—she asked him chattily, and leisurely moved on,—“about the time I stood on the sidewalk to see the procession go by, in Boston, when we commemorated Bunker Hill?” And she went on with a favorite reminiscence: how she had held on to her inch of standing-room, in spite of a fat and puffing man, a gimlet-elbowed woman, and a policeman.

When they were in her coupé, smartly bowling toward town, silence fell. Gerald's brow was black, his eyes were steely.

"Mrs. Hawthorne," he jerked out, "I am not going to express myself on the experiences of this afternoon. Words could not do them justice, and I am not cool enough to trust myself. But I wish to apologize to you most humbly for my egregious, my imbecile mistake."

"Don't you care, Geraldino! Don't you care one bit! Bless your dear heart, I'm not touchy!" Aurora said cheerily, and, not resisting as he had recently done the impulse to comfort his friend by a caressing touch, gave his hand as tight a squeeze as her snug new glove permitted. "Nasty old thing! What does it matter? But"—her eyes rounded at the amazed recollection,—“that I should have lived, I-me-my size-to feel like a fly-speck on the wall! It did beat everything! Yours truly, F. S. W.! Fly Speck on the Wall!”

She was lost for a moment in the consideration of herself reduced to a negligible dot, and Gerald, too angry to talk, thought hydrophobia thoughts in silence. In these he was disturbed by the sound of her trying in a murmur to speak like Antonia, and hitting off the Englishwoman's pronunciation rather successfully.

"Deah Madam! I nevah, nevah inscrrribe a book.... I drap them into the baaahsket. Yesss. I marely keep the stamps."

CHAPTER X

The house where Gerald lived was the same one he had lived in since the days of Boston and Charlestown. His mother, coming to Florence with her two children, a boy of ten, a girl of seven, had needed to look for a modest corner in which to build their nest. The income of which she found herself possessed after settling up her husband's affairs, even when supplemented by the allowance made her by his family, so little permitted of extravagance that she chose the topmost story of the house in Borgo Pinti, with those long, long stairs that perhaps had contributed to keep Gerald's legs thin.

Its street door was narrow, its entrance-hall dark; the stone stairs climbed from darkness into semi-darkness, reaching the daylight when they likewise reached the Fanes' landing. But the old house was not without dignity; all three loved it.

As you entered the Fanes', there was another dark hall, very long, running to right and left. One small window opposite, on an inner court, was all that lighted it. This hall grew darker still, as well as narrower, after turning a corner to the left; then it turned to the right, and was lighter. At the end of it was a window from which, if you bent out, you saw far below you a garden.

The rooms, without being lofty and vaulted, like those on the ground and first floors, were pleasantly high, and paved with brick tiles. From the one large interior room a window-door opened on to a terrace in the court—a deep brick terrace with a broad ledge on which stood a row of flower-pots. When water was wanted, you opened a little door in the kitchen wall and let your copper urn down, down, down into mossy-smelling blackness; you heard a splash and gurgle, and after proper exertions got it back brimming.

The Italian-ness of it all captivated the mother, who had been drawn to this dot on the map, where she was told one could live well at less expense than in the United States, by the lure of the idea of Italy. She was very humbly an artist. She had given drawing lessons to young ladies in an elegant seminary, and, when approaching middle age, married the father of one of these, a troubled, conscientious man whom the cares of an entangled and disintegrating business kept awake at night. When his need for feminine sympathy ceased, and administrators settled in their summary way the questions that had furrowed his brow, his widow's wish to start life anew far from the scene of her worries had led to the balmy thought of Italy-Italy, where were all the wonders which had most glamour for her fancy.

She had loved it in an undiminished way to the end, had never really desired to go home, though she spoke of it sometimes when the chill of the stone floors and walls shook her fortitude, and the remembrance of furnace heat, gas-light, hot water on tap, glowed rosy as a promise of eternal summer. The children, however, were taught in their respective schools that artificial heat is insalubrious; they had Italian ideas and chilblains; not on account of any creature comfort that they missed would Florence have been changed back for Charlestown.

In her picturing of days far ahead Mrs. Fane certainly saw Lucile, an accomplished young lady, receiving tributes of attention in the drawing-rooms of home; and Gerald, a young man of parts, finding recognition and fortune among his countrymen. To go home eventually was among her cloudy plans.

But Lucile died at sixteen, without adequate cause, one almost would have said. She merely had not the ruggedness, the resistance, needed to go on living among the rough winds of this world. The mother, a creature of old-fashioned gentleness and profound affections, survived her by only a few years.

A business matter then obliged Gerald to go to America, and had he liked the place, he might have taken up his abode there. It affected him like vinegar dropped in a wound, like street din heard from a hospital bed. He turned back, and the long stairs to his empty dwelling were dear and sweet to him on the day of his return.

This, then, had remained his home. His needs were simple, and he could live without applying himself to uncongenial work, though the allowance had been stopped, and the income, as Leslie had said, was incredibly small. The good Giovanna, who had been his mother's servant, stayed on with her *signorino*, and economized for him; the wages of an Italian servant were in those days no extravagance. He had no pleasures that cost money; he neither traveled nor went to fine restaurants. He wore neat, old well-brushed clothes, went afoot, gave to the poor single coppers. But he had liberty, worked when he pleased and as he pleased; he was content to be poor, so long as his poverty did not reach the point where it involves cutting a poor figure. Giovanna, prouder than her master, disliked the thought of *far cattiva figura* even more than did he, and was careful in her household management to keep up a certain style, never forgetting the sprig of parsley on the platter beside the single *braciolina*.

At one period he had contemplated a change in his mode of living, had dreamed of entering the contest for laurels and gold, so as to afford a more appropriate setting for the beauty of his charmer. The Charmer had attained without need of him the setting she craved, and Gerald went on climbing his long stairs, painting in his so personal and unpopular way, and at night reading by light of a solitary lamp the choice and subtle masterpieces of many literatures.

"My land! shall we *ever* get to the top?" whispered Aurora to Estelle as, one behind the other, sliding their hands along the wall, they felt with their feet for the steps that led to

Gerald's door. "He told us they were long, and he warned us they were dark, but this!... I wonder why they don't have a lamp going, or something."

"Because there isn't any image of the Virgin," said Estelle, lightly. "It's our just having come in from the sunshine makes it seem dark. It's getting lighter. Cheer up! It's good for you."

"It'll make me lose three pounds, I shouldn't wonder."

They spoke in whispers, because when they had pulled the bell-knob and the door had swung open, a voice from incalculable altitudes had shouted, "*Chi è?*" They had answered, as instructed, "*Amici,*" and now they pictured somebody listening to their shuffling ascent.

At the top, in fact, stood Giovanna, who regarded them with an eye the color of strong black coffee and said, "*Riverisco!*"

The small old woman had a thin, bronze Dantesque face, molded by a thousand indignations—all directed against proper objects of indignation—to a settled severity; a face of narrow concentrated passions and perfect fidelity and a preference for few words. The friendly smiles of Aurora and Estelle produced in her a relenting. Courtesy here demanded a pleasant look, and Giovanna was always courteous. She stood aside for Gerald, who came to the very door to welcome these ladies.

The guests were now assembled. One of them was staying with Gerald—Abbé Johns, who had come for a few days from Leghorn, where he lived. The others were Mrs. Foss and Miss Seymour.

What had been in Mrs. Fane's time the drawing-room had since become also a studio. The landlord had permitted his tenant to increase the light by extending the windows across the street-side wall. Beyond that, there were as few signs about of the art-trade as Gerald had affectations of the artist. The model-stand supporting books and things appeared like a low table; easel, canvases, portfolios, all the littering properties of a painter, had been shoved for the occasion into the next room, a spacious glory-hole which Giovanna did not permit to become dusty beyond the decent.

The result of removing, first, many of the things that made the room a drawing-room, then, most of the things that made it a studio, left the place rather bare. It was according to Gerald's taste: few things in it, each having the merit of either beauty or interest, else the excuse of utility.

Mrs. Foss had waited for Aurora's arrival to make the tea. The feast was very simple. Gerald offered what his mother had used to offer. Giovanna cut the bread-and-butter as that genteel lady had taught her, and continued to buy the plum-cake at the same confectioner's.

Aurora had come in from the sunshine and cold with January roses in her cheeks and exhilaration in her blood. At sight of her beloved Mrs. Foss she laughed for joy. She rejoiced also to see Miss Seymour, who was one of her "likes," and she was immensely interested to meet the abbé, whom she knew to be Gerald's best friend, even as Estelle was hers. She loved Gerald for having just these people to meet them at tea, the ones he himself thought most of. She felt sweetly flattered at being made one of a company so choicely wise and good.

But the result was not exactly fortunate for the gaiety of the little party, if Aurora's laugh had been counted upon to enliven it. Far from shy though she was, she developed a disinclination to-day to speak. She was impressed by the abbé, for whom her conversation did not seem to her good enough.

The young priest, a convert to Catholicism, was Gerald's age, and had it not been for his collar, the cut of his coat, would have looked like a not at all unusual Englishman with blue eyes, curly black hair, a touch of warm color in his shaven cheeks. Unless you sat across the tea-table from him and now and then, while he quietly and unassumingly talked, met his eyes.

Some persons said that he looked ascetic, some austere, some angelic. Mrs. Foss, not finding the right adjective for his mixture of poise and humanity, was content to call him charming. Gerald, who had known him when they were Vin and Raldi to each other and equally far from entering the Church, regarded him as simply the nicest fellow he knew. Aurora had no definition for him, but did not feel disposed to ripple on as usual in his hearing. Yet she would have liked to make friends with him, too. She would have said to him some such thing as, "What are the thoughts you have, which make you so calm, deep inside? But I know. We learned them at our mother's knee, but in the fury of living, having fun, getting on, we never revisit the chamber where they are kept. You live in it."

He was talking with Estelle like any other man whose conversation should not contain the faintest element of gallantry, and Estelle was talking to him with an ease that Aurora marveled at. Aurora marveled how Estelle could know, or seem to know, a lot of things which she had never before given sign of caring about. If the two of them were not conversing upon the symbolism of religious art! Having finished his tea, the abbé went to fetch a book from Gerald's shelves, which he knew as well as his own, and Estelle was shown reproductions of carvings on old cathedrals.

Mrs. Foss, who had been talking of the Carnival now beginning, telling Aurora about *corsi* and *coriandoli* of the past as compared with the poor remnants of these customs, and describing the still undiminished glories of a *veglione*, perceiving finally that the usually merry lady was on her best behavior to the point of almost complete taciturnity, from necessity addressed herself more directly to Miss Seymour, who shared the sofa with her; and from talking of *veglioni* the two slid into talking of Florentine affairs more personal.

The task of entertaining Mrs. Hawthorne thus devolving upon Gerald, he took it up in a way that flatteringly presupposed in her an interest in general questions. His manner seemed to her very formal. She forgot that, innocent as their relations were, he yet could not

before people speak to her with the lack of ceremony that in private made her feel they were such good friends. But even aside from this cool and correct manner, Gerald seemed to her different to-day—calmer, more serene, less needing sympathy, as if something of his friend the abbé had rubbed off on to him.

As he was going on, in language that reminded her of a book, she interrupted him.

"Don't you want to show me your house?"

"I was going to suggest it," he said at once. "There are several things I should like to show you. Will you come?"

She rose to follow, losing some of her constraint.

"It's what we always do on the Cape. Any one comes for the first time, we show them all over our house."

When they were outside the drawing-room door, she felt more like herself.

"Oh, I'm so glad I can't tell you to see the place where you live!" she expanded.

They went down the long corridor, past a closed door which he disappointingly did not open.

"It's a dark room we use to store things," he explained. Neither did he open the door at the end of the hall. "It's Vincent's room," he said.

They turned into the darker, narrower corridor, bent again, and went toward the little window high over somebody else's garden. He ushered Mrs. Hawthorne into the kitchen, for here, near the ceiling, was the door-bell, and on it the well-known coat of arms, crown and cannon-balls, which testified to the age and aristocracy of the house.

While he sought to interest her in this curiosity, Aurora was looking at everything besides; for Giovanna was making preparations for dinner, and Aurora's thoughts were busy with the fowl she saw run on a long spit and waiting to be roasted before a bundle of sticks at the back of the sort of masonry counter that served as kitchen stove.

"They do have the queerest ways of doing things!" she murmured.

He took her across the passage and into the dining-room. He wished to show her an old china tea-set, quaintly embellished with noble palaces and parks, that had been his great-grandmother's. There again she looked but casually at the thing he accounted fit for her examination, and carefully, if surreptitiously, at all the rest.

Last he showed her into the great square interior room with the glass door on to the terrace over the court, the room which had been his mother's and was now his own, and where hung a portrait of his mother. On this Aurora fixed attentive and serious eyes, and had no need to feign feeling, for appropriate feelings welled in her heart.

"How gentle she looks!" she said softly. "And how much you must miss her!"

She stood for some time really trying to make acquaintance with the vanished woman through that faded pastel likeness of her in youth which Gerald kept where it had hung in her day, the portrait of herself which she womanishly preferred because, as she did not conceal, it flattered her.

"She looks like one of those people you would have just loved to lift the burdens off and make everything smooth for," Aurora said; "and yet she looks like one of those people who spend their whole lives trying to make things smooth for others."

"Yes," said Gerald to that artless description of the feminine woman his mother had been, and stood beside his guest, looking pensively up at the portrait.

All at once, Aurora felt like crying. It had been increasing, the oppression to her spirits, ever since she entered this house to which she had come filled with gay anticipation and innocent curiosity. It had struck her from the first moment as gloomy, and it was undoubtedly cold, with its three sticks of wood ceremoniously smoking in the unaccustomed chimney-place. Its esthetic bareness had affected her like the meagerness of poverty. And now it seemed to her sad, horribly so, haunted by the gentle ghosts of that mother and sister who had known and touched all these things, sat in the chairs, looked through the windows, and who conceivably came back in the twilight to flit over the uncarpeted floor and peer in the dim mirrors to see how much the grave had changed them. She shivered. Yes, cold and bare and sad seemed Gerald's dwelling. And Gerald, whose very bearing was a dignified denial that anything about himself or his circumstances could call for compassion—Gerald, thin and without color, looked to her cold-pinched and under-nourished. She had a sense of his long evenings alone, drearily without fire, his solitary meals in that dining-room so unsuggestive of good cheer; she thought of that single candle on the night-table burning in this cold, large room where he went to bed in that bed of iron, laying his head on that small hair pillow, to dream bitter dreams of a fair girl's treachery.

She wanted to turn to him protesting:

"Oh, I can't stand it! What makes you do it?"

His next words changed the current of her thoughts.

"I have another portrait of my mother," he said; "one I painted, which I will show you if you care to see it."

She cheered up.

"Do! do!" she urged heartily. "I'm crazy to see something you've painted."

"You won't care for my painting," he pronounced without hesitation; "but the portrait gives a good idea of my mother, I think, when she was older than this."

They returned to the drawing-room, where their friends were in the same way engaged as when they left them. One pair was looking at a large illustrated book; the other two sat leaning toward each other talking in undertones.

"The bird which you see," the abbé was saying, "with the smaller birds crowding around him, is a pelican. The pelican, you know, who opens his breast to feed his young, is a symbol of the Church."

"It's not true, though, that the pelican does that," Estelle was on the point of saying with American freedom, "any more than that a scorpion surrounded by fire commits suicide. I read it in a Sunday paper where a lot of old superstitions were exploded." But she tactfully did nothing of the sort. She appeared instructed and impressed.

What Miss Seymour was saying to Mrs. Foss would have sounded a little singular to any one overhearing. The two women had been friends for years, but never come so near to each other as, it chanced, they did that afternoon, when all fell so favorably for a heart to heart talk.

"I feel as if I had lost a key!" said Miss Seymour, and looked like a bewildered princess turned old by a wicked fairy's spell. "When I possessed it I thought nothing of it. It opened all the doors, but I didn't know what it was made them so easy to open. Only now, when it's gone, I know the value of that little golden key."

"I know," said Mrs. Foss, sympathetically. "There's no use in us women pretending we don't mind! Those who really and truly don't must be great philosophers or great fools, or else selfless to a degree that is rarer even than philosophy...."

Gerald and Aurora crossed the room unhailed and entered the room beyond, where dusty canvases, many deep, stood face to the wall.

He found the unframed painting of his mother and placed it on the easel. The short winter day was waning, but near the window where the easel stood there was still light enough to see by.

Aurora looked a long time without saying anything; Gerald did not speak either. After the length of time one allows for the examination of a picture, he took away that one and put another in its place; and so on until he had shown her a dozen.

"I don't know what to say," she finally got out, as if from under a crushing burden of difficulty to express herself.

"Please don't try!" he begged quickly. "And please not to care a bit if you don't like them."

She let out her breath as at the easing of a strain. He heard it.

"I won't be so offensive," he went on, "as to say that in not liking them you merely add yourself to the majority, nor yet that my feelings are in no wise hurt by your failure to like them. But I do wish you to know that I think it a sin and a shame to get a person like you, who can't pretend a bit, before a lot of beastly canvases inevitably repugnant to your mood and temperament, and make you uncomfortable with the feeling that compliments are expected."

"All right, then; I won't tell any lies." She added in a sigh, "I did want so much to like them!"

And he would never know what shining bubble burst there. She had wanted so much, as she said, to like them, and, as she did not say, to buy some of them, a great many of them, and make him rich with her gold.

He replied to her sigh:

"You are very kind."

After a moment spent gazing at the last painting placed on the easel, as if she hoped tardily to discover some merit in it, she said:

"I don't know a thing about painting, so nothing I could say about your way of doing it could matter one way or the other. But I have eyes to see the way things and people look. Tell me, now, honest Injun, do they look that way to you—the way you paint them?"

He laughed.

"Mrs. Hawthorne, no! Emphatically, no. And emphatically yes. When I look at them as you do, in the street, across the table, they look to me probably just as they do to you; but when I sit down to paint them—yes, they look to me as I have shown them looking in these portraits."

"But they're so sad! So sad it's cruel!" she objected.

"Oh, no," he objected to her objection; "it's not quite as bad as that."

"They make me perfectly miserable."

He whipped the canvas off the easel, saying dryly:

"Don't think of them again!"

It looked like impatience. With hands thrust in his pockets he took a purposeless half-turn in the room, then came back to her side.

"If you totally detest them, I am sorry," he said mildly. "I had wanted to offer you one, a little, unobtrusive one to stick in some corner, a token of the artist's regard."

"Oh, do! do!" she grasped at his friendly tender. "Find a little cheerful one, if you can. I shall love to have it."

He selected a small panel of a single tall, palely expanding garden poppy, more gray than violet, against a background of shade. Flower though it was, it still affected one like the portrait of a lady wronged and suffering.

In the drawing-room to which they returned Giovanna had lighted a lamp. The fire had properly caught and was burning more brightly; the place looked rosy and warm, after the winter twilight filling the other room and the chill that reigned there.

Aurora returned to the tea-table; with a disengaged air she reached for plum-cake. She ascertained with comfort that Mrs. Foss did not look sad or Estelle ill used; that the abbé was as serene as ever and Miss Seymour, after her talk with Mrs. Foss, rather serener than usual. Gerald was far jollier than any of his portraits. To make sure that she was no depressing object herself, she smiled the warmest, sunniest smile she was capable of.

"Do come and talk a little bit with me, before I have to go home!" she unexpectedly called out to the abbé.

When at the end of the long evening spent together smoking and talking the two friends separated for the night, Gerald went to his room as did Vincent to his. But Gerald had no

more than pulled off his necktie when he changed his mind, went back to the drawing-room, crossed the tobacco-scented space where something seemed to linger of the warmth of goodfellowship, and entered the farther room.

A doubt had risen in his mind. He could not wait till morning to see his work with a fresh eye, an eye as fresh as Mrs. Hawthorne's, and satisfy himself as to whether he, so careful of truth, had unconsciously come to exaggerating, falsifying his impressions, grown guilty of hollow mannerisms.

Whatever he had said, he had been stung by Mrs. Hawthorne's liking his paintings so little. It was easy to console oneself remembering the poor lady's ignorance of art. The truth might be that something was wrong with the pictures, which suspicion had driven the artist to go and have a dispassionate look at them in the frigid hour between twelve and one of the night. If a person is on the way to becoming a morbid ass he cannot find it out too soon.

Gerald's dogma was that the first duty of a picture is to be beautiful. His critics did not give sufficient attention to that aspect of his work, he privately thought; they were put off by what they mistakenly called its queerness, its mere difference from the academic, the conventional. This was bitter, because he had always so loved beautiful lines, beautiful tints, had insisted that the very texture, of his painting should have the beauty of fine-grained skin.

He was no conspicuous colorist, of course, he did not by temperament revel in the glow of rich, bold, endlessly varied tints. It was a limitation, which his work naturally reflected. This was marked in fact by modesty and melancholy of color-scheme. But that did not interfere with beauty, he maintained. He had been thrilled by the discovery in the Siena gallery of an old master with the same predilections as he, an antipathy apparently to the vivid, crying, self-assertive colors, which he accordingly with admirable simplicity left out, and interpreted the world all in blues and greens, grays and violets, whites of many degrees and tones and meanings.

"They're so sad that it's cruel!" Mrs. Hawthorne had voiced the instinctive objection of her earth-loving, life-praising disposition to the view he took of people and things. But what was there to do about it? When he looked at a sitter to render his personality sincerely, that was the way he saw him. If he had been limited to rendering a human being in the single aspect he wore while walking from the drawing-room to the dinner-table with a lady on his arm and a rich meal in prospect, he would have given up painting, it interested him so little. Most of the portrait-painters in vogue did thus paint the surface and nothing besides. Gerald had no envy of their large fees at the price of such boredom as he would have suffered in their place.

He held a canvas to the light of his candle. It was an old one of Amabel. She had not been sitting for him, he had made this sketch from a distance while she worked on her side. It was easy to see that the room was cold, that the woman with the pinched aristocratic nose, the little shawl over her shoulders, was poor, determined and anxious. If Mrs. Foss had said, "But Amabel never was as hollow-cheeked as that, nor ever looked pathetic in the least," Gerald could only have answered, "I swear to you this is how she looked to me on that day."

He studied the portrait of his mother, one of his earliest, bad in a way, but excellent in the matter of likeness. His mother no more than Amabel had been a pathetic person, Mrs. Foss would certainly have said. To which Gerald might have answered that she was not so during an afternoon call; but that the most characteristic thing about that gentle and delicate woman had been the fact of her living so much in the life of others and being open to endless sorrows through them. The dim affectionate eyes, the deprecating half-smile of his mother, engaged sympathy for the unfair plight.

Last, he took up a portrait of Violet. She had been in the perfection of young beauty; she had had no capacity for deep feeling, really,—why did an aroma of sadness escape from that dainty colored shadow of her? Why, but because of the artist's yearning sense that beauty is transitory, and the loveliest girl subject to destiny, and the future full of pitfalls for the fragility of all flesh!

"Imagine a barnyard fowl, a common white hen pecking among the gravel," Gerald once illustrated his view-point, "and imagine hovering over it a hawk, which it hasn't seen. Does it make no difference in your sense of the hen that *you* see the hawk?"

"It comes to this," Leslie on a certain occasion summed up Gerald's case: "Gerald isn't satisfied to paint the thing that's before him. All he cares to paint is the soul of things, and what you finally see expressed on the canvas is his pity for everything that has the misfortune to be born into an unsatisfactory world. Gerald can't see a thing as being common: the moment he narrows his eyes to look for purposes of art, it becomes to him exceptional, unique. I asked him once, as a joke, to paint me a simple, large, bright orange squash, in a field. And he did. A masterpiece. One can't say that the squash isn't large, orange, and true to life. But what a squash! It has an amount of personal distinction, an air of rarity and remoteness, that would make you think twice, nay, three times, before making such a precious product of the sacred earth into pies!"

When he was chilled through and his hands were numb, Gerald remembered to pick up his candle and go to bed. No change of opinion, it is needless to say, had resulted from his midnight inquiry.

A point of natural spite made him say that he did not ask people to like his pictures. All he asked was permission to go on painting as he pleased, obscure and independent, the sincere apostle of a peculiar creed, working out his problems with conscience and fidelity. If fate might send him critics whose opinion he valued he would be properly grateful. He felt the need of criticism and companionship, in his work, but had no regard for his fellow artists in Florence. His thoughts turned sometimes with envy toward Paris, where modern art had some vitality, and artist life the advantage of stimulating associations. There was a good deal

of talk at the time, and some derision, of a new phase called impressionism, whose chief seat was Paris.

As for the opinion of such a person as Mrs. Hawthorne, it obviously had no value. But while the artist could brush her aside in the character of critic, it remained a little galling to the man to know he figured in her mind as a painter who did not know how to paint.

"Can't paint for sour apples!" he seemed to hear her reporting to Estelle, and got in his mouth the taste of the apples.

CHAPTER XI

When Gerald asked Mrs. Hawthorne to sit for him, she stared in his face without a word.

"Don't be afraid," he hastened to reassure her; "I engage to paint a portrait you will like."

She felt herself blush for the dismay she had not been able to conceal, and to hide this embarrassment she lifted to her face—not the handkerchief or the bouquet with which beauty is wont to cover the telltale signal in the cheek, but a wee dog, as white as a handkerchief and no less sweet than a bouquet. She rubbed her nose fondly in the soft silk of his breast, while, tickled, he tried, with baby growls and an exposure of sharp pin teeth, to get a bite at it.

Gerald looked on with simple pleasure. Because he had given Aurora that dog. On the day of making a scene because she was to receive a dog from Hunt he had set to work to find one for her himself, the prior possession of which would make it natural to decline Charlie's, if, as Gerald doubted, Charlie's offer had been anything more than facile compliment. And now, instead of the torment to his nerves of seeing her fondle and kiss a brute of Charlie's, he had the not disagreeable spectacle of her pressing to her warm and rosy face an animal that related her caresses, even if loosely and distantly, to a less unworthy object. Sour and sad, dried up and done with women, a man still has feelings.

It would be unfair not to add that something better than primeval jealousy actuated Gerald, at the same time as, no doubt, some tincture of that. A sort of impersonal delicacy made the idea disagreeable to him of a dear, nice woman cherishing with the foolish fondness such persons bestow on their pets the gift of a friend whom she, in taking his loyalty for granted, overrated, as he thought.

The dog he had selected to present to her belonged to a breed for which he had respect as well as affection, crediting to Maltese terriers, besides all the sterling dog virtues, a discretion, a fineness of feeling, rare enough among humans. That Gerald kept no dog was due to the fact that he was still under the impression of the illness and death of his last, Lucile's pet and his mother's, who had been his companion until a year or two before, a senile, self-controlled little personage of the Maltese variety.

Having decided to give Mrs. Hawthorne a dog, Gerald had spent some hours watching the several components of one litter as they disported themselves in the flagged court of a peasant house, and had fixed upon one dusty ball of fluff rather than another upon solid indications of character.

Snowy after strenuous purifications at the hands of Giovanna, sweet-smelling from the pinch of orris powder rubbed in his fur, and brave with a cherry ribbon, he was taken from the breast of Gerald's overcoat and deposited in the hands of Aurora, whose delight expressed itself in sounds suggestive of an ogreish craving to eat the little beast, interspersed with endearments of dim import, such as, "Diddums! Wasums! Tiddledewinkums!" Estelle's did the same. There was no difference in the affection the two instantly bestowed on this dog. Aurora remarked later on that Busteretto couldn't be blamed for not knowing which was his mother.

Sensitively timid, yet bold in his half dozen inches with curiosity of life and the exuberant gladness of youth, Busteretto could frisk and he could tremble. He was cowed by the sight of fearful things, beetles and big dogs, but next moment, with budding valor, would dash to investigate them. He twinkled when he ran, his bark lifted him off his four feet. Withal something exquisite marked him even among Maltese puppies, which Aurora felt without art to define it. She said he reminded her of the new moon when it is no bigger than a fingernail. If with the tip of his rose-petal tongue he laid the lick of fondness and approval on the end of your nose, you felt two things: that the salute had come directed by the purest heart-guidance, and that the nose had something about it subtly right. You were flattered.

When Gerald encouraged Mrs. Hawthorne to decide for herself how she should like to be painted, with what habiliments, appurtenances and surroundings, she decided first of all to have Busteretto on her lap,—but that was afterward given up: he wiggled. Then her white ostrich fan in her hand, her pearls around her neck, her diamond stars in her hair, a cluster of roses at her corsage, her best dress on, and an opera-cloak thrown over the back of her chair.

Catching, as she thought, a look of irony on Gerald's face, she had a return of suspicion.

"See here," she said, observing him narrowly, "there's no trick about this, is there?"

"Not the shadow of one. Please trust me, Mrs. Hawthorne. This is to be a portrait entirely satisfactory as well as entirely resembling. It is like you to desire to be painted with your plumes and pearls and roses, and they are very becoming. I shall put them in with pleasure. I know you do not believe I can paint a portrait to suit you. Very well. Grant me the favor of a chance to try. We shall see."

It was true that she did not believe it, but she was so willing to hope. One of the upstairs rooms at the back was chosen for the sittings because the light through its windows was the least variable. The necessary artist's baggage was brought over from Gerald's, and the work began.

Charcoal in hand, he regarded Mrs. Hawthorne quietly and lengthily through half-closed eyes.

"You have not one good feature," he said, as if thinking aloud.

"Oh!"—she started out of the pose they had after much experimenting decided upon—"oh! is

that the way you're going to pay me for keeping still on a chair by the hour?"

"You have no eyebrows to speak of."

"What do you mean? Yes, I have, too; lots of them; lovely ones. Only they don't show up. They're fair, to match my hair."

"You are undershot."

"What's that?"

"Your lower jaw closes outside of your upper."

"Oh, but so little! Just enough to take the curse off an otherwise too perfect beauty."

As she curled up the corners of her mouth in an affected smirk, he quickly shifted his glance, with a horrible suspicion that she was crossing her eyes. As she had pronounced the word perfect "*parfait*," he presumed that she was making herself look, for the remainder, like Antonia. It was her latest vaudeville turn, imitating Antonia. He was careful not to look again in her direction until she had stopped doing what annoyed him furiously. He could not hope to make her understand to what point the debasing of beauty to brutal comic uses wounded him.

"Faultless features," he went on after a time, in commentary on his earlier remark, "do not by any means always make a beautiful face," politely leading her to suppose he meant that to be without them was no great misfortune.

Estelle came into the room for company. She brought her sewing, one of those elegant pieces of handiwork that give to idleness a good conscience. Gerald felt her delicately try to get acquainted with him. She was not as altogether void of intellectual curiosity as her friend. She would seem to care about discovering further what sort of man he was mentally, what his ideas were on a variety of subjects. Also, but even more delicately, to interest him, just a little bit, in her own self and ideas.

He was grateful to her, and did what he could to show himself responsive. With the portrait began the period of a less perfunctory relation between them. They had talks sometimes that Aurora declared, without trace of envy, were 'way above her head.

Estelle was waking to an interest in the art and history of the Old World. She was "reading up" on these things. She was also "working at" her French, and would in a little systematic way she had excuse herself at the same hour daily, saying she must go and get her lessons. Not feeling quite the enterprise to study two languages at one time, she had given the preference to French, as being the more generally useful in Europe.

Gerald now made the acquaintance of a new member of the household. She came into the room bearing a small tray with a hot-water pot and a cup. She took this to Aurora, who helped herself to plain hot water, explaining:

"I am trying to 'redoocce.' This is good for what ails me, they say. But I could never in the world think of it. Clotilde thinks of it for me, and she's that punctual! Clotilde, you're too punctual with this stuff. You don't suppose I like it?"

"But think, Madame, of the sylph's form that it will give you!" replied Clotilde, in respectably good English.

"I do think of it. Give me another cup. Mr. Fane, this is Miss-no, I won't launch on that name. It's Italo's sister, who has saved our lives and become our greatest blessing."

Clotilde exposed in smiling a fine array of white teeth. She was not at all like her brother, but well-grown, white and pink beneath her neat head-dress of crisp black hair. She impressed Gerald as belonging to a different and better class. If she were vulgar, it was at least not in the same way. She appeared like that paradox, a lady of the working-class, with a distinguishing air of capability, good humor, and openness. The latter Gerald was not disposed absolutely to trust, but he was glad to trust all the rest.

No sooner had she left the room than Aurora and Estelle in one voice started telling him about her. He learned that she and Italo were not what they called "own" brother and sister, but only half. Their father, being left by the death of his wife with a young family on his hands, had in feeble despair married the cook, become the father of one more child, and died. Italo was that latest born. The children of the first wife had then been taken by her folks, while their step-mother retained her own chick, assisted from a distance by the prouder portion of the family to educate and give him a trade. He had chosen an art instead, and by it was rising in the world. There had been published a waltz of his composing, dedicated by permission to a name with a coronet over it. He lived with and supported his good soul of a mother, and saw something of his half-brethren, all of them through lack of fortune condemned to small ways of life, like himself.

Clotilde, the best-hearted, was his favorite and he hers. She recognized his gifts, she further regarded him as a man of spirit, or wit.

"It must be," reflected Gerald, "that the fellow can stir up a laugh."

He knew him only as a fixture at the piano, but could well accommodate the idea of a species of buffoonery to that boldly jutting nose of his. He fancied that *maldicenza*, gossip further spiced with backbiting, would form the chief baggage of his wit. If he possessed sharp ears, his opportunities for picking up knowledge of other people's affairs were certainly unusual. He passed from house to house, playing accompaniments, drumming for dancing, so insignificant on his screw-stool that many no doubt talked before him as if nobody had been there.

Gerald did not dislike Ceccherelli, really, only had him on his nerves in relation to Aurora. He felt him, indeed, rather likeable at a distance, as part of a story; he had the good point of being an individual. Gerald was in general touched to benevolence at sight of a poor devil elated by his little draught of success. To Ceccherelli without a doubt the patronage of the wealthy American represented success. Ceccherelli pulling out his gold watch was a disarming vision.

Gerald cherished a hope, born of curiosity, that he might witness some exhibition of Ceccherelli's *spirito*, or wit, and upon an evening when the pianist dropped in after dinner was on the alert for manifestations....

It may here be inserted that upon being asked to remain for dinner Gerald had artfully delayed answering until he had made sure that Clotilde did not dine with the ladies. Their familiarity had made him fear it. Highly as he was prepared to esteem Clotilde, the meal would, with her making the fourth, have lost for him those points on account of which he prized it. But he gathered that she found it more convenient to take her meals in private. In rejoicing for himself, he rejoiced also for her, eating in holy peace, as he pictured her doing, the dishes of her country, cooked with oil and onion; pouring the wine of her country from a good fat flask such as never found its place on the table of the strangers.

To go back: Gerald when after dinner the pianist came to make music for the ladies, was hoping for some example of that brightness for which he had a reputation with three persons, possibly more. But Ceccherelli remained on the piano-stool and never once raised his voice. Estelle and Aurora went in turns to chat with him there, but not one witty word reached Gerald. Then he had the sense to see that it was he, Gerald, who acted as a spoil-feast, a dampener. He got an outside view of himself, stiff, dry, critical, ungenial-looking. It was not to be wondered at that the flow of spirits was dried up in the man of temperament by his vicinity. He suspected, catching a side-look from the pianist's small brown eye, that the little man who did not care to speak aloud in his hearing yet had plenty to say on the subject of him in a different entourage.

This notwithstanding, it was only when Gerald got whiffs and echoes of Ceccherelli through Aurora that he called him a pest.

"Italo says," she began, after a silence such as often fell while she posed and he painted, "that Mr. Landini has the evil eye."

"What rubbish!"

"Glad to hear you say so. I don't believe there's any such thing, myself. But Italo swears there is, and has told me story upon story to prove it. He wants me to wear a coral horn and poke it at Mr. Landini whenever he comes near me."

"Wherefore a coral horn? You can more cheaply, and quite as effectually, make horns of your fingers, like this. I should strongly advise you not to let the object of this precaution catch you doing it.... I should think, Mrs. Hawthorne, you would be ashamed to let that inferior little individual corrupt your mind."

Fancying it teased him, she pursued, "What do you think he says besides? That Mr. Landini's color isn't natural, but a juice, he says, a dye, that he stains himself with."

"For the love of Heaven, why?"

"That's what I wanted to know. Why go to all that trouble for the sake of looking like a darkey? But Italo says, says Italo, that it gives him more success with the ladies. His difference from other men obliges them to look at him, then his eyes do the rest."

"I only hope your laugh is sincere, Mrs. Hawthorne, and that you do not allow this poisonous nonsense to affect your feelings towards—"

"Don't be afraid. If I did, I shouldn't be having him to dinner, should I? And he's coming to-night."

"Oh."

"Yes. Quite a party. You weren't asked, because we know you now. You would have managed by sly questions to find out who else was coming and then you wouldn't have come."

"Well, who is coming? There is nothing sly about that."

"I sha'n't tell you. This much I will tell you, though—" she added with the frankness usual to her, "I don't look forward to it much."

It was on the end of his tongue to ask next morning how her dinner had gone off, but on second thoughts he left it for her to speak of when she was ready.

She at first appeared much as on other days, but when she had lapsed into silence and fallen into thought her expression became a shade gloomy. He had noticed that when her eyes were rather more grey than blue it was the sign of a cloud in her sky.

"Might one ask the lady sitting for her picture to look pleasant?" he said.

"Yes, yes," she remembered herself; "I will try to look pleasant. But I feel cross."

"Well?... What went wrong with your dinner?"

"Oh, I made a fool of myself."

"That sounds serious. Was it?"

"Yes. No. Oh. I don't know. I don't suppose it was really serious.... But the whole thing has made me cross."

She labored under an urgent necessity to tell somebody all about it, that was evident.

"You see," she plunged without preamble into her confidence, "from the beginning, I didn't want that party! I love to have folks to dinner, any number, all the time. You know I just love a jollification. But this was different, as I knew it was going to be. It began with Charlie Hunt telling me—or, not exactly telling, I forget how it came out—that yesterday was his birthday. I said, 'Come and celebrate with us!' I was thinking of making a big cake and sticking it full of pink candles. And from that simple beginning, blessed if I know how it happened, except my always wanting to say yes to anything anybody proposes, it came to be a regular dinner-party, the kind they give over here, with courses and wines and finger-bowls, all the frills, and twelve people, not friends of mine at all, barely acquaintances, but people Charlie Hunt thought it would be nice to ask. Well, it was my fault, every bit of it, and nobody else's. I've no business to say all those joyful yeses if I don't mean them. Good enough for me if I have to swallow my pill afterwards without so much as making a face. It wasn't so bad, after all,

everything went all right, thanks to Clotilde and Charlie. Only I wasn't having much fun. Charlie had planned how people should sit, and Mr. Landini was on one side of me, and he was making himself terribly agreeable. He means all right, but his talk, as I guess you know, isn't a bit my kind. And last night, I don't mind telling you—"her voice dropped to a note confidentially low, "with his compliments and incinerations, you'd almost have thought he was sweet on me. Only I know better. And so, as I say, I wasn't having much fun. Then I don't know what got into me. They were passing the fruit. I got up and went to the sideboard and took one of those fine hot-house looking peaches out of our permanent assortment that needs dusting every few days, and I came back to my seat and offered that marble fruit with a fetching smile to Mr. Landini. He looked as if he felt I was bestowing a very particular favor. He took it—and it dropped out of his hand on to the plate with a crash that laid it in smithereens.... You can see why I am cross."

"I shouldn't be surprised, dear woman, if he were cross, too."

"He was perfect! I respected him! Liked him better than I ever had before! I never saw anything so well done as the way he carried it off! I was never so uncomfortable in all my life, though we united in laughing, ha, ha.... Charlie would have taken my head off, if he had dared, afterwards in a corner of the parlor. But the first word he said, I cut in, short as pie-crust, 'Young man,' I said, 'if you aren't careful I shall sit on you. Do you know how much I weigh?' And I meant it."

Gerald prudently placed a paint-brush across his mouth, and shut his teeth on it as on a bridle-bit, to excuse his saying nothing in the way of comment on what he had heard.

Mrs. Hawthorne told him next day at the first opportunity, like one eager to make reparation for an injustice, "It's all right now! A beautiful plate came yesterday afternoon from Ginori's where my dinner-set was bought—a plate, you know, to match the one that got broken. As if I cared anything about the old plate! And along with it Mr. Landini's card, with such a nice message written on it. Don't you think it white in him? When it was all my fault. And in the evening Charlie Hunt came and was sweet as pie. We're just as good friends as ever. I'm ashamed of myself for having felt so put out. Forget anything I said that didn't seem quite kind. He's all right. It's me that's crochety.... Isn't that picture far enough along for you to let me see it?"

"No, Mrs. Hawthorne."

"Will you let me see it when it's far enough along?"

"No."

"I think you're real mean. How much longer will it take to finish it?"

"Does sitting bore you so much?"

"Land, no! Bore me? I perfectly love it! It's like taking a sea-voyage with some one. You see more of them in a week or two than you would in the same number of years on land. I'm getting to feel I know you quite well."

"Wasn't it clever of me to think of the portrait?"

"Go 'way! D'you see anything green in my eye? As I was saying, I'm getting to know you pretty well. You get mad awful' easy, don't you? But you don't hate people, really, nearly as much as I do, that it takes a lot to make mad. There are people in this world that I hate—oh, how I hate 'em! I hate 'em so I could almost put their eyes out. But you, Sticky-prickly, when it comes right down to it, I notice you make a lot of allowance for people. Do you know, when it comes right down to it, you're one of the patientest persons I know. I'd take my chances with you for a judge a lot sooner than I'd like to with loads of people who aren't half so ready to call you a blame' fool."

"While you have been making these valuable discoveries in character, what do you suppose I have been doing, Mrs. Hawthorne?" asked Gerald, after the time it would take to bow ceremoniously in acknowledgement of a compliment.

"Oh, finding out things about me, I suppose."

"Not things. One thing. I had known you for some length of time before my felicitous invention of the portrait, you remember, and as you are barely more elusive than the primary colors, or more intricate than the three virtues, I did not suppose I had anything more to learn. But I had. It can't be said I didn't suspect it. I had seen signs of it. I smelled it, as it were. But I had no idea of its extent, its magnitude, its importance. It is simply amazing, bewildering, funny."

"For goodness' sake, what?" she cried, breathless with interest.

"I can't tell you. It would ill become me to say. The least mention of it on my part would be the height of impertinence. The thing is none of my business. Be so kind as to resume the pose, Mrs. Hawthorne, and to keep very, very still, like a good girl. Do not speak, please, for some time; I am working on your mouth."

Gerald had indeed been astonished, amused, appalled. He had in a general way known that Mrs. Hawthorne was prodigal, the impression one received of her at first sight prepared one to find her generous; but he had formed no idea of the ease and magnificence with which she got rid of money.

In the time so far devoted to painting her he had grown quite accustomed to a little scene that almost daily repeated itself—a scene which he, busy at his side of the room, was presumably not supposed to see, or, if he saw it, to think anything about.

Clotilde would come in with a look of great discretion, a smile of great modesty, and stand hesitating, like a person with a communication to make, but not sufficient boldness to interrupt. Aurora, always glad to drop the pose, would excuse herself to Gerald and ask what Clotilde wanted. Clotilde would then approach and speak low,—not so low, however, but that in spite of him messages and meanings were telegraphed to Gerald's brain. The look itself of the unsealed envelopes in Clotilde's hand was to Gerald's eye full of information. She would

sometimes extract and unfold a document for Aurora to look at; but Aurora would wave it aside with a careless, "You know I couldn't read it if I wanted to." At the end of the murmured conference Aurora would say, "Will you go and get my *porte-monnaie*? It's in my top drawer," and when this had been brought, her dimpled hand would take from it and give to Clotilde bills of twenty, of fifty, of a hundred francs, hardly appearing to count. Sometimes she would say: "I'm afraid I haven't enough. I shall have to make out a check."

Gerald's *flair*, and knowledge of his Florence, enabled him perfectly to divine what was in question. He was only puzzled as to why these transactions should not have taken place at a more private hour, and acutely observed that they took place when they could, this being when Estelle was out of the way. Clotilde also had *flair*.

After Clotilde had retired, Aurora one morning, having imperfectly understood what her money was wanted for, puckered her brows over the letters that, through an oversight, had remained in her hands. She held one out to Gerald to translate. It was from the united chorus-singers of Florence, a simple, direct, and ingenuous appeal for a gratuity. Another letter was from a poor young girl who wished for money to buy her wedding outfit. Another from a poor man out of work.

Gerald could have laughed. But he did not; nor made any remark. He did not dislike seeing those voracious maws stuffed with a fat morsel. He knew as much of the real poverty in Florence as of the innocent impudence of many poor, with their lingering medieval outlook upon the relations of the poor and the rich. He sided with those against these. Singularly, perhaps, he regarded himself as belonging among the latter, the rich. He was glad the chorus-singers and the *sposina* and the worried *padre di famiglia* were going to be made glad by rich crumbs from Aurora's board. But he could not help uneasiness for the future, when the famished locusts, still approaching single scout, should precipitate themselves in battalions, when the whole of Florence should have got the glad tidings and gathered impetus....

Well, Clotilde was there. Clotilde would know pertinent discourses to hold to the brazen beggars when their shamelessness passed bounds. Meanwhile Gerald could see that she enjoyed this distributing of good things among her fellow-citizens. Not that she was strongly disposed to charity. He did not believe she gave away anything of her own, but she loved to see Aurora give. After a life spent in a home where the lumps of sugar were counted and the coffee-beans kept under lock and key, it attracted her like wild, incredible romance.

It would have hurt her to behold this unproductive output, no doubt, had it not been a mere foreigner who lost what her own people gained,—money, besides, that could never have benefited her, and that came nearer to benefiting her when spent in that manner than in another. Clotilde, loyal in service, giving more than good measure, offering all the pleasant fruits of a visible devotion, could yet not be expected to have—or, to state it more fairly, was not supposed by Gerald to have—any real bowels for this outsider, who might for one thing be drawing from bottomless gold-mines, or, if she were not, would suffer a ruin she had richly deserved. And might it not in aftertimes profit her, Clotilde, to have been instrumental to this person and that in obtaining money from the millionaire? The shops recognized such a title to reward, and offered it regularly to such private middlemen as herself for a careful guiding of the dispensing hand, and this without the feeling on any side that it was the payment of the unjust steward.

Gerald did not in the least despise Clotilde, poor Clotilde, with her nose like a little white trumpet between her downy pink and white cheeks, for this businesslike outlook and use of her position. It would have been different if she had been a friend and gentleman.

The portrait did not progress rapidly. Gerald was not hurrying. On Gerald's lips as he painted there played an ambiguous smile, privately derisive of his work and the fun he was having.

No problems, no effort, none of those searching doubts of oneself that produce heart-sickness; nor yet any of those exaltations that cause one to forget the hour of meals. Curious that it should have been fun all the same!... His reply to which was that only a very poor observer could think it curious that the lower man within a man should feel it fun to be indulged. Fortunately, a natural limit was set to this Capuan period.

He would come from the winter world into the room which the American kept enervatingly warm, a pernicious practice. One could not deny, however, that the body relaxed in it with a sense of well-being, after steeling itself to resist the insidious Italian cold, exuding from damp pavements and blown on the sharp tramontana; that cold which is never, if measured by the thermometer, severe, but against which clothing seems ineffectual. The blood does not react against it; the blood shrinks away, and stagnates around the heart.

He would change his coat for a velveteen jacket, not in order to be picturesque, but to keep his coat-cuffs clean. He was as particular as an old maid, Aurora told him, before he had been caught absentmindedly wiping paint off on his hair.

The fair model would get her chair-legs into correspondence with certain chalk-marks on the carpet, be helped to find her pose, and having made herself comfortable, turn on him blue eyes, with a faint brown shadow under them—blue eyes that wore a sheepish look until she presently forgot she was sitting for her picture. She was pressed to keep her opera-cloak over her shoulders, lest she take cold in her *décolleté*; the high fur collar made an effective background for her face. Then he would fall to painting, and the hours of the forenoon would fly.

An amiable woman would now and then make a remark, easily jocular. Another amiable woman—soothing presences, both—would answer. Or he would answer; there would be an interlude of familiar talk, rest, and laughing, and throwing a ball for a scampering puppy. At

noon an end to labor. He would remain for lunch, that meal of cheery luxury, immorally abundant. After it he would still linger in this house, bright and warm with fires, smoking cigarettes in a chair as luxuriously soft as those curling clouds on which are seen throning the gods in ceiling frescos, and grow further day by day into the intimacy of the amiable women. In full afternoon they would ask him if he would go out with them in their carriage, take an airing, and return for dinner; or, if he obstinately declined, might they set him down somewhere. He would make a point of not accepting, and hurry off afoot with his damp umbrella.

Although Gerald had enlightened contempt for the sensuous comfort he was taking in the fleshpots of the Hermitage, there was in it one element which he did not analyze merely to despise.

He was aware of it most often after Estelle had left the room. He settled down then for a time of heightened well-being. It was observable that the sitter also took on a faintly different air. Often at that moment she would vaguely, purposelessly, smile over to him, and he would smile in absolute reciprocity. They would not seize the opportunity for more personal exchange of talk. All would go on as before. He had nothing to say to Aurora or she to him that could not have been said before an army of witnesses. Yet it was to him as if a touch of magic had removed an impediment, and the mysterious effluvium which made the vicinity of Mrs. Hawthorne calming, healing to him, had a chance to flow and steep his nerves in a blessed quiet, a quiet which—one hardly knows how to describe such a thing—was at the same time excitement.

Gerald did not really care for talking. He could, it was true, sit up all night with Vincent Johns, discussing this subject and that; he could split hairs and wander into every intricacy of argument with men and artists; with women too he could sometimes be litigious. The bottom truth was nevertheless that he did not care for talking. It had happened to him to sigh for a world where nobody talked forever and ever.

What he cared for was faces. They were what discoursed to you, told the veracious story of lives and emotions—not lamely, as words do, mingling the trivial with the significant, but altogether perfectly. It rested with you to understand.

Mrs. Hawthorne in talk was cheap as echoes of a traveling-circus tent: you had the simple fooling of the clown, the plain good sense of the farmer's wife, the children's ebullient joy in the show. But Mrs. Hawthorne in silence and abstraction was allied to things august and mysterious, things far removed from her own thoughts. These, while she sat in her foolish jewels, unsuitable by day, were very likely busy with her house, her dressmaker, the doings of her little set, gossip, the personal affairs—who knows?—of the painter painting her. But, profounder than words or thoughts, Mrs. Hawthorne's essential manner of being related her to those forces of the world which the ancient mind figured in the shapes of women. There was something present in her of the basic kindness of old Earth, who wants to feed everybody, is ready to give her breast to all the children. Her robust joyousness reposed, one felt, on a reality, some great fact that made angers and anxieties irrational.

The student of faces could not have maintained that he got these impressions of his sitter through his eyes. It was more, after all, like a reflection received on the sensitive plate of his heart.

One day Gerald began to hurry. He had had enough of it. The portrait was finished in a few hours. The ladies were not permitted to see it. They were made to wait until it was varnished and framed in one of the great, bright Florentine frames of which they were so fond.

Gerald, while they took their first long, rapt look, stood at one side, with a smile like a faun's when a faun is Mephistophelian.

Aurora, clasping her hands in a delight that could find no words to express it, made a sound like the coo of a dove.

Estelle echoed this exclamation, but her charmed surprise did not ring so true, if any one had been watchful enough to seize the shade of difference. Because, not having been made to give a promise, she had from time to time taken a look privately at the painting during its progress. Aurora had known of this and been sorely tempted to do the same, but had resisted the temptation, afraid of Gerald's bad opinion.

"My soul!" she murmured, really much moved.

Of course she knew that the portrait flattered her; but she felt as Lauras and Leonoras and Lucastas no doubt felt when their poets celebrated them under ideal forms in which their friends and families may have had trouble to recognize them. The pride of having inspired an immortal masterpiece must have stirred their hearts to gratitude toward the gifted beings able to see them disencumbered from their faults, and fix them for the contemplation of their own eyes and their neighbors' as they had been at the best moment of their brightest hour.



Aurora, clasping her hands in a delight that could find no words to express it, made a sound like the coo of a dove

In the days when *La Grande Mademoiselle* was painted as *Minerva*, Aurora's portrait might have been called "Mrs. Hawthorne as *Venus*." The expression of her face was as void of history as the fair goddess's. The tender beam of pleasure lighting it suggested that she might that moment have been awarded the apple. The portrait was, nevertheless, in a way, "Aurora all over," as Estelle pronounced it; but an Aurora whose imperfections had been smoothed out of existence, and with them her humor; an Aurora whose good working complexion, as she called it, had been turned to lilies and roses, her hair of mortal gold to immortal sunshine, and those sagacious orbs of blue, which made friends for her by their twinkle, into melting azure stars.

The painter had, besides, glorified every detail of the setting: the rich fabric of the dress, the creamy feathers of the fan, even the roses of the breast-knot. The pearls and diamonds he had amused himself with making larger than they were, and filled these with a winking fire, those with a lambent luster. But Gerald had no mind when he indulged in satire to be gross. The whole was dainty, as shimmering as a soap-bubble, and of a fineness that rightly commended it to lovers of beautiful surfaces.

"I don't care," burst from Aurora, as if in reply to an inaudible criticism, "I just love it! I don't care if it is flattered. I could hug you for it, Gerald Fane. I think it's perfectly lovely. It's going to be a solid satisfaction. By and by, when my double chin has caught up with me, and I'm a homely old thing, and nobody knows what I did look like in my prime, I'll have this to show them. By that time, with my brain weakening, I hope I shall have come to thinking it was as like me as two peas. There's some reason for living now."

Every caller was taken to see the portrait, and heard Mrs. Hawthorne's opinion of the talented artist. The majority of visitors candidly shared her admiration, though not one woman among them can have failed to say to herself that the portrait was flattered. But with a portrait of oneself to have executed, who would not prefer the brush that makes beautiful?

Interest spread in the painter, whose work few even of the Florentines knew except from hearsay. No one who saw Mrs. Hawthorne's portrait was very clearly aware—such is fame!—that it was for Fane a departure. Until it came to Leslie. She stood a long time before the painting, then exclaimed:

"What a joke!"

But she was inclined to take the same view as Mrs. Hawthorne, that when he could paint like that it was a pity Gerald should not do it oftener, to build up a reputation and fill his purse. She only would have advised him not to go quite so far another time in the same direction.

As Gerald, the portrait finished, came no more to the house, fairly as if modesty could not have endured the compliments showered upon him, Aurora with a communication to make had to square herself before her desk in the room of the red flowers and painstakingly pen a note.

Aurora, when taking pains, wrote the cleanest, clearest, most characterless hand that was ever seen outside of a school copy-book, and took pride in it. Aurora's language, when she applied herself to composition, lost the last vestige of color and life. She wrote:

"My dear Mr. Fane:

"You have not been to see us for a long time, and so I am obliged to write what I have to say. It is that our friends *cannot say enough* in praise of your portrait of me, and Mrs. Bixby, an American who is staying at the pension Trollope, wants to have one just like it—one, of course, I mean, as much like her as that is like me, but not a bit more. But before she decides she wants to know what it will cost. And that brings me to the question, What is the price of my picture? Please, let me beg you to make it *a figure I shall not blush to pay* for such a *fine piece of work*. Make it a price that agrees with my estimate of the picture rather than your *very modest* one. I shall be glad, you ought to know, to pay anything you say. You couldn't, if you tried, make it seem too much for me to pay for *such a fine piece of work*. I have got up in the middle of the night and gone down to look at it with a candle, and stood till I began to sneeze, I like it so much, though I know it's too good-looking. So please set a good price on it and not *make me feel mean* taking it. Then I'll tell Mrs. Bixby what I paid. She's got plenty of money, and even if she beats you down, it will be better if she knows I paid a big price. You have such a wonderful talent it ought to make your fortune, and so it will by and by. Don't forget that we are always glad to see you and that you haven't been for quite a while.

"Yours sincerely,

"Aurora Hawthorne.

"P.S. What do you think Busteretto did? He saw me pouring some water into a bowl and imagined I was going to give him a bath. So he went to hide under the grate. Then of course he had to have a bath, which he wouldn't have had to otherwise. He sends much love.

"Another P.S. I meant to tell you we have got a box for the veglione (I hope that is the way to spell it) on the last night of the Carnival. We have only asked the Fosses so far, and we want you to be sure to save that night to come with us."

Gerald, having read, sat down and wrote, with a disregard to the delicacy of his hair-lines and the shading of his down-strokes that would have furnished a poor example to anybody:

"The portrait, my dear Mrs. Hawthorne, is a gift, for which I will not even accept thanks, as it is, your kind opinion notwithstanding, absolutely without value. One sole point of interest it has, that of a future curiosity—the only thing of the kind that will have been painted in his whole lifetime by

"Your devoted friend,

"G. F.

"Shall I find you at home this evening?"

CHAPTER XII

No festivity has quite the vast and varied glitter of a *veglione*. It takes a whole city to make a party so big and bright. And the last *veglione* of the season is rather brighter than the rest, as if the spirit of revelry, inexhausted at the end of Carnival, made haste to use itself up in fireworks before the cold dawn of Ash Wednesday.

The opera-house is cleared of its rows of seats, the stage united to the parquet by a sloping floor. Every one of the boxes, rising tier above tier in a jeweled horseshoe, offers the sight of a merry supper-party, with spread table, twinkling candelabra, flowers, gala display.

Crowding floor and stage and lobbies, swarm the maskers. In the center of the great floor the *corps de ballet*, regiment of sylphs in tulle petticoats and pale-pink tights, performs its characteristic evolutions to the pulsating strains of the opera orchestra. The public dances in the remaining space—dances, promenades, and plays pranks, the special diversion of the evening being to “intrigue” some one. They are heard speaking in high squeaks, in bass rumbles, in any way that may disguise the voice. Many are in costume,—Mephistos, Pierrots, Figaros, Harlequins, but the most are in simple domino.

When a lady wishes to descend among the crowd she, in the darkness at the back of the box, slips a domino over her ball-dress, a mask over her features, and goes forth unknown to all save the cavalier on whose arm she leans.

The only uncovered faces belong to gentlemen. These look often a little foolish, a little bored, because the uncovered faces are the natural objects of the maskers’ impertinences, their part the rather barren amusement of trying to divine who it is endeavoring to intrigue, or puzzle, them, and wittily to parry personalities often more pointed than the drawing-room permits.

The party in Aurora’s box was large for the size of the box. She had gone on inviting people, then brought hampers and hampers of good things with which to feed them. There were the Fosses, Charlie with all the Hunt girls, Landini, Lavin, the American doctor, the American dentist, and Gerald.

Also Manlio. The Fosses had brought him. He had returned from furlough some time before. It was known now to everybody that he was the *fidanzato* of Brenda Foss. There was no talk of his leaving the army; on the contrary, he was rumored to have prospects of early advancement to the grade of captain; wherefore the general public took it for granted that the bride’s parents were providing the indispensable marriage portion.

Aurora’s eyes, at a moment when Manlio’s attention was elsewhere, rested on him with a brooding, shining look. The symptoms of a great happiness, though modestly muffled, were plain in his face. The Beautiful One was coming back in the spring, already near, to marry him.

Aurora’s affectionate look was just tinged with regret. She had suffered a disappointment in connection with Manlio. An obstinate and uncompromising woman beyond the ocean, when invited to join in a harmless conspiracy, had preferred to do actually, to the tune of eight thousand dollars, what the grasping creature should have been satisfied with merely appearing to do. The happiness that pierced through Manlio’s calm, like a strong light through pale marble, came to him from the bride elect’s aunt, and Aurora felt robbed.

But Mrs. Foss’s hand found hers under the table and gave it a warm squeeze, whereupon Aurora’s heart swelled in a way it had of doing. When such a dilation took place, something simultaneously happened to her eyes: the surrounding world was revealed to them as “too lovely for anything.” Dimples declared her joy.

“Won’t somebody have something more?” she asked, with the spoon in her hand poised over a bowl still half full of chicken mayonnaise.

But every one was done with eating; all were in haste to go down on to the floor and find amusement, perhaps adventure, amid the fluctuating, fascinating crowd.

The box was fairly deserted when the door opened again, and the eyes of those left in it, turning to see who entered, were met by two unknown maskers.

One wore the costume of a *bravo* of old times, picturesque, disreputable, an operatic *Sparafucile* in tattered mantle and ragged plume. The other was in a black satin domino, and had the face of a crow, a great black beak projecting from a black mask.

They stood a little way inside of the door as if waiting to be addressed. There was silence for a moment, while the others waited likewise. Within the eye-holes of their masks the eyes of the intruders glittered in the glassy, baffling way of eyes behind masks.

Aurora, unused to the mode of procedure at a *veglione*, asked helplessly in a whisper of Landini:

“What shall I say to them?”

He spoke for her then, in Italian, because he thought it probable that these were Florentines who had come into a strange box for a lark.

“Good evening,” he said. “Will you speak, or sing, and let us know what we can do for your service?”

The bravo, lifting two long hands in loose and torn black gloves, rapidly made signs, like the deaf and dumb.

“You speak too loud,” said Gerald. “We are deafened. Let the lady speak.”

The black domino, with a shrug of the shoulders and a gesture of black-gloved hands excusing the limitations of a bird, answered by a simple caw.

Aurora now found her tongue and her cue:

"And is it yourselves?" she burst in rollickingly. "Proud to meet you! Will you partake?"

With a hospitable sweep of the arm, intelligible to speakers of any language, she made them free of her supper-table, where the candles still twinkled over an appetizing abundance.

Gerald watched sharply, saying to himself: "If they accept, we shall at least see their chins."

But upon the invitation *Sparafucile*, with farcical demonstrations of greed, reached forth his long fingers in the flapping gloves, seized cakes, white grapes, mandarins, nuts, and stuffed them into his wide pockets; while the black domino grasped the neck of a bottle of champagne and possessed herself of a glass. A caw of thanks issued from the black beak, and from the bravo, as with their booty the two retreated to the door, there proceeded, as unexpected as upsetting, a whoop of rejoicing so loud that those near him fell back as if from the danger of an explosion. In the midst of this consternation the maskers were gone.

"My land! did you hear that?" cried Aurora, who had clapped both hands over the pit of her stomach. "Goodness! he's scared the liver-pin out of me! Who d'you suppose they were?"

Landini lost not another minute before asking Mrs. Hawthorne if they should go down together for a turn.

Gerald had been on the point of asking the same thing. He had almost uttered the first word when Landini anticipated him. He felt a sharp prick of annoyance with himself for not having been quicker as much as with Landini for having been so quick. A little jealousy was quite in order with regard to Mrs. Hawthorne now, on the simple ground of that more intimate footing of friendship established between them by the portrait. With the expression of courteous mournfulness proper in an outrivalled cavalier, he made the gesture silently of having been at the lady's service. Manlio did the same.

The singular blonde, with Nubian lip and Parisian hair, Miss Deliverance Jones, or, more commonly, Livvy, who spent this evening at the farther end of the box making her own reflections on the European doings of which she got glimpses, held up a white satin domino for her mistress's arms. Gerald precipitated himself, took it from the maid and held it in her place. He tried to meet his friend's glance, hoping for some faintest sign of participation in his regret at not having been "spryer." For the space of a second, just before she fastened on her mask, he caught her eye. Brief and bright as the illumination of summer lightning, a look of fun flashed over her face. She winked at him.

Landini ceremoniously held his arm for her and Gerald saw them leave together with a lessened objection.

Gerald had for some time past suspected that Landini was paying court to Mrs. Hawthorne. Whether the lady were aware of it he could not tell. Gerald had not believed the man had a chance, although, women being incalculable, one can never feel quite easy. But now he could almost have found it in himself to pity the somewhat singular man-Italian in fact, English in manner, Oriental in looks,-if so were he had built up any little practical dream on the fair widow's acceptance of him. To the possibility of a sentimental dream Gerald did not accord one single thought.

He seated himself, to wait for their return. Only Manlio was left in the box besides himself. Manlio, consecrated to the worship of one afar, cared little to mix with the profane and noisy multitude. As Gerald leaned forth to see the couple that had just left them reappear downstairs, Manlio, whose eyes followed his, remarked very sincerely, when the large easily-recognized white domino came into sight "*È buona!*" which can be translated either, "She is kind," or "She is good."

Gerald felt the warmth of an increased liking for him, because of the perspicacity he showed. They lighted cigarettes, and together looked over the marvelous scene, so rich in color and life, while they talked of things that bore no relation to it, serious things and manly-politics.

Charlie came in with Francesca, who at the door doffed her domino and mask. Both, heated from dancing, were ready for a rest and a little more of the Champagne-cup.

"By the way, Gerald," said Charlie, "that's a jolly good painting, old chap, you made of our charming hostess."

"Glad you like it!" answered Gerald carelessly, without irony.

He did not at the moment dislike Charlie.

He was genially inclined to-night toward all the world. While he had been tying on his white cravat before the glass in preparation for the *veglione*, it had dawned on him, to his surprise and glimmering relief, that he felt something resembling pleasure in the prospect of the confused and promiscuous affair he was enlisted for. He had constated that something like normal responsiveness to the common exterior solicitations to enjoyment was returning to his spirit, his nerves. The tang of life was pleasant to his palate.

A dim gladness moved him, as at coming across a precious thing one had supposed lost, in remembering that he was young....

He laid all this to the mere passage of time, and thanked the gods that unless one dies of one's hurts one finally recovers.

Under these circumstances it is conceivable that he should not momentarily feel hate or impatience toward any fellow-passenger on the amusing old Ship of the World.

Scraps of poetry stirred in the wells of memory where they are dropped and lost sight of. "I feel peaceful as old age," he quoted.

But his eye falling on the white carnation which Giovanna, knowing her signorino was going *in serata*, had provided for his buttonhole, lines less grey came to his lips: "*Neque tu choreas...*" He fished for the half-forgotten words. "*Donec virenti canities abest...*"

Because a positive sense of health pervaded him, he, with a philosophy founded upon observation, remarked that by this sign no doubt he was on the verge of an illness. But he absentmindedly neglected the practices preventive of misfortune, believed in not solely by the *popolino* of Italy, but recommended to him in boyhood by the excellent physician who after curing his mumps had taught him to make horns with his fingers against calamity of any sort that might threaten.

So, being in a good humor, and made further contented by the uplifting privilege of a broad unmistakable wink from a lady, he did not dislike Charlie as usual; he even, as he looked at him, lustrous-eyed, clear-skinned, smooth, lighting his cigarette at a candle, wondered why one should not like him. He had his good qualities. Mere vitality is one. Those points of conduct that called upon him the disdain of persons more fastidious with regard to their actions, secret or revealed, than he, were not productive, after all, of much harm....

With eyes narrowed, as when he was examining a face to paint it, Gerald watched the handsome fellow in an animated cousinly dispute with Francesca—with the result, really against his hope, of finding himself, instead of aided by his effort of good-will to discover new virtues, confirmed in his previous disesteem. He could make himself almost love Charlie by picturing him afflicted, humiliated, sorrowful. But he could not picture him sorrowful except for narrowly personal misfortunes, such as poverty, sickness. One could not even be sure, with a face of so little generosity or moral consciousness as Charlie's, that he would under all circumstances be incapable of active malignity....

The latter thought Gerald had the justice to sweep aside with an unspoken apology.

"Of course, you, Charlie, never could admit that a cousin and a female might know better than you!" Francesca was contending noisily. "It happens that I have lately looked up, with some care, the costumes of the *trecento*...."

"My dear girl!" interrupted Charlie. "You will be insisting next that an *incroyable* is a Greek, or that creature, that sort of Italian bandit who gave the disgusting roar, is a French marquis.... Lend me your glass, will you? I think I see some one I know."

"It's Trix," he said after a moment, "making signs to us from the Sartorio's box. They want us to come over. Come on, let's go."

Manlio and Gerald were again left alone in the silent company of the pale coffee-with-milk-colored maid, who unnoticed crept nearer and nearer the front of the box to peep at the brilliant house.

Gerald was beginning to think that Landini kept Mrs. Hawthorne rather longer than was fair when the door opened to let them in, with Estelle and Leslie and Percy and Doctor Baldwin, all laughing together.

"Well, have you intrigued any one?" Gerald asked Aurora.

"Me? Oh, I wouldn't be up to any such pranks," she said. "Has any one been intriguing you?"

"I haven't been down, Mrs. Hawthorne. I have stayed quietly here, hoping to go down with you, if you will be so good, merely intriguing myself meanwhile—" he dropped his voice so as to be heard of her only,—"with wondering what kept you so awfully long."

"Interesting company, funny sights."

"Are you too tired to come down again and give me a dance?"

"Bless your soul, I'm not tired, but I'm going home."

"Going home?"

"Man, do you know what time it is?"

"I know, of course. But you can't mean you are going home. You only came at midnight, and it's less than half-past two. Hosts of people stay until the big chandelier goes out."

"Ah, don't try to talk me over! It's time I sought my downy, if I want to get up in the morning. We're going to begin Lent like good girls, Estelle and I, by going to church."

Gerald was certain these excuses were hollow. It was obvious, at the same time, that Mrs. Hawthorne was bent on leaving. He was vexed. He wondered what her real reason was, as men so often do, after women have taken pains to give them in detail their reasons, and tried, ignoring what she said, to get some light from her face.

It looked to him excited in a smothered way. He at once connected this repressed excitement with Landini; but then, the face was mirthful, too, in the same lurking manner, and the proposals of a serious man could hardly affect even the most frivolous quite like a comic valentine.

He finally preferred the simplest interpretation: she had seen as much as she wanted to; she was prosaically sleepy and going home to bed.

"Good night," she said. "Come soon to see us! Adieu; no, *ory-vwaw*."

"Am I not permitted to take you to your carriage?"

After seeing them tucked in their snug coupé and hearing this wheel off, Gerald returned to the great hall. He without question would remain until the big light was extinguished. Colors, forms, sparkle, golden haze—a painter must be dead or a duffer to leave before the gay glory of it faded and was dispersed in the gray dawn.

The scene viewed from near had its cheapness, its crudity, like those poor painted faces of the dancers pirouetting in the midst of a public they can more surely enchant from the distance of the stage. The costumes, so many of them, came from humble costumers who let them from year to year without renewal of the tinsel or freshening of the ribbons. But those very things gave to this page of life its depth of interest, gave reality to this romance.

The ball was taking a slightly rougher, noisier character as it approached the end. Some of the boxes were darkened, but the floor was full, even after the tired *ballerine* had been permitted by the management to go home.

Gerald himself now became one of the slightly bored-looking men he had observed earlier,

strolling about, *claque* under arm, in the rigid black and white which took on an effect of austerity amid the blossom-colors of the costumes. He sincerely hoped no one would approach him to intrigue him, and the hope found expression, more than he knew, in his countenance. He felt unable to meet such an adventure in a manner that would satisfy his taste. It marked a fundamental difference between him, at bottom a New-Englander, and his friends of Latin blood, he thought, that he had not the limberness, the *laissez-aller*, the lack of self-consciousness and stupid shame, which enables them so good-humoredly to take the chance of appearing fools. And so before this romance he was only a reader; they were it—the romance.

He could deplore his own gray rôle, but not change it; he therefore wished anew, every time a merry masker looked as though she might intend accosting him that she would think better of it and leave him in deserved neglect. He had his wish; he was in the whole evening teased by nobody whatever.

His eyes, straying over the crowd, sought for known faces. All Florence had turned out for the occasion, but some of it had by this time gone home. Most of the men he knew had women on their arms, and from their silence or talkativeness one might without undue cynicism determine whether these were their own wives and daughters or wives and daughters of others.

A tall, gray-whiskered old gentleman in uniform passed him—none other than Antonia's friend, General Costanzi—who was trying to retain all his dignity while beset by two frolicsome little creatures looking like the chorus in "Faust," who, suspended one on each of his arms, were trying to win from him a promise to take them to supper. He sent toward Gerald a look of comical long-suffering, to which Gerald replied by a nod vaguely congratulatory, and a smile that courteously wished him luck in that lottery.

The painter Castagnola, broad-blown, debonair, passed him, in a costume of sterling and royal magnificence, copied from a portrait of Francis First whom he in feature resembled. At his side, with gold cymbals in her hands, went a figure in floating robes of daffodil gauze, a dancer from one of the frescoes of Pompeii, wearing a mask—four inches of black velvet—only for the form. Her bare shoulders and arms, of an insolent beauty, forbade any mistake as to her identity. Gerald knew, like the rest, that it was Castagnola's model.

Charlie passed him, at a little distance, with a laughing lady hitched to his elbow. Her mask swung from her hand—the ball was wearing to its end, and masks are hot. The hood of her rose-colored domino had been pushed back from a mass of ruffled black hair; her eyes and teeth gleamed with equal brightness and directness of purpose. It was suggested to Gerald by her air and manner that she had forgotten the spectators. Her freedom from constraint was shared by Charlie. Seeing them together reminded Gerald that Charlie was after all Italian,—one forgot it sometimes. He tried to remember which of the bits of scandal tossed on to the dust-heap at the back of his memory was the one fitting this Signora Sartorio.

They passed out of sight, and he forgot them in the interest of the next thing.

Carlo Guerra, like him alone, stopped to chat with him. Guerra, a pleasant figure in Anglo-American as well as Florentine circles, with his fine head of a monk whom circumstances have rendered worldly, had, before inheriting his comfortable income, been a journalist. He still enjoyed above all things the exercise of the critical faculty, and had much to say this evening about a recent exhibition of paintings.

Gerald was hearing it with proper interest when some part of his attention was drawn away by a sound across the house. It was, softened by distance, that species of lion's roar, incredibly large as issuing from a human throat, and comical from such a disproportion, which had startled the audience several times already that evening. Gerald turned, without much thinking, to look off in the direction whence it came and single out the figure with which it was associated, when he was surprised to find the figure he sought almost under his nose. Not more than six feet from him were to be seen the tattered mantle and ragged plume of *Sparafucile*; likewise the thick crow's-beak of the black domino.

The two were looking at him and, his impression was, laughing. He fancied they were on the point of speaking to him,—he had thought earlier in the evening when they came into the box that they might be acquaintances,—but the crow suddenly pressed tittering against the bandit, pushing and pulling him away. In a moment they were lost among the crowd.

Who, then, had been accountable for the roar at the other end of the house? An imitator? A double? Gerald suspected a masked-ball device intended to intrigue. He gave it no more thought, but proceeded, started on that line by the episode, to reflect on the singularity, yes, the crassness, of Mrs. Hawthorne's determination to leave the ball early. The secret of it was, of course, that she had no imagination, no education of the imagination. A *veglione* was caviar to her. This wonderful scene, beheld for the first time, perhaps the only time in life, and she had had to go to bed just as if they had been in Boston or Charlestown! If one must go to church in such a case, it was Gerald's opinion, one does not go to bed at all. But she belonged to the class of people who would miss the last act of an opera rather than miss a train or allow the beans to burn. A bread-and-butter person, a sluggish, fat-brained person, elementary, not awakened and sharpened to appreciation and wonder. If he had not been in such a good humor he might have been cross, scornful of her; as it was, he indulgently thought her merely too flatly healthy in every taste for anything but the wilds of Cape Cod to which she sometimes playfully referred.

He here perceived that he had entirely lost the thread of Guerra's talk, and that Guerra, probably aware of it, had moved to another subject. It was hearing the name Hawthorne that had startled him to attention.

"I saw you earlier in the evening in a box with Mrs. Hawthorne," Guerra said, "whom, you

remember, I had the pleasure of meeting at Mrs. Grangeon's."

After considering a moment with a half-smile, he nodded and pronounced in the tone of an impartial critic, "*Simpatica!*" Then, after considering another moment, nodded again. "*Ha gli occhi di donna buona.*" Which means, or nearly, "She has good eyes." And Gerald's esteem for Guerra was immensely raised, for while thinking very well of him, he would yet not have expected a man like Guerra to discern so much at a first meeting. A worldling like Guerra might so naturally have said "*È bella!*" for Aurora that evening in her best frock, had been *bella*-beautiful; or he might have said, "*Begli occhi!*" for her shining blue eyes admitted of that description. That Guerra had said what he said indicated finer feeling than Gerald had given him credit for.

Still lingering in desultory talk, the former journalist now asked:

"Have you seen the Grangeon?"

"No," said Gerald. "Is she here?"

"Yes; she is with the Rostopchine, in a box of the third order." He looked up and around to find the box with his eyes, and after a moment indicated it to Gerald. "There! Do you see them? The Rostopchine in pale purple, and the Grangeon in an Indian thing all incrustated with green beetle-wings, a thing for a museum. They are talking with a uniform whom I do not know. She was speaking of you this evening-Antonia, asking me what you are doing. She has great faith in your talent."

Gerald's lip curled a little sourly, and he stood looking upward without reply.

Turning to look down through her jeweled lorgnette and running her eyes over the crowd, Antonia now saw him. Recognition lighted her face to unexpected liveliness. She fluttered her hand to him demonstratively.

After bowing and smiling, he stood quietly, with face upturned, receiving her showered greetings.

He had a certain knowledge of Antonia. She was capable of entirely dropping the remembrance of her bad treatment of him; perhaps forgetting it really, but likelier choosing merely that he should forget it. She permitted herself the caprices of a spoiled beauty.

A classic golden fillet this evening bound her gray locks; a jewel depending from it sparkled upon the deeply lined forehead of a brain-worker. Her irreparably withered neck was clasped by an Indian necklace, showy as a piece of stage jewelry. Light-minded smiles wreathed her heavy face. Where her sleeves stopped there began the soft and serried wrinkles of those long, long buttonless gloves which Sarah Bernhardt had brought into fashion.

It was not difficult to see in what illusion Antonia chose to live to-night. Her readers might even, perhaps, have determined which of her own heroines she personated.

For all these things Gerald liked his old friend the more.

Her lips framed the words, "Come up! Come up!" while her hand made the equivalent signs.

He nodded assent, and with Guerra walking beside him started on his way. Guerra under the central box excused himself and turned back, having already paid his respects. Gerald, once out in the lobby, advanced more uncertainly, finally hesitated and stopped.

He was not sure he wished to see Antonia in circumstances which would not allow him to express his resentment of her behavior toward the friend whom with her formal permission he had brought to her house. It was owed to Mrs. Hawthorne not to let the incident pass. He had ceased to be furious at Antonia; he had not written in cold blood the wrathful, finishing letter planned in heat of brain. That, after all, was Antonia as he had always known her and been her friend: Antonia, capable of heroisms and generousities, fineness and insight, density and petulance. One could not drop the great woman into the waste-basket because on one occasion more she had been perverse and the sufferer happened to be oneself. But the great woman, thought Gerald, needed a sober word spoken to her. In conclusion, he would not go to see her, no, until he could have it out with her.

And so instead of seeking Antonia in her box, Gerald cut short his difficulty by going home. It was high time; it had been Lent for hours. If Antonia were *intrigata* at his failure to appear, it would only be in keeping with the fanciful circumstances of the hour and place.

CHAPTER XIII

Early in Lent the weather treated Florence to what Aurora and Estelle called a cold snap. Their surprise and indignation were extreme. That Italy, sunny Italy, should feel herself free to have these alpine or polar fancies!

Estelle showed what she thought of it by taking cold. Aurora affected wearing her furs in the house. To increase their sense of ill usage, they would now and then turn their faces away from the fire and sigh, admiring how the air was dimmed by a puff of silver smoke. These pilgrims from a Northern climate, who knew so well the sensation of breath freezing in the nostrils and numbness seizing the nose when on certain winter days they stepped from their houses into the snow-piled streets at home, could not admit that in the City of Flowers one should catch sight of one's breath,-indoors, too.

The little monthly roses, shivering but brave, blooming still, or blooming already, out in the garden, bore witness, after all, to the clemency of the winter, and upheld the city's title to its name. The garden altogether was nearly as green as ever. Against alaternus, ivy, myrtle, laurestine the season could not prevail. Aurora decided that the blame for their discomfort rested with the house; she planned drastic and fundamental improvements which it was quite certain the noble landlord would not permit her to carry out.

What with Estelle being half sick and herself, as she claimed, half frozen, Aurora at the end of a day during which the sun had not lighted the world by one feeblest ray, and the night had closed down thick and damp, was just a little disposed to low spirits. She had not been out, and nobody had come to see her. She felt the weariness that follows for certain sociable natures upon a long stretch of hours without renewal from outside.

She sensibly reacted against it by making the sitting-room as cozy as she could, drawing close the crushed-strawberry curtains, piling wood on the fire, placing a screen so that it shielded her chair and table from the draft; and, seated in her chimney-corner, took up a piece of knitting.

She was not very fond of reading, and she was fond of knitting large soft woolly afghans, of which she made presents to her friends. Reading seemed to her, anyhow, a rather idle thing to be doing. Knitting came under the head of work. How often had her story-paper been snatched from her when she was a girl, and a sock to knit thrust in her hand, with the bidding to be about something useful. How she had hated it. But now that she was free she still had a better conscience when she knit.

To the click of her long wooden needles she thought, with more pleasure than was afforded by any other vision at the moment, of a hot water bottle gently warming the bed into which she meant to creep at exactly nine o'clock. This hour she had set when at eight already the temptation to go to bed and forget the unsatisfactory day in sound warm slumbers had been so strong as to make yielding to it appear wrong.

These vestiges of Puritanism Aurora did not recognize as such, but yet her mind as she was practicing self-discipline turned, without seeking for the reason, toward the person who had done most to inculcate in her the doctrine that if you like to do a thing that itself is almost surely a sign of the thing being wicked, and that if you dislike it it is very probably your duty.

While she continued to appear the signora to whom the servants' eyes were accustomed, albeit a trifle more absent and unsmiling, she was to herself a young girl in a far country, living and moving in scenes of difficulty and misunderstanding with a sharp-chinned, narrow-chested, timidly-beloved just woman-her mother, long since laid to rest....

There was nothing from outside to dispel the faint heartache accompanying this retrospection; wind and rain against the windows were more proper to increase the melancholy, and Aurora, suddenly sick of staying up to be blue, wound her yarn to start for bed. But first, for just a moment, she would go down-stairs, she thought, and have a look at her portrait, for that was the most comforting thing to do that she could think of. She loved her portrait as a child loves its favorite toy.

This she was intending when the sound of the door-bell at once stopped and cheered her by the possibility it held out of some diversion. Vitale entered with a package.

Catching in what he said the name Gaetano, Aurora took it to mean that Gaetano had brought the package. He was waiting below, she did not doubt. Gaetano was Giovanna's nephew, and had more than once come on errands from Gerald. Saying, "*Aspettare!*" she hastened into her room for the porte-monnaie which resided in her top drawer. From this she drew a reward that should make the journey through night and rain from Gerald's house to hers seem no hardship. Her blues had vanished.

Before removing the rain-splashed newspaper, she gazed for a moment at the package, trying to guess what it could be. It was square, flat, about a foot and a half one way by a foot the other. What was Gerald Fane sending her like that without any enlightening missive? A note might be inside. She cut the string, took off the newspaper, to find a second wrapper of clean white drawing-paper. After touching and pinching, she guessed the object to be a picture-frame and picture. Filled with curiosity, she pulled off the last wrapping, and with a face at first very blank stared before her....

It was a painting, one of the kind she had seen at Gerald's studio and not liked.

Different though it was from the portrait down-stairs,-as different as poverty from riches, as twilight from day,-she could yet see that this also was meant for a portrait of herself. She remembered tying that blue neckerchief over her head and under her chin one evening,

trying to look like an Italian in her *pezzola*, to make the others laugh.

She stood the picture on the chair which she had pulled up before her so as to rest her feet on the rung, off the stone floor, still to be felt, she imagined, through the rug. Of course it was herself, but how disappointing-disappointing enough to shed tears over-to have this held up to her after that lovely being down-stairs! How unkind of her friend Gerald!

Unfair, too, for although this, in not being a beauty, was obviously more like her than the other, she could not admit that it was any truer. She could not believe that she ever really looked like this, though she knew that it was the way she sometimes felt. How had Gerald known she ever felt like this?

That she was a person who ate well, slept well, felt well, loved fun, was giving and gay-that was all most people knew, or were entitled to know, of her; all she knew of herself a good deal of the time. Such things could never be the whole of any person, of course. Every one has had something to overcome. Some persons have had to overcome and overcome and overcome, one thing after another, one thing after another, that has tried to drag and keep them down. She had had-probably because, as her mother often told her, she was born with such a lot of the devil in her-a great many trials sent to her, for her discipline, no doubt, her cleansing; but she had come out of them still unreduced, still eager for a good time.

All persons are made up, in a way, of these experiences of the past, but they don't expose them in their faces, they forget them as much as they can.

Yes, as much as they can. How much is that? The only true sorrows being involved with one's affections, and the objects of one's love never far from one's thoughts, how much could a person be said to forget her sorrows, really?

Aurora reflected upon this for some time, staring the while at her portrait. The face looking back from the canvas was very like her, had she but known it, at this exact moment, while the thoughts produced, the memories wakened, by it substituted for her ordinary hardness the delicate look of a capacity for pain.

As she gazed at the portrait longer she liked it better; from minute to minute she became more reconciled, and found herself finally almost attracted. Something from it penetrated her for which she had no definition. It was perhaps the dignity of humanity confronting her in that strong and simple face framed by the kerchief, like a woman of the people's,-her own face, but not certainly as she saw it in the mirror; a humanity that out of the common materials offered to it day by day had rejected all that was mean and contrived to build up nobleness.

Half perceiving that this portrait in its different way flattered her as much if not more than the portrait down-stairs, she, while modestly refusing to be fooled by the compliment, yet felt a motion of affectionate gratitude toward Gerald for the sympathy which had enabled him to pierce beneath the surface and see that Bouncing Betsy had her feelings, too, her history; yes, her bitter tragedy.

While continuing with her eyes on the picture, she from time to time wiped them, and when the door-bell rang again, aware of being "a sight," took the precaution of retiring to her bedroom, so that if Vitale should come to announce a visit,-it was not yet nine o'clock,-she could the better make him understand that he must excuse her to the visitor; she was going to bed.

But learning from the servant that Signor Fane was below, she changed her mind, and chose unhesitatingly from her stock of useful infinitives the appropriate two: "*Dire venire.*"

Gerald found her by the fire, her fur-cloak over her shoulders, her woolly afghan in her hands, and the picture on the chair before her.

"Well?" he asked expectantly, looking at it, too, after they had shaken hands.

"You've made me feel sorry for myself. What's the use?" she answered in a little sigh, keeping her reddened eyes turned away from him. "Hush! Wait a moment! I was forgetting," she added, in comedy anticlimax, like a housewife who in the midst of a scene of sentiment should smell the dinner scorching. She jumped up, and went without the least noise to close the door to Estelle's room, returning from which she illogically fell to talking in a whisper.

"Estelle's gone to bed. She's got a snow-balling old cold. I've rubbed her chest with liniment, and tied up her throat in a compress, and given her hot lemonade, and she lies there with a hot water bottle at her feet and grease on her nose, and let's hope she'll feel better in the morning."

"Let's hope, indeed. I'm very sorry to hear she's ill. But she's sure to be better by tomorrow, isn't she, with all that care and those remedies. I hope you haven't a cold, too, Mrs. Hawthorne. You almost look," he said innocently, "as if you had. This weather is dreadful. You haven't, have you, dear friend?"

"No; I guess what you see is just that I've been crying. Don't say anything about it. Don't notice it. Never mind. Come and sit down by the fire and get warm. Your hand was like ice."

"It's very bad out, and not much better in, except here by your generous fireside. I haven't been warm all day."

"Why didn't you come before? It isn't what I call balmy here, but I expect it's balmier than at your place."

With her kindly unconstraint she reached for one of his hands to test its temperature. With a little cry of "Mercy me!" she closed his numb fingers between her palms to warm them, as if the blaze could not have accomplished this end so well as they.

He let it be, not with the same unconsciousness in the matter as she, but hoping that the soft, warm infolding would somehow do him good. He had come in the rather desperate hope of being done good to. As he had been about to start out, having intended, when he sent the portrait, to follow close upon it, he had found himself feeling so ill-feeling, at the end of the dismal day, so indescribably burdened and ill and apprehensive of worse things-that he had

been on the point of giving it up. But then the wish itself to escape from his bad feelings had impelled him forth toward the spot glowing warmer and cheerier in his thoughts than any other, where, if he could forget how ill he felt, he would naturally feel better. Aurora's house during the days of painting the first portrait had come to feel remarkably like home to him.

So when Aurora released his hand, saying, "Let's have the other," he docilely gave it to her, though the fire had already partly thawed it. Gratefully, with the hand set free, he covered both her kind hands, which loved so much to warm things and feed things and pet things and give away money.

Overcoming his ordinary stiffness, he pressed them right manfully, to signify that he would not speak of her tears if she wished him not to, but here was his sympathy, and with it his penitence, if so were that, as she intimated, he had had a share in making them flow.

"So you are all alone this evening?" he asked in the voice that makes whatever is said seem affectionate and comforting.

"Yes. I haven't even Busteretto. I let Estelle keep him on the foot of her bed. She's perfectly devoted to him. And Clotilde is busy in her own corner of the house, going over the bills. It takes lots of time."

"And where is the musician in ordinary, the gifted Italo?" he inquired, with a smile meant to draw from her a smile.

She was caught without difficulty. "The gifted Checkerberry hasn't been round lately," she smiled. "He won't expose himself to the night air for some time. He's got laryngitis so he can't talk above a whisper." Her eye twinkled and she laughed, though what she communicated was not on the face of it very funny.

He was perhaps calling attention to this when he said, "Poor devil!"

"Yes," she agreed, achieving sobriety, "it's bad weather for laryngitis," and went on with the weather, dropping Italo. "It's been a mean sort of day, hasn't it? I haven't set foot outside. I was already feeling kind of blue and making up my mind to go to bed when Gaetano came with your present."

There was an intimation in her glance that this event had not made the world appear any rosier.

Both turned to look at the picture. Their hands loosened naturally; they sat apart.

"Can't you see why I had to paint it, Mrs. Hawthorne?" he asked, speaking eagerly, and as if pressing his defense.

"How could I endure to have that thing down-stairs stand as my idea, my sole idea, of you? And how could I bear to make you a gift, a sole gift, of a piece of work I do not respect? This may be worth no more, -I think differently, -but it is at least the best I can produce. It has my sanction. You, too, believe me, will prefer it to the other after a while."

She shook her head a little disconsolately.

"The other you can, if you must, keep in your drawing-room to make an agreeable spot of color," he went on, reversing their parts and trying to induce in her a lighter humor; "it has that perfectly legitimate use. In your drawing-room, you know, Auroretta, among the pictures of your choosing, it does not, in our Italian idiom, altogether disappear. This one you will keep out of sight, but will look at now and then, if you please; and I quite trust you, with time, to recognize that it was painted by some one who understood and honored you more than there was any evidence of his doing when he perpetrated, for a joke, that bonbon-box subject down-stairs."

Mrs. Hawthorne, with soft and saddened eyes fixed on the portrait, again shook her head, sighing, "Poor thing!"

"Not at all!" he protested almost peevishly. "Please not to suggest by pitying her that I have not represented there a fine, big, strong thing, built to stand up under anything! I could slay, with pleasure, at any time" - he diverged, carried away by a long-standing disgust, - "the pestiferous asses who call my things morbid. I am too careful to keep true to what I see. The difference between them - I mean the critics who call me morbid - and myself, is in the degree of sight."

"Don't get excited, Geraldino!" she checked fumings which she did not entirely understand. "What I meant was that looking at her has made me think of all the things that have gone wrong with me in my whole life. Don't you call that a tribute? You couldn't have painted this picture if you hadn't suspected those things, and, honest, I don't see how you could suspect them. Ever since I came over here I've been so jolly. Seems to me I've been nothing but jolly. I've been having such a good time! How you could see under it, I don't know. As a matter of fact, I've always been jolly between-times. Give me half a chance, let me get out of the frying-pan, I'd be ready in a minute to go on a picnic. But I've not been spared my troubles, Geraldino; you were right there."

At this reference to many sorrows, he found a thing to do more expressive than words. Sitting near each other as they were, he could reach her without rising; he bent forward and touched his lips commiseratingly to her hand.

He might have known that it would bring her story, but he had not schemed for this, and, unwilling, yet eager, to hear, was a prey to compunctions on more than one ground when, after a little gulp and sniff, she burst forth:

"I've seen perfectly dreadful times, Geraldino. Some of them were the sort of thing you can get over, but some of them - upon my word, I wonder at myself how I've got over them as I have. The queer thing is - I haven't, in a way. It will come over me sometimes, in the queerest places, at the oddest moments, that I am still that woman to whom such awful things happened, that I, playing my silly monkey-shines, am that heart-broken woman."

"I know," murmured Gerald, and took her plump hands steadily between his hard, thin ones.

"I've never had any sense," she let herself go. "Anybody can see that; and when I was younger I had even less, naturally, than I have now. Always, always, I wanted so to be happy! I wanted to have a good time. I was born wanting to have a good time. And everything was against it. But I managed somehow. One way or another, I got to the circus 'most every time. My mother used to wonder what my finish would be, and try to lick the Old Boy out of me. But it couldn't be done. I'm just like my father, my dear old pa, who was a sinner. He let ma have her way in everything, as he thought it right to do. Not, I guess, because he always liked her way, but because after my sister, who was a beautiful child, died in such a terrible way that I can't even bear to mention it,—she caught fire,—Aurora hurriedly interjected, "ma came so near going out of her senses that pa humored her in everything. He thought the world of her; so did we all, but it couldn't be called a happy home. There were three boys, besides me,—I was the last,—and we were all such everlastingly lively young ones, and ma was so strict! Pa was away most of the time getting a living. My pa, you know, was a pilot. It wasn't a fat living for so many of us, but that wouldn't have mattered long as we had enough to eat. But ma, poor soul, because of that twist her mind had taken through sorrow, was always seeing something wrong in everything we did; she never could be quiet or contented. The boys didn't get so much of it: they were off out of doors and later at their trades; but me, I was kept in to help with the housework, and kept in for company, and kept in for no other reason, I guess, than because my wicked heart longed so to go out and play with the girls and boys. I dare say it was good for me. Ma meant all right, that I know, but ma was all along a sick woman. We realized later that though she was round and about, busy every minute, she was sick for years with the trouble that finally took her away. I don't want you to think I didn't have a real good mother, for I did—a first-rate mother who did her honest best to make a good woman of me."

"I know, I know." By a reminding pressure of her hands he begged she would trust him not to misunderstand.

"But my pa—you should have known my pa!" Aurora's face brightened immensely, and Gerald suspected that it was like him she looked when she screwed her lips to one side in a manner humorously suggesting a pipe at the corner of her mouth, and said in a voice not her own, "Golly, Nell, can't you whistle for a snifter?" He could almost see a sailor's chin-whiskers.

"He took me with him once in a while. Golly, those were good times, if you please! Free as air, all the peanuts I could eat, out in the boat with my pa, and catch fish, and catch a steamer if we could. We had an 8 big as a house on our sail. He was as good a seaman, my pa was, as any in East Boston, but he wasn't a hustler. But there, if he'd been a hustler, he wouldn't have been my pa. Wouldn't for a house with a brownstone front have had my pa any different from what he was. Grandma was just the same sort, God bless her! easy-going, jolly, come a day, go a day, do as she please and let you do as you please. I used to have such lovely times at her house, summers, down on the Cape, before my sister died!

"It was there I first knew Hattie-Estelle. Her aunt's house was next to my grandma's. I used to think her the luckiest child that ever was born. Seemed to me she had just about everything—a gold locket and chain, bronze boots, and paper dolls by the dozen. We used to play together, day in day out, one of those plays that last all the time, where you pretend you're some one else and act it out in all you do. We kept it up for years. I don't see that we've changed much with growing up. Seems to me we were pretty near the same then as we are now, having our spats, but having lots of fun, and wanting to share everything. Estelle lived in East Boston, too, and was going to be a school-teacher. It seemed to me that to be a school-teacher was just about the finest thing anybody could do. That would have been my ambition, to be a school-teacher. But I never got beyond the grammar school, I was needed at home to help mother. Then my poor pa died—an accident down in the docks,"—Aurora, lowering her voice, began to hurry and condense,—“then Ben, then Joe, then—will you believe it?—Charlie, that I loved best. They all had the same delicate constitution as ma, it turned out, and a predisposition to the same trouble. Then finally, after going through with so much, my poor mother went, too, and for that I could only be thankful. And I had taken care of them all. I wasn't twenty-three when I was the last left. Doesn't it seem strange! I sometimes can't believe it even now."

This rapid enumeration of calamities so great robbed them of terror and pathos, yet Gerald had somewhat the startled, shocked feeling of a man who knows he has been struck by a bullet, though his nerves have not yet announced it by suffering.

Aurora, who after the passing of years could think of these things without tears, yet in speaking of them to a sympathetic hearer had obvious difficulty in keeping a stiff upper lip. Gerald turned away his eyes while with her hand she covered and tried to stop her mouth's trembling.

"Poor child!" he said, with a sincerity which saved the words from insignificance.

"Yes," she half laughed. "Wouldn't one think it enough to sort of subdue anybody, take the starch out of them for some time? When I came out of that house of sickness I couldn't think of anything else but sickness and death. It stuck to me like the smell of disinfectants after you've been in a hospital. I couldn't think of anything but that it would take me next. I supposed I must be affected, too. But the doctor examined me, and do you know what he said? 'Sound as a trout,' he said. 'You're so sound,' he said, 'you're so healthy, that we'll have to shoot you to get you to the resurrection.' Then I felt better. He was a new doctor that we'd called in toward the end. He knew how I was situated, and as he seemed to think I'd make a good nurse, he got me a chance in the City Hospital, where I could get my training. And Hattie, dear Hattie, what a friend she's been! She and her ma and pa made me come and make my home with them. It's since then that we've been like sisters."

At the sound, appositely occurring, of a cough in the neighboring room, Aurora stopped and listened.

"Dear me!" she whispered. "D'you suppose she's lying awake?"

"She may be coughing in her sleep," he suggested.

"Yes," Aurora said dubiously, after further listening, and hearing nothing more. "And if I should go in to see, I might wake her. The bell-rope is right at the head of her bed; all she has to do is pull it if she wants somebody to come. I was entertaining you with the story of my life, wasn't I? Where had I got to? Oh, yes. There in the hospital I just loved it. Perhaps you can't see how I could. I just did. I had lots of hard work. The training was sort of thrown in in my case with other duties, but there were the other nurses and the house-doctors, I grew chummy with them all. I had fun with the patients, too. You don't know how much good it does you to watch anybody get well; the majority get well. It's good for them, besides, to have you jolly."

"Your gaiety of heart makes me think of the grass, Aurora, the blessed ineradicable grass, that will grow anywhere, that you see pushing up between the paving-stones of the hard city, and finding a foothold on the blank of the rock, and fringing the top of the ruined castle, and hiding the new-made graves."

Aurora, always simple-mindedly charmed with a compliment, paused long enough to investigate Gerald's comparison, then resumed, with the effect of taking a plunge into deep waters:

"But it was there I met the fellow who did me the worst turn of any...."

"They brought him in with broken ribs one rainy night, after he'd been knocked down in the street by a team and kicked by the horses. I wasn't his regular nurse, but I was in and out of his room, and if he rang while his regular nurse was at her meals, I'd go. Everybody knows that when a man's sick he's liable to get sweet on this or that one of his nurses."

"How I could have been mistaken in Jim Barton I can't see now. Since knowing him, if I ever see anybody that looks a bit like him, I shun them like poison, because I know as well as I need to that however nice they may appear, you can't depend upon them. But before I knew him I'd never stop to distrust anybody."

"It began with our setting up jokes together; he could be awfully funny even when he was swearing like a pirate about his luck landing him in a hospital. Bad language didn't seem so awful coming from him, because he was so light-complexioned and boyish-looking. He was only passing through the city, in an awful hurry to get West, when he got hurt, and he was madder than a hornet at the delay. But after a while he quieted down, because he'd got something else to think about, which was getting me to go along with him to California, where he'd bought a share in a mine. And me, star idiot of the world, it seemed the grandest thing that had ever happened. I'd never had anybody in love with me that way before. The boys had always liked me, but I'd been like another fellow among them, and I'd never more than just been silly for a week or two at a time over one fellow and another at a distance. And here was a solid offer from a perfectly splendid man who had everything, money included. They'd found several thousand dollars on him when he was picked up. And the yarns he told about gold-mines!... But it wasn't that, it wasn't the gold-mines, it was 'the way with him' that caught me. I guess when you're in love you're no judge of your man. We two, I tell you, seemed made for each other. He was as fond of a good time as I, and he loved fun, like me. We were going to California to make our everlasting fortune. You'd have thought there was no more doubt about it than the Gospels being true. And the good times we were going to have while doing it were nothing to the good times we'd have after, when I'd have my diamonds and he'd have his horses and things. As I said, the diamonds weren't needed; I'd have gone with him anywhere just for the fun of being together. I couldn't see what I'd done to deserve my blessings. I guess he was in love, too, as far as it was in him to be; I'll do him that justice."

"Hattie and her ma, while they had nothing to say against Jim, wanted me to wait awhile. But Jim couldn't wait. The moment he was well enough he wanted to be off. And I didn't care much about waiting either. I felt as if I'd known him all my life. So they said nothing more and gave us a perfectly lovely wedding from their house. They didn't see through him any more than I did, and in a way it wasn't strange, because he wasn't hiding anything in particular or misrepresenting anything. He believed all he said about the big money he was going to make and the grand times we should have. He was born with the sort of nature that always believes things are going to turn out right without labor and perseverance on your part. He wasn't fond of work, that's sure. What we ought to have done was find out something about his past; but even that, I guess, wouldn't have opened our eyes, with him before us looking like one of ourselves. And it wasn't a very long past; he was young. He came of good folks, I guess. I never saw them, but there are ways of telling. Good folks, but not wealthy, and so as to get rich easily he had tried one thing after another. He was quick' discouraged, and the moment the thing didn't look so big or easy he wanted to throw it over and try something else. Then I've come to the conclusion he loved change for its own sake—go somewhere else, take a new name, and start a new business, talking big. It came out after he died that he'd been known under half a dozen names in as many States. There simply wasn't anything *to* him. I don't believe he meant to act like a skunk, but, then, he hadn't any principles either to keep him from acting like a skunk, or meaner than a skunk, when it came to getting himself out of difficulty. And I, for my sins, had to marry such a fellow as that! It was like there had stood the good times I'd always wanted, right before me in the body, and I took them for better, for worse, and got what my ma said I deserved to get when she tried to cure me of my fancy for good times!"

"Don't!" protested Gerald, softly. "Don't regard as wrong what was so natural. All who

have the benefit of knowing you must thank the stars which permitted your beautiful love of life to survive the dreadfulness of which you have given me a glimpse."

"The dreadfulness, Geraldino! I haven't told you anything yet of the dreadfulness. I haven't come to it. I haven't come to what makes her"—she nodded toward the portrait,—“look like that.”

"Then tell me!" he encouraged her.

"It isn't Jim. When I think of Jim, it only makes me mad. My heart is hard as stone toward him." She clenched her jaws and looked, in fact, rather grim. "That he's dead doesn't change it. I hope I forgive him as a Christian ought to who asks forgiveness for her own trespasses. I know I don't feel revengeful. There wasn't enough *to*Jim for me to wish him punished in hell. But if you think I have any sentiment because I used to love him, or that I was sorry I woke up from my fool dream when I once had seen it was a dream—Not a bit of it. There was a time, though, when I first began to suspect and understand, that makes me rather sick to think of even now. I was so far from home, you see. I hadn't a friend, and I wouldn't for worlds have written back to my old friends that I'd made a bad bargain—not while I wasn't dead sure. And I kept on hoping.

"At first we had a real good time. We lived in a miner's cottage, but that seemed sort of jolly. I'd been used to hard work all my life, so I didn't mind that, and I wanted him to have as nice a home as any man could on the same money. So I cleaned and contrived and baked and brewed and fixed up. I wanted him to be pleased with me and proud among the other men. But pretty soon I found I didn't care to make acquaintances, because I was ashamed of the way Jim did. He kept putting all his money into the mine, sending good money after bad, and let me keep house on nothing, and then was in a worse and worse temper because the mine didn't pan out and things weren't more comfortable at home. I began to wake up in the night and lie there in a cold sweat, clean scairt. I haven't told you that we were looking for an addition to the family. That's one reason I was so scairt. But I shut my teeth, and said I to myself, 'This baby's going to have a chance if his mother can give it to him by not getting excited or letting things prey on her mind.' So I kept a hold on myself and didn't let anything count except guarding that baby. I seemed to care more about it than all the rest of the world put together. Oh, I can't begin to tell you how much more than for all the rest of the world put together. I don't know that a man would understand."

"Yes, he would; of course he would," spoke Gerald, gently reverent, yet a little impatient; then he qualified his assertion: "He could imagine, I mean to say, how you would have felt that way."

"Well, that matter was going to be put safely through, no matter what. The first mistake I made was not making friends with my women neighbors, so that everybody in Elsinore supposed that Jim's wife was the same stripe as he,—or that's what I thought they supposed,—and when I needed friends I couldn't think of any to turn to except those at home. The other mistake I made was not to write them at home and tell them the truth and then wait for them to send me money to come. But I guess my mind stopped working when the shock came."

Aurora appeared to brace herself, while decently considering how to minimize to her audience the brutality of her next revelation.

"Jim cleared out one night while I was asleep, taking every cent we'd got and every last thing he could hope to turn into a cent," she said, hardening her voice and lips. Gerald was given a moment in which to visualize the situation, before she went on: "I guess, as I said before, that I wasn't in my right mind for a spell; all I could think of was getting home to my own folks, and I was going to do it somehow, though I hadn't a cent. I hadn't even my wedding-ring. I'd put it off because my finger had grown fatter, and he'd taken even that to go and try his luck somewhere else.—What do you think of it?" she mechanically added.

She was pale, remembering these things. Gerald drew in a long, unsteady breath, oppressed.

"I was going to get home somehow," Aurora repeated, "and I wasn't going to waste time waiting for anything. And how was I going to do it? I don't suppose I really thought; I followed instinct like an animal. I hid in a freight-car going East—"

A definite difficulty here stopped Aurora. While she felt for words in which to clothe what followed, the images in her mind made her eyes, which were not seeing the things actually before them, more descriptive of the anguish of remembered scenes than her words were likely to be.

"I'm going to skip all that, Gerald." With a gesture, she suddenly rolled up a part of her story and threw it aside. "But when I came to see and understand rightly again, weeks after, in a hospital at Denver, I cried, oh! how I cried, and didn't care what became of me. Because I'd lost him; they hadn't succeeded in saving him. He had lived, mind you," she emphasized with pride—"he had lived a little while, he was all right, perfect in every way—a son."

His due of tears was not withheld from the wee frustrated god. Aurora gave up talking, so as to have her cry in quietness.

Gerald, holding back a sound of distress, twisted on his chair, not daring to recall himself to Aurora's notice either by speaking or touching her.

"I'm plain sorry for myself," she explained her tears while trying to stop them. "You can't be sorry, for their own sakes, for the little children who go back to God without knowing anything of this life's troubles. It's for myself I'm sorry. I never can bring up those times without the *feeling* of them coming over me again, and then, as I tell you, I'm sorry for that poor fool in her empty house, and then in the thundering freight-car, and then in the hospital. I see her outside of me just as plain as I would another person. Then, too"—she dried her eyes as if this time for good—"I feel a burning here"—she touched her breast—"like anger. Angry. I feel angry at being robbed, in a way I never seem to get over. To think I might have

had him all my life, like millions of other women, and I never even saw him! And he was as real to me all those months before!... I don't see how I could have loved him more than I did. I'm hungry for him sometimes, just as I might be for food. And then I'm angry and rebellious. But I couldn't tell you against who. It isn't God, certainly. He's our best friend, all we've got to rely on. And He's been mighty good to me. There in Denver, when I hadn't a friend or a penny, He raised up friends for me and gave me the most wonderful luck.

"I stayed right there in Denver till less than a year ago. I guess you've heard me speak of the Judge. The doctor in the hospital where they carried me was his son; that's how it all came about—friends, good luck, money, everything. When I say I found friends, let me mention that I found enemies, too, the meanest, the bitterest! I—but there"—she interrupted herself as, on the very verge of further confidences, a change of mind was effected in her by sudden weariness or by a deterrent thought, or both—"I guess I've talked enough about myself for one evening. I didn't have a soft time of it there in Denver," she summed up the remainder of her story, "but I'd got back to being my old self. You'd never have known what I'd been through. I was just about as you've known me here. Funny, isn't it,"—Aurora seemed almost ashamed, apologetic,—“how the disposition you're born with hangs on?”

"Golden disposition," Gerald commented soothingly. Timid about looking directly at her just yet, he looked instead at the portrait, whereon lay the shadow of the events just related.

After a little period of thought in silence Aurora said, with the shamefaced air she took when venturing to talk of high things:

"I heard a sermon once on the text, 'Mary kept all these things in her heart.' The minister said that it wasn't only Mary who did this, but ordinary women, so often. And I know from myself how true it is. You see a woman all dressed up at a party, laughing with the others, dancing perhaps, and she'll be saying inside of herself, 'If baby had lived, he'd have been three years old.' Or thirteen, or thirty. I've no doubt it goes on as long as she lives. And she can see him before her just as plain, as he would have been.... My baby would have been five last October."

Gerald remembered how sweet he had always thought it of her to wish to stop and fondle little children, often wee beggars, stuffing little grimy fists with pennies, not avoiding to touch soiled little cheeks with her clean gloves. He had attributed this propensity to a simple womanly talent for motherliness.

"I've got this to be thankful for," she came out again from silence, farther down along the line of her meditations, "that he did live for a few hours. I've got a son, just as much as if he'd grown to be a man." She was dry-eyed, almost joyful in this.

"Yes, yes," hurried Gerald, consolingly; "that's what you must always think of—that and not the other things. You must lay hold of that thought and feel rich in it. But hear me, dear friend—me, trying to suggest ways to you of being brave and cheerful! You, who do from god-given temperament what I can only see as a right aim of aspiration, by light of a certain philosophy arrived at in my own way, through my own experiences. Philosophy is not the right word, either; the feeling I have is mainly esthetic. In order not to be too unhappy in this world, in order to have a little serenity, we must forgive everything, Aurora; that is what I have clearly seen. It's the only way. We must forgive events just as we forgive persons. And we must love life. I who so much of the time hate life, yet know better. We must love it as we must love our enemies. The wherefore is a mystery, but peace of heart and beauty of life are involved with doing it. We mustn't mind being wounded, crucified. We mustn't mind anything, Aurora! We mustn't be angry, the gestures of it are ugly. I, who am always being angry, who sometimes groan aloud my thoughts are so blasphemously bitter, I am telling you what I at bottom know. The game is so unfair, it calls for magnanimity on our part to stake handsomely and lose patiently. Patience, that's it! We must be patient—patient as a cab-horse! Pride and dignity demand that we be patient, absolutely. For the sake of certain beautiful things and sweet people in the world, we must give it a good name. But hear me! Hear me giving counsels to you—you who without formulating these ideas act on them, whilst with me they are things which I see as fit to be done but can never hope to do."

"You, too, Gerald, poor boy," was Aurora's simple reply—"you, too, have had lots to try you."

He swept aside by a gesture the subject of his trials, removed it altogether from the horizon, unwilling really that the interest be shifted from her to him. She was equally determined, now that he had sympathized with her, to sympathize with him.

"I know you have," she insisted; "I know you've had lots to try you, just as you knew that I'd had lots. And you're so high-strung, so sensitive ... I never knew anybody like you. But there are good times coming for you; I'm sure of it."

"I don't in the least expect them." He laughed a little harshly. He had winced at her description of him as sensitive, high-strung. "Dear incurable optimist, I don't in the least expect them. It's not because there will be compensation that I hold it the decentest thing to put up with the *mechancetés* of fate, fate's ingenious stabs in the tender, as they come, without giving the exhibition of one's vulnerability, or poisoning one's system with hate!"

"But there will," she continued to insist, "there will be compensations. I know it just as well.... You have so much talent, it's perfectly wonderful, and it's only a question of time your having the success you deserve. I, of course, am not educated up to your paintings, but even I am beginning to see something more than I did at first. I can see, for instance, that almost any fine painter, with a command of his colors, could have done the picture down-stairs, but that only you in the whole world could have done this one here. But, I say again, my opinion isn't worth anything. But there's Leslie, who knows all about art and such things, doesn't she? Well, she's told me how wonderful you are. From what she's told me I'm perfectly sure you'll make your mark in the world."

Again Gerald swept her words aside like noxious obscuring cobwebs. "What is, few know,

and what will be, nobody knows whatever," he said. "But of all things, I beg, I beg you will not think of me as a misunderstood genius! Art is not a passion with me, it is—an interest. And don't hold out for a lure that will reconcile me, my dear friend, anything so vulgar as success! The single hope I have, when I am the most hopeful, is that simply my metal, my resistance, may never quite fail. I shall not have success, dear lady, though in your kindness you predict it. I shall go on and on seeing with different eyes from other people, carving my cherry-stones in my own way, and made unsociable by the failure of others to see how superior my way is. I shall go on growing more eccentric and solitary, and call myself lucky quite beyond my merits if those particular snares which the devil Melancholy sets for the solitary may be escaped, that I may neither drink, nor drug myself, nor shoot myself, nor marry the cook!"

"Don't talk like that, Gerald!" cried Aurora. "Don't say anything so awful! Now keep still while I talk, listen while I tell you. You're going on painting in your own way, but some one—see?—some one is going to arise bright enough to recognize how perfectly wonderful your pictures are. Keep still. You mustn't despise success, you know, success is what everybody needs and wants. You're going to succeed. Keep still. Stupid people will want to buy your pictures because the people who know about such things have told the public how wonderful they are. Then you'll grow rich and famous. You won't be either eccentric or solitary. You'll have hosts of admiring friends. I guess you could have them now, if you wanted to. You won't be melancholy. You'll be happy. In your home there will be a nice wife. Why are you supposing you'll never marry? A dear true beautiful girl who thinks the world of you and that you think the world of. And when you're an old gentleman with your grandchildren playing at your knee, you'll say to yourself, 'Aurora told me so!'"

She was all cheering smiles and dimples again.

"Be sure you remember now," she said, holding up a finger and shaking it to mark her bidding, "to say to yourself, 'Aurora told me so!'"

It was a pity almost that Gerald should not have gone home at that point. He would have left with undivided fond and approving feelings; he would have left tied to Aurora by a thousand sweet humanities in common, as well as impressed afresh by the depth and mysteriousness of woman. But he had either forgotten or was disregarding the hour—the clock on the mantelpiece, like most ornamental clocks, was not going; the bliss of being warm for the first time in days, warm through and through, warm to the middle of his heart, made him careless of correctness; and so he stayed on, to be rudely jarred by and by out of his contentment, and take with him finally into the night a renewed, even sharpened, perception of those exasperating faults which made Mrs. Hawthorne, as he named it, impossible.

Because they seemed to be on such solid terms of friendship after the long evening before the fire, when they had sorrowed together and sympathized; when he had been permitted to hold and press her hands; when with a veritable mutual outgoing of the heart they had vied in prophesying for each other fair and happy days, Gerald found the boldness—and found it without much strain—the boldness to utter a request which had burned on his lips before, but which he had repressed, saying to himself that what Mrs. Hawthorne did was no affair of his.

"Aurora," he said—she was after this evening Mrs. Hawthorne to him only in the hearing of others,—"Aurora, I want to ask a favor, a great favor."

"Go ahead. I guess it's granted."

"I wish I felt sure; but I'm afraid. Say you will not take part in the amateur variety show at *mi-carême*."

"Sakes!" cried Aurora, staring at him with round eyes. "Ask me something easy! Ask me something else! I can't do that."

"You can. Of course you can, if you wish to. You have only to give some excuse."

"An excuse? Not for a farm! I don't want to. I've bound myself. They expect me as much as anything. I couldn't back out. It's so near the time, too. Why, it's to make money for the Convalescents' Home. I'm a big feature of the show."

"I know you are, and I have a perfect horror of what you may do. I can't bear to think of the public sitting there gaping at you and laughing."

"The public will be composed of friends. It's all private. Give it up? Not much! I tell you, it's nuts to me! I expect to have lots of fun. You've never seen, Geraldino, how funny I can be. You'll see that night."

"The voice runs that you're going to appear as a nigger mammy and sing plantation songs."

"Oh, does it? Well, that seems innocent. What objection do you see to that?"

"I did not call my request reasonable, dearest Aurora. I begged a personal favor. You know the sort of nerves I have. It is like pouring acid on them to think of you making a show of yourself."

She laughed, but would not yield; she treated his proposition like a spoiled child's demand for the moon, and, after condescending to tease like a boy, he woke suddenly to the fact of being ridiculous. He dropped the subject with the abruptness that causes the opponent nearly to topple over in surprise.

He had sat for a long moment in silence when, realizing that this appeared ill-humored and a piece of effrontery, he started in haste to talk again, choosing the first subject that came into his mind, which was a thing he had meant to tell Aurora this evening, but had not remembered until this moment. The wide distance between the subject he dropped and the subject he took up would show, it was hoped, how definitely he washed his hands of her doings.

"If you have wished for revenge on our friend Antonia," he said, "you can be satisfied. She

is in the most singular sort of difficulty.”

“Oh, is she? I’m sorry,” said Aurora. “Bless you! I never wished her any harm.”

“I went to see her yesterday. I had saved up my grievance and felt the need to lay it before her. I think one should give an old friend who has behaved badly the chance to make reparation, don’t you? After being angry as you saw me, I yet did not want to break with her. She was very kind to me when I was young. At the same time I could not let her rudeness to you pass. But I found her in such trouble already when I went to see her yesterday that I said not one word of my grievance. It will have to wait.”

“You needn’t think you must pick her up on my account. I don’t care. But what was the matter?”

“Two of her oldest friends, through an unaccountable mistake, turned into enemies. Both insist that under cover of a mask at the last *veglione* she insulted them. Unfortunately, her best friends are not kept by their actual knowledge of her from thinking it just possible she might desire to amuse herself with getting a claw into them. She has more than once given offense to her friends by putting them into her books. But Antonia swore to me that she was innocent, and begged me to convince De Brézé. The villa she lives in is his property, and he has requested her to vacate it. The other aggrieved one, General Costanzi, she fears may succeed in preventing the publication of her next novel by threat of a libel suit.”

“Well, that sounds bad. But what do they say she’s done?”

“The poor woman doesn’t even know what she is supposed to have said; insulted them is all she can gather. Both maintain that though she tried to alter her voice they recognized her, and will not accept her word for it that she wore no such disguise as they describe. Which reminds me that the offender, or the offender’s double, for I have an idea there were two masked alike, came into your box early in the evening with a companion. You have not forgotten—that black domino with the crow’s beak?”

Aurora jumped on her seat with a cry of “Goodness gracious!”

“What is it?” he asked, looking at her more attentively. She appeared aghast.

She did not answer at once, tensely trying to think.

“Well,” she finally exclaimed, relaxing into limpness, “I’ve been and gone and done it!”

And as he waited—

“I guess I did that insulting,” she added, and wiped her brow.

He thought for a moment that she might be acting out a joke, but in the next accepted her perturbation as genuine.

“Can’t you see through it even now I’ve told you?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“Did you suppose I didn’t really know those two who came into the box, the one who roared and the one who cawed? Well, I’m a better actress than I supposed.”

“But—”

“And did you really suppose I was going home to bed just as the fun was at its height? There again you’re simpler than I thought. Land! Don’t I wish now that I had gone home!”

“And you—”

“We’d heard so much from everybody of the pranks they play at these *vegliones* of yours that we wanted to play one, too—we wanted to intrigue you and a lot of other people. The trouble seems to be we did it too well. Land! I wish I hadn’t done it! I wish Heaven I’d consulted you, or some one—we hatched it all up with Italo and Clotilde.”

“Italo and Clotilde!”

“They were the two who came into the box and didn’t say a word, for fear of being known by their voices. Then, after you had so politely seen us off, Estelle and I in the carriage put on black dominos and crows’ beaks, and after driving around a couple of blocks came back and found Italo and Clotilde waiting for us. Clotilde had put off her black domino in the dressing-room; she was dressed under it exactly like her brother. D’you see now how we worked it? Estelle took Clotilde’s arm, and I took Italo’s; we separated and kept apart, and it was as if there had only been one couple, the same as there had been since the beginning of the evening.”

“I see.”

“I’ve been dying to tell you about it ever since, but I just haven’t told you. I don’t know what I was waiting for. I guess I was enjoying letting you stay fooled. I had the greatest time, bad cess to it! talking to some people I knew and to a lot that I didn’t. Italo would whisper to me beforehand what to say, and I’d say it. I didn’t always know what it was about, but nothing was further from my mind than to wish to insult anybody. I was so excited I didn’t always notice what I did say, it just seemed playful and funny and in the spirit of the rest. I went up to Charlie Hunt and spoke to him. I put a flea in his ear, and I’m positive from his face that he didn’t know me. I came near going up to you when you were talking with that Mr. Guerra, but I was too much afraid you’d recognize me; you’re so sharp, and, then, you’re the one most particularly who has heard me talk with my English accent, which I put on on the night of the *veglione* so as not to be known.”

“Your English accent? That explains.”

“What?”

“Your English accent is a caricature of Antonia’s.”

“I don’t have to tell you, I suppose, that I had no idea of personating Antonia.”

“The very difference between the original and your imitation might seem the result of an effort on her part to disguise her speech.”

“I’ve been a fool, of course, and some of the blame is mine, but just let me get hold of Italo and watch me shake the teeth out of his confounded little head. I remember perfectly speaking to the old general that we saw at Antonia’s that day and to the old viscount who

came to my ball."

"Do you remember what you said?"

"Not exactly, but in both cases it seemed harmless. I wouldn't have said it if it hadn't seemed harmless. I couldn't have wished to insult them, how could any one suppose it? To the general it was something about a horse."

Gerald gave a sound of raging disgust.

Aurora waited, watching him.

"Was it very bad?" she asked finally, and held her breath for his answer.

"Just as bad as possible. Ceccherelli deserves to be flayed. Is the man mad? And what, may I ask, did you say to De Brézé?"

"I only remember it was something about ermine. I forgot until this moment that I meant to ask Italo what the joke was about ermine. Was that too very bad?"

"Just as bad as possible. No, rather worse. Both relate to ancient bits of scandal that no one would dare refer to—that would place a man referring to them in the necessity to fight a duel. Mind you, mean and discredited scandal. I won't resurrect it to enlighten you. You can interrogate Signor Ceccherelli, who has really distinguished himself in his quality of habitué of this house and your particular friend."

"I know you're angry, Gerald; I don't wonder you're ready to call names. But the thing is simple, isn't it, after all, now that I understand. The harm done isn't such as can never be mended. All I have to do is write to Antonia and tell her I was the black crow, or, if you advise, write to the two gentlemen I've offended."

"Heavens, no! you can't do that!"

"Why can't I?"

"You can't; that's all. You can't admit that that little vermin is on terms of intimacy with you permitting his prompting your Carnival witticisms, and you can't hope to make any one in Florence believe you didn't understand what you were saying."

"Yes, I can, my friend; I can make them believe. I can speak the truth. I can, at all events, prove that Antonia had nothing whatever to do with it."

"No, no, no, I tell you! You can do nothing whatever about it. Your name must not be allowed to appear in the matter at all. It would serve Ceccherelli right that his part in the disgraceful business should be known, dangerous little beast that he is. He would receive a lesson, and an excellent thing it would be; but that, again, might involve you. One couldn't trust him to keep your name out of it. Besides, it would very likely ruin him, disgusting little beggar."

"You leave him to me! He roared his throat to a frazzle the other night, and can't make a sound, but he'll come round as soon as he's better, and then if I don't give it to him! Little cuss!... But I'm to blame, too, Gerald. You told me over and over that I oughtn't to encourage him to gossip as I did, but I went right on doing it because it was as good as a play to hear him tell his queer stories in his queer English. It amused me, I've no other excuse. I sort of knew all the time that it was wrong. And so he got bolder and bolder and finally overstepped the line. And now I've got my come-uppance. I'll settle him, trust *me*, and I'll write to Antonia, and I'll write the two gentlemen, if you'll just tell me where to write."

"Must I tell you again that you are above all things to do nothing of the kind? Not certainly if you think of continuing to live in Florence. Leave the matter to me. I am well acquainted with everybody in question and shall be able to satisfy them, I hope, while leaving them completely in the dark as to the real culprit."

Mrs. Hawthorne appeared to hesitate.

"I really should feel better if I could confess," she said. "It would take a whole load off my chest. You see, I don't know your ways of doing over here; that would be my way. They might all forgive me and say I was just a fool. But if they didn't, and, as you seem to fear, made Florence too unpleasant to hold me, luckily I'm not tied down. I'm free. I can pull up stakes when I please and go pitch my tent elsewhere."

"The delightful independence of riches! The grandeur and detachment of your point of view!" he spoke in a flare of excited bitterness. "What you have said is equivalent to saying that your friends of Florence are a matter of complete indifference to you!"

"I *love* my friends of Florence, and you know it, Gerald Fane! And I don't believe they'd ever turn against me, no matter what trouble I'd made for myself at that confounded veglione. So I don't look to leaving Florence just yet a while. You know I was only talking. I felt perfectly safe—But it's astonishing to me, dear boy, how ready you are to get mad at me. When you know me so well, too. You ought to be ashamed."

"I am, dear. It's my temper that's bad. And you're so kind," he meekly subsided. "But you *are* trying, you know," he added, after a moment, with returning vivacity, "what with the extreme bad taste of your masked ball adventures, and your obstinate determination to publish them, and then your insane obstinacy to make a show of yourself as a colored nurse in this vaudeville—But I forgot, I had sworn to myself not to speak of that again. May I count upon you at least to leave entirely to me the matter of exculpating Antonia to General Costanzi and De Brézé?"

"Oh, very well, if you think best."

"Will you promise solemnly to be silent on the whole matter?"

"All right. But I don't like it, Gerald. If I've done wrong, I should feel lots easier in my mind if I could tell."

"That feeling of yours is precisely what I wish to guard against. Do believe that in this matter the old Florentine I am knows better than you. Promise."

"All right, I promise."

After a moment, "There's no chance, is there, of your changing your mind about the other

matter"—he asked sheepishly,—“the matter which I must not mention? No, I supposed not. I am perfectly aware of my presumption in making any suggestion to you on the subject. But if you knew how the thought of it torments me....”

“You’ll get over it when you see me. You’ll just laugh with the rest.”

“Enough. Good night,” he said stiffly, but it is doubtful that the word of leave-taking was anything more than a mode of expressing displeasure, or that departure would immediately have succeeded upon his rising from his chair, had not a sound of coughing from the neighboring room called up before him an image of Harriet Estelle, wide awake, with a stern and feverish eye fixed on the clock.

He was startled into a consciousness of the lateness of the hour.

“Good night!” he repeated in a guilty whisper. “I daren’t look at my watch. I’m afraid I’ve kept you shockingly late.”

The night, when Gerald went out into it, was quieter and dryer. The streets were altogether empty. He had quite forgotten having felt ill earlier in the evening, and did not remember it even when he found his teeth chattering as a result of coming out into the penetrating night air after sitting so close to the fire. A thing he did remember, as he took out the large iron key to the door of home, was that after all Helen Aurora telling him her story he did not know how she came to be Mrs. Hawthorne. There must have been a second marriage there in Denver, one of those little-considered episodes in American life, perhaps, that are hardly thought worth mentioning. She sometimes spoke of “the judge.” She had spoken to-night of a doctor, son of the judge. No, he decided, it could not be either of them. The second husband, whoever he had been, had clearly not been important, and he was dead, for Mrs. Foss had told him explicitly that Aurora was a real, and not what is called in America a grass, widow. From this second husband it must have been that she derived her wealth.

CHAPTER XIV

Even had Aurora been able to apprehend the measure and quality, the fine shades, of Gerald's dislike to the thought of her doing a turn in the society variety-show, it is more than doubtful that she would have let it weigh against her strong desire to take part. It is fine to have such delicate sensibilities regarding the dignity of another, but it is foolishness to entertain anything of the sort regarding your own.

"If there's one thing I love, it's to dress up and play I'm somebody else," Aurora had said when first the subject of the benefit performance was discussed.

Mrs. Hawthorne was so certain to give generously to the cause of the convalescents that it was felt only fair to flatter her by seeking to enlist the service of her talents; but apart from this, the promise of her appearance was counted upon to create interest. She being obviously less restricted by conventions than other people, there existed a permanent curiosity as to what she might do next; and it could not be denied that she could, when she chose, be funny.

With the exception of one peculiar and superfastidious man, nobody had the smallest objection to seeing her distort her fine mouth in comic grimaces, or lend her fine figure to clownish acts. There were those, of course, who called Mrs. Hawthorne vulgar; but too many persons liked her for the charge of vulgarity to go undisputed or become loud. A good many had reason to like her.

Aurora felt so sure of the general friendliness that not the smallest pang of doubt, of deterring nervousness, assailed her while preparing her scene; and when she once occupied the center of the stage the spirit of frolic so possessed, the laughter of the people so elated and spurred, her, that she would have turned somersaults to amuse them, and done it with success, no doubt, for all that Aurora did on this occasion was funny and successful. Aurora, intoxicated with applause, was that night in her simple way inspired. Her state was, in fact, dangerous, discretion deserted her, and before the end, carried away by the desire to please further, make laugh more, she had done a foolish thing—a thing which she half knew, even while she did it, to be foolish, perhaps wrong. But not having leisure to think, she took the risk, and in time found herself, as a result of her mistake, to have made an enemy; yes, changed her dear and helpful friend Charlie Hunt into a secret enemy.

In an old palace on Via dei Bardi a stage had been set, filling one fourth of the vast saloon. A goodly representation of Anglo-American society in Florence crowded the rest. Beautifully hand-written programs acquainted these, through thin disguises of name, with the personalities of the performers. Only one name was really mysterious—Lew Dockstader.

After a lively overture by piano, violin, and harp, the three Misses Hunt, in Japanese costume, gave a prettily kittenish rendering of "Three Little Maids from School," selection from one of those Gilbert and Sullivan operettas latterly enchanting both England and America. The tub-shaped Herr Spiegelmeyer, dressed like a little boy and announced as an infant prodigy, played a concerto of prodigious difficulty and length. Lavin, of the tenor voice rich in poetry and prospects, humbled himself to sing, "There was a Lady Loved a Swine," with "Humph, quoth he"—s almost too realistic. Then came Lew Dockstader.

Now, report had spread that Mrs. Hawthorne was to appear as a negress; no one was prepared to see her appear as a negro. The surprise, when it dawned on this one and the other that that stove-black face with rolling eyes and big red and white smile, that burly body incased in old, bagging trousers, those shuffling feet shod in boots a mile too large for them and curling up at the toe, belonged to Mrs. Hawthorne, the surprise was in itself a success. Then, as has been said, Aurora was undeniably in the vein that evening.

She had seen Lew Dockstader, the negro minstrel, once in her life, but at the impressionable age, when you see and remember for good. It had been the great theatrical event of her life. "What, haven't seen Lew Dockstader! Don't know who he is!" thus she still would measure a person's ignorance of what is best in drama and song. She loved Lew. When she impersonated him she did not try to imitate him, she simply felt herself to be he.

In this character she now told a string of those funny anecdotes which Americans love to swap. She sang divers songs, pitched among her big, velvety chest tones: "Children, Keep in de Middle ob de Road," "Fluey, Fluey," "Come, Ride dat Golden Mule." With the clumsy nimbleness and innocent love of play of a Newfoundland pup, she flung out her enormous feet in the dance.

The crimson curtains drew together upon her retreat amid unaffected applause. Recalled, she gave the encore prepared for such an event. Recalled over and over, like singers of topical songs, to hear what she would say next, Aurora, a little off her head with the new wine of glory, exhausted her bag of parlor tricks to satisfy an audience so kind. Then it was that she made her mistake. Recalled still again, she invented on the spot one last thing to do. She recited a poem indelibly learned at public school, giving it first as a newly landed Jewish pupil would pronounce it, then a small Irishman, then a small Italian, finally an English child. To add the latter was her mistake, because her caricature of the English speech was very special.

The sound of it started an idea buzzing in the head of one of her audience—Charlie Hunt, who sat well in front, and in applauding raised his hands above the level of his head so that actors and audience alike might be encouraged by seeing that he gave the patronage of his approval.

He did not immediately connect Aurora's English with a rankling remembered episode, but

the thing was burrowing in his subconsciousness, and an arrow of light before long pierced his brain. He reconsidered the conclusion upon which he had rested with regard to the black crow who at the *veglione* had put to him an impertinent question. Could it be that not the particular lady whom he had fixed upon in his mind, as being fond of Landini, consequently jealous of Mrs. Hawthorne, had by it expressed her spite, but that-? He saw in a flash a different possibility.

When the show was over and the performers had issued from the dressing-rooms in the clothes of saner moments, Charlie Hunt approached Mrs. Hawthorne, who, flushed with excitement, was looking almost too much like an American Beauty rose. He paid his compliments in a tone tinged with irony, all the while watching her with a penetrating, inquiring, ironical eye. But the irony was wasted. She was too pleasantly engrossed to perceive it.

"Has anybody here seen Mr. Fane?" she asked after a time, when her glances had vainly sought him in every corner.

Estelle told her that she had not set eyes on him the whole evening; and, which was more conclusive, little Lily Foss said he had not been there.

CHAPTER XV

Aurora, unable to see beyond the footlights, had never dreamed but Gerald was among the audience. Her capers had at moments been definitely directed at him. Discovering that he had kept away, she was not so much hurt as puzzled.

"Who'd have thought he cared enough about it to be so mean!" she said to herself. "Well," she said further, "let him alone. He'll come round in a day or two."

She really expected him that same day. When he did not come, or the day after, or the day after that, she tried to recall passage for passage their talk on the subject of the show. She did not remember his saying anything that amounted to giving her a choice between renouncing it or renouncing his friendship.

Then she reviewed all she knew of him; and his present conduct, if he were by this avoidance trying to punish her for doing what it was the prerogative of her native independence to do, did not seem in accordance with his known regard for the rights of others.

Aurora did not know what to think. From hour to hour she looked for a call, a message, a letter, and because the time while waiting seemed long, she neglected to note that the actual time elapsed was not more than Gerald had sometimes allowed to pass without her attributing his silence to offence. He had his work, he had other friends; Abbé Johns might be in town again visiting him. This silence, however, had a different value, she thought, from other silences. They had seemed so much better friends after their confidences that long evening over the fire; she expected more of him than she had done before it.

At other moments she was disposed to find fault with herself. She supposed she was a big coarse thing, unable to appreciate the feelings of a man who apparently hadn't as many thicknesses of skin as other folks.

It was at such a moment, when she made allowances for him, that she thought of writing, making it easy for him to drop his grouch and return. But here Aurora felt a difficulty. Aurora thought well, in a general way, of her powers as a letter-writer, and she was proud of her beautifully legible Spencerian hand; but for such a letter as she wished to send Gerald fine shades of expression were needed beyond what she could compass. She was fond of Gerald; in this letter she must not be too fond, yet she must be fond enough. What hope that a blockhead would strike the exact middle of so fine a line?

She could obviate the difficulty by sending him a formal invitation to dinner. But suppose she should receive formal regrets?

After that the whole thing must be left to him; the tactful letter meant to hurry him back would no longer be possible.

"Oh, bother!" said Aurora, and formed a better, bolder plan.

Aurora had not seen the plays, had not read the books, where the going of the heroine to visit the hero at his house for whatever good reason under the sun has such damaging results for her fair fame. Aurora was innocent of good society's hopeless narrowness on the subject. If she made a secret of her plan to Estelle it was merely because Estelle had permitted herself wise words one day, warnings, with regard to Gerald, in whom she specifically did not wish her friend to "become interested."

"You're too different," Estelle had said. "You're like a fish and a bird. I won't say I don't like him. He's nice in a way, but it's not our way, Nell. You'd be miserable with him, first or last."

"My dear," Aurora had replied, "if you knew the sort of thing we talk about when you're not there you wouldn't worry. If you can see Gerald Fane in the part of my beau you must be cracked. And if you think I'm soft on him, you're only a little bit less cracked. Can't you see we're just friends? It's nice for him to come here and it's nice for us to have him. We want friends, don't we?"

"All I say is don't go ahead with your eyes shut till you find before you know it that you're landed in a case of, 'Mother, I can't live without him!' For, Nell, it won't do, you know it won't."

"My dearest girl, of course I know, but not half so well as he knows! Bless you, Hat, do you forget all Leslie told us about him and his affair? And do you forget my little affair? Do you suppose either of us wants to try again?"

"Indeed, I hope you will try again, both of you. But not together, Nell. I've got the man all picked out for you; you know perfectly I mean Tom Bewick. There's the one for you, Nell. Big, healthy, kind. Good sense. Good temper. Your own kind of person, Nell, and not a queer bird from a menagerie. Don't go and spoil everything by getting tangled up over here. You know as well as I do that Gerald Fane, take him just as a man, can't hold a candle to Doctor Tom."

"I've never thought of comparing them. I don't see any use in doing it. Tom's Tom and Gerald's Gerald. So far as Gerald goes, you can set your heart at rest and bank on this: I know just as well as you do, and he knows just as well as I do, that we couldn't pull in harness together any more than—just as you say, a fish and a bird. Neither of us is thinking of such a thing. But why mustn't a fish and a bird have anything to say to each other? He might like the cut of her fins and she might fancy the color of his wings. They could sympathize together, couldn't they, if nothing else?" Aurora's eyebrows had with this tried to signify her entire capacity to take care of herself and her own business.

But not wishing to rouse any further uneasiness in her friend, she no more after that spoke frankly of Gerald whenever he came into her mind. And when she declined Estelle's invitation to go with her to Mlle. Durand's, where she would hear the pupils of the latter recite Corneille and Racine, she did not tell her what she had planned to do instead, fully intending, however, to reveal it later.

Gerald meanwhile did not flatter himself imagining Aurora unhappy because he stayed away longer than had lately been quite usual. Time dragged with him, but the calendar told him that just so many days, no more, had passed. He pictured her going her cheerful gait, occasionally saying, perhaps, "I wonder what has become of Sticky-prickly?"

He had not gone to the mid-Lent entertainment as a matter of course. Aurora had shown small knowledge of him when she thought he would consent to see her disport herself before the public as a negro. On the day after, when he learned that she had been the star of the evening as a negro, his frenzied disgust itself warned him of the injustice, the impropriety, of exhibiting it to her. He chose to remain away until it should have sufficiently worn down to be governable. By that time the poor man had developed an illness, that cold of which for some weeks he had been carrying around in his bones the premonition.

With reddened eyelids and thickened nose, a sore throat and a cough, he felt himself no fit object for a lady's sight. He stayed in to take care of himself.

Giovanna knew what to do for her *signorino* when he was *raffreddato*. She built a little fire in the studio; she brought his light meals to him in his arm-chair before it. She administered remedies. His bed was warmed at night by her *scaldino*. Gaetano was sent to Vieusseux's for an armful of books. All day Gerald sat by the fire and read, and sometimes dozed and dreamed, and read again. And days passed, while his cold held on.

He thought of writing Aurora to tell her. But if he told her, she would at once come to see him; of so much one could be sure. And he did not want her to come. The eccentric fellow did not want her to come precisely because he wanted her to come so much.

"This is the way it begins," he said to himself, with horror, when he became fully aware that his nerves, now that he could not go to find Aurora when he chose, were suggesting to him all the time that the presence of Aurora was needed to quiet that sense of want, of maladjustment to conditions, haunting him like the desire for sleep.

At sight of his danger he became very clear-headed. The man who sees a snare and walks into it deserves his fate, surely.

"It is time to stop it," he said. And he laid down for himself new rules of life.

Fortunately, he had at hand some absorbing books. Dostoiwsky's "Crime and Punishment" could effectively take him out of himself.

But the print was fine and crowded, he was weakened by illness, he was forced now and then to stop and rest with swimming head. Then at once would return, like the demon in fair disguise tempting some hermit of the desert, the thought, "What is Aurora doing? If Aurora knew I was ill, she would come." And the imagination of her coming would shed a feverish gladness all along those petulant, ill-treated, starved nerves. "What have I to do with Aurora, or Aurora with me?" he would ask, furiously, the incongruity of what had happened to him calling forth sometimes a desperate laugh. But Nature laughs at man's ideas of congruity; remembering that, he could only hold his hands against his eyes and try to press the image of Aurora out of existence.

Gerald, however, was much stronger than his nerves. He could see his own case, even with a pulse at ninety, as well as another man's. And his will was firmer than might have been thought. He knew something of a human man's constitution, how it can circumvent a man, or how a man, well on his guard, can circumvent it. He formed the project of interrupting his visits to the Hermitage.

After this resolution he regarded those returns of earth-born desire for Aurora's balmy touch and tranquilizing neighborhood as a man who had taken an heroic and sure remedy against ague might regard the fluctuations in his body of heat and cold continuing still for a little while. As to how Aurora would take his defection, all should be managed with so much art and politeness that the most sensitive could not be hurt. By the time the new important work which he would make his excuse was accomplished, his cure would have been accomplished as well.

Meanwhile, each time the door-bell rang-it was not often, certainly-his attention was taken from his book, and he listened. And so, on Mlle. Durand's French afternoon, Gerald, having heard the bell, was listening, but with his face to the fire and his back to the door. When Giovanna knocked, "Forward!" he said, without turning. The door opened.

"*C'è quella signora.*" "There is that lady," dubiously announced Giovanna.

Gerald turned, and beheld that lady filling the doorway.

Then it was as if a bright trumpet-blast of reality, breaking upon a bad dream, dispelled it; or as if a fresh wind, blowing over stagnant water, swept away the cloud of noxious gnats. All he had latterly been thinking and feeling seemed to Gerald insane, sickly, the instant he beheld Aurora's comradely smile. He was ashamed; he found himself on the verge of stupid, unexplainable tears.

"Well!" said Aurora.

At the sound they were placed back on the exact footing of their last meeting, before thinking and conjecturing about each other in absence had built up between them barriers of illusion.

"Well!" he said, but less pleasantly, because he was mortified by the awareness of himself as an uninviting sight, with his old dressing-gown, neglected beard, and the unpicturesque

manifestations of a cold.

But Aurora's face was reassuring; she did not confuse him with the accidents of his dressing-gown and beard and cold. Aurora's face beamed, so much was she rejoicing in her own excellent sense, which had told her that one look at each other would do a thousand times more to make things right between them than innumerable letters could have done.

"I didn't know what to think," she said, "so I came to find out. First I'd think you were mad at me, then I'd think you had gone away and written me, and the letter hadn't reached me, Gaetano had lost it on the road. Then I'd think you might be sick, and there was nobody to let your friends know. I don't know what I didn't think of. What made you not send me word?"

"I did not know you would be uneasy. I did not rightly measure, it seems, the depth of your kindness. I should certainly have written to you before long in case I had continued unable to go to see you."

"How long have you been sick?"

"I am not sick, dearest lady. I only have a cold. In order to make it go away more quickly I have to remain in the house. But how good, how very good of you to come! Sit down, please do, and warm yourself. I will ring for Giovanna, and she will make us some tea."

Aurora, smiling all the time with the pleasure she felt in not finding him angry or estranged or in any way altered toward her, took the arm-chair from which he had just risen, while he drew a lighter chair to the other side of the chimney-place. His fires were not like hers. Two half-burned sticks and a form of turf smoldered sparingly on a mound of hot ashes; he eagerly cast on a fagot, and added wood with, for once, an extravagant hand. Then, looking over at her, he smiled, too.



Gerald turned, and beheld that lady

"Now tell me all about yourself," she commanded. "I want to know what you're doing for this cold of yours."

"Please let us not talk about my cold," he at once refused. "Let us talk about something agreeable. Tell me the news. I have not seen any one for days. I have been living in Russia with a poor young man who had committed a murder, also with a most sympathetic being who found the world outside an institution for the feeble-minded too much for him." By a gesture toward the books on the table he gave her a clue to his meaning.

"You say you haven't seen any one for days," she said. "Now the Fosses, for instance, who are your best friends, don't you let them know when you're shut in?"

"You have no conception, evidently, of my bearishness, dear friend. They have. They never wonder when they do not see me or hear from me for weeks."

"I know, and it seems funny; it seems sort of forlorn to me. I saw them the other day and asked if any one had seen you since the night of the show. They said no, but didn't seem to think anything about it."

"It's not really long since then. How are they all?"

"All right, and busy as bees. They've no time to come and see me, or anybody else, I guess. Brenda's coming back to be married in May, and they're flying round getting her things ready. All her linen is being beautifully embroidered...."

They went on talking, without much thought of what they said. It was immaterial, really,

what they said, or even whether they listened to each other, while they had in common the comfort of sitting together in front of the fire after a long separation filled with doubts and dismays. She told him about the Convalescents' Home, the sum they had raised for it. No word, prudently, was spoken by either of her share in raising it. He told her about the Russian novels. A third person might perfectly have been present, for anything intimate in their conversation. Gerald was scrupulously careful, for his part, that this should be so. The third person would never have divined how far for the moment that chimney-corner transcended, in the sentiments of the parties seated before it, any other corner of the earth.

Aurora's attention became closer when Gerald related his interviews with De Brézé and Costanzi, both of whom he had succeeded in convincing that Antonia had had nothing to do with intriguing them at the *veglione*, and had left to digest as best they could their curiosity concerning the mysterious masker mistaken for her. He had been obliged to give his word that he knew on absolutely good authority who this person was.

His attention, on the other hand, was complete when she told him how she had dealt with Ceccherelli; she was considerate enough to-day to make the effort to pronounce the gentleman's cognomen.

"I was savage at him, you remember," she said. "I was going to take his head off. Then when it came to it, and I had told him what I thought of him and the whole disgraceful scrape he had got me into—Oh, I went for him, hammer and tongs! Incidentally, I made him tell me what it was I had said. Pretty bad, wasn't it!—Well, do you know, he cried, he felt so. He just cried on his knees, and didn't try to get rid of any of the blame. All he wanted was that I should forgive him. And what could I do? As long, particularly, as I knew that a good deal of the fault was my own.... So now he comes to the house with a look as if he'd just been baptized. And he tells me only stories fit, he says, for a convent. Here is a sample, if you'd like to hear. Mrs. X, as he called her, who lives in a palace not a thousand miles, he said, from Piazza degli Anti-nory, and who had given Mr. B. reasons for not liking her, was seen by him, in a suspiciously simple dress, going suspiciously on foot, in a little suspiciously out of the way street, at a considerable distance from Piazza degli Anti-nory. The gentleman followed her stealthily into a house he saw her enter, thinking, you know, he would find out something to her discredit. And what did he find out but that she was secretly visiting and relieving the poor! The brilliant society lady, whom he wished to be revenged on because, as I gathered, she had scorned his dishonorable love-making, was secretly the angel of the poor.... Don't you think that's a nice story? He tells me nothing now that's less nice than that. We're reformed characters. He has asked my permission to dedicate to me a beautiful piece of music he has just composed, and which is called—but in French—'Prayer of the Evening.'"

Both of them were pleasantly aware of a tray placed on the table near them, as if descended from heaven, laden with teapot, bread and butter, jam. Neither of them really saw Giovanna, who brought it in, or was struck by the stern expression of her face.

Aurora, never sorry of something to eat, turned her attention to the tray. Gerald wished to serve her, and she first noticed his weakness when she saw the teapot tremble slightly in his hand. She went on chattering, but she was observing him.

"Is your carriage waiting before the door?" he suddenly asked, after a space during which she had suspected that he was not properly attending to what she said. Aurora's monogram, daintily executed, adorned the door-panels of her carriage.

"Yes," she answered. "Why?"

As if he had not heard, he changed the subject. After a while he asked, again irrelevantly:

"How was it that Miss Madison did not come with you this afternoon?"

"She was going to a different tea-party." Supposing that his question was a way of politely desiring news of Miss Madison, she went on to talk of her.

"She was going to her French teacher's, who is having a French afternoon where they're supposed to talk nothing but French. What would I have been doing there? But Estelle is getting to talk the French language exactly as well as her own.... That reminds me. A thing I've wanted to tell you. If you should notice that Busteretto seems to be rather more her dog than mine, don't you say anything, or care. The fact is Estelle loves him more than I do. That's all there is about it. Which isn't saying that I don't love him. But Estelle's silly over him, in the regular old maid way, as I tell her. When he wouldn't eat his dinner this noon, I had all I could do to make her eat hers, she was so troubled. And nothing ailed him, I guess, but that he'd picked up something in the kitchen. What I wanted to say was, don't you think it's because I don't value your present, if you should notice by and by that I seem to have given up my claims to Busteretto. That sort of alive present has a will of its own. The little thing took to her from the first more than he did to me. Shall I tell Estelle that you wished to be remembered?"

"Pray do."

"She'll be sorry to hear you're sick. Don't say that again, Gerald," she silenced him, letting her anxiety at last plainly appear. "Don't tell me you aren't sick, for I know better. It's been taking away my appetite to see you make believe to eat, and choke over it. Your cough is so tight it sounds as if it tore your lungs. Give me your hand. It's as hot, dear boy, and as dry!... Wait, let me feel your pulse."

He knew that his pulse was high, that his temples ached, that a disposition to shiver accompanied the volcanic heat of his blood.

He laughed at her light-headedly while with serious concentration she counted the beats in his wrist.

"I'm going to stop at Doctor Gage's on my way home," she said, letting go his hand, and not heeding what he said. "And I'm going to tell him to come and see you."

"Please do not! If I need a doctor, there is my own, an Italian, the same for years."

"An Italian? Do you think they're as good?"

"Better for my own case."

"Gerald, it's my advice to you to go right to bed and let your doctor come and prescribe. A cold is nothing in a way, but a neglected cold can grow into a mean sort of thing. Say you'll do it. Don't you know how good it will feel to you just to give in and go to bed and let some one else do all the looking after you? Oh, I wish I could speak Italian enough to have a talk with your Giovanna."

"Giovanna has taken care of me and my *malanni* for years. She gives me tar-water, and rice-water, and tamarind-water, and linden-tea, and cassia. She threatened me this morning with a sinapism if I were not better by evening. I shall be better. I do not wish for a sinapism."

"Is that a poultice on your chest? I guess it's what you need. Now, if I have any influence with you, Gerald, if you love me one little bit, you'll promise to go right to bed, and you'll give me your doctor's address so that on my way home I can leave word for him to come."

"You shall not take that trouble. I can send Gaetano."

"You promise me you'll do it, then?"

"I seem to have been left no choice, dear lady."

"That's real sweet of you. You'll go to bed the minute I've gone?"

"Yes. But don't go quite yet!"

"With that temperature, I don't see how you can care who stays or who goes, or anything in the world but to lay your head down on a pillow. I won't stay any longer now. Go to bed like a good boy. To-morrow I'll run in and see how you're getting along."

His last word was, after a moment of seeming embarrassment:

"I hope Miss Madison will be able to come with you next time."

"Yes, yes," said Aurora, lightly, taking it for a mere amiable message with which he was charging her for Estelle.

Fever no doubt colored all Gerald's dreams that night, and was in part responsible next day for his thoughts, as he passed from languor to restlessness, and from impatience back to the peace of the certain knowledge that before evening he should have visitors-fair visitors.

When it seemed to him nearly time for them, he ordered Giovanna to make the room of a beautiful and perfect neatness, hiding all the medicine bottles and humble signs that one is mortal. She was directed to lay across his white counterpane that square of brocade which often formed a background for his portraits. She was asked to brush his hair and beard, and wrap his shoulders in an ivory-white shawl, thick with silk embroideries, which had been his mother's. In a little green bronze tripod a black pastille was set burning, which sent up, slow, thin, and wavering, a gray spiral of perfume.

Keenly as he was waiting, he yet did not know when the ladies arrived. He opened his eyes, and they were there, shedding around them a beautiful freshness of health and the world outside. Estelle, in a soft green velvet edged with silver fur, held toward him an immense bunch of flowers. Aurora, in a wine-colored cloth bordered with bands of black fox, tendered a basket heaped with fruit. Both smiled, and had the kind look of angels.

They sat down beside his bed. They talked with him; all was just as usual. They asked the old questions pertinent to the case, he made the old answers, and by an effort kept up for some minutes a drawing-room conversation with them.

Then Aurora said:

"Hush! You mustn't talk any more!" And when he thought she was going away, he wondered to see her take off her gloves.

She stood over him; he wondered what she meant to do. She felt of his forehead with her cool hand. With her palms, which were like her voice, of a velvet not too soft, she smoothed his forehead and temples; she stroked them over and over in a way that seemed to draw the ache out of his brain. Her fingers moved soothingly, magnetically, all around his eye-sockets, pressing down the eyelids and comforting them.

At first he resisted. Perversely he frowned, as if the thing increased his pain, annoyed him beyond words. He all but cried out to the well-meaning hands to stop.

"Doesn't it feel good?" asked Aurora, anxiously.

He relaxed. Without opening his eyes, he nodded to thank her, and as he yielded himself up to the hands it seemed to him that those passes drew his spirit after them quite out of his body.

"I don't think I'll go up with you," Estelle said unexpectedly when on the next day they stopped before the narrow yellow door in Borgo Pinti. "I'll wait here in the carriage. I'm nervous myself to-day. Give my best regards to Gerald. I hope you'll find him better."

Aurora did not take time to examine into the possible reasons for her friend's choice. She climbed the long stairs sturdily, managing her breath so that she did not have to stop and rest on the way.

She followed the stern Giovanna, unsubdued by the latter's hard and jealous looks, to the door of her master's chamber.

She went toward the bed, smiling at the sick man over an armful of white lilacs.

He half rose in his bed and quickly, disconnectedly, impetuously, said:

"My dear friend, this is most good of you. I'm sure I thank you very much. I'm very, very much better, as you can see. I shall be out again in a day or two." He was visibly trembling; his eyes flared with excitement. "That being the case, my dear lady, I earnestly beg you will not trouble to come like this every day." He stopped to choke and cough, then wrenching

himself free from strangulation—"Aurora,"—he changed his key and tune,—“do let me be ill in peace! Here I am on my back, with a loosened grip on everything, and it’s taking an unfair advantage to invade my privacy as you do. Take away those lilacs with you, won’t you, please? We haven’t any more vases to put them in; they’d have to be stuck in a bedroom water-jug. Giovanna won’t let me have flowers in my room, anyhow; she says they are bad for me. Don’t be offended! I know you mean nothing but to be kind, but the thing you are doing is devilish.... What do you think I am made of? I don’t want you to be offended, but I have got to say what I can to keep you from coming to this house and troubling me in my illness. I have got to say it plainly and fully because you, Aurora, never understand anything that is not said to you in so many words. I might try and try my best to convey the same idea to you in a gentle and gentlemanly way, and not a scrap of good would be done. I’ve got to talk like a beast. I wish to be alone. Is that clear? I’ve just struggled and waded my way out of one quagmire; I do not wish to enter another. Is that plain? I wish to feel free to be ill as much and as long as I choose. It concerns nobody. It concerns nobody if I die. It would be an excellent thing, saving me the trouble later of blowing out my brains.... My God, Aurora, have you understood?” he almost shouted.

“Yes,” said Aurora in a voice that sounded pale, even as her face looked pale. “I have understood, and I won’t come again. Just one thing, Gerald. Put your arms under the bed clothes and keep them there.”

“Whether he’s better or worse I truly couldn’t tell you,” Aurora said in answer to Estelle’s first question. After a moment she added, “I can’t make him out.”

Estelle saw that she was deeply troubled, and, herself troubled at the sight, did not press her for explanations.

During the drive home Aurora made only one other remark. It was delivered with a certain emphasis.

“*One* thing I know: I sha’n’t go *there* again in a hurry!”

Her lilacs, after wondering a moment what to do with them, she had quietly deposited outside Gerald’s entrance-door.

It was unimaginable, of course, that the childhood’s friend should so disregard the rules of the game as to leave her old playmate’s curiosity long unsatisfied. Estelle accordingly learned before evening that Gerald had been guilty of an attack of nerves, in the course of which he had said something which Aurora did not like. What this was Aurora would not tell, saying it seemed unfair to repeat things Gerald had spoken while he was not himself and which he perhaps did not mean. From which Estelle judged that Aurora had already softened since she returned to the carriage looking as grim as she was grieved.

That Aurora had something on her mind no observant person could fail to see, and Estelle was not unprepared to hear her say as she did on the third morning at breakfast, after fidgeting a moment with a pinch of bread:

“I’m so uneasy I don’t know what to do. That boy is much sicker than he knows,” she went on to justify her disquietude, “and he’s in a bad mood for getting well. I don’t believe Italian doctors know much, anyhow. I’ve heard that they still put leeches on you. All he has to take care of him, day and night, is that old servant-woman What’s-her-name, who, he told me himself, doctors him with herb-tea. I’m so uneasy! The sort of cold he has, I tell you, can turn any minute into something you don’t want. He’s all run down and a bad subject for pneumonia. I’m thinking I shall have to just go to the door and find out how he is.”

“You could send a servant to inquire,” suggested Estelle.

Aurora appeared to reflect; she might have been trying to find a reason for not taking the hint, but she said, “No; I should feel better satisfied to go myself.”

At the last moment, when they were ready to start, Estelle found Buseretto’s nose hot, and decided not to go. She stayed at home and called a doctor. For some days the pet had not seemed to her in quite his usual form.

Aurora, climbing Gerald’s stairs this time, felt very uncertain and rather small. The street door, when she had pulled the bell-handle, had unlatched with a click, but no voice had called down, and when she reached the top landing the door in front of her stood forbiddingly closed. She waited for some minutes, wondering whether she were doing right. Suppose Gerald were enough better to be up again and, Giovanna being out, should himself come to open the door. How would she feel, caught slinking back, after she had been requested loudly and roundly to stay away?

Well, set aside how she felt, the object of her coming would have been reached, wouldn’t it? She would know that he was better. She rang and listened.

Certain, as soon as she heard them, whose footsteps were on the other side of the door, she held in readiness her Italian. She counted on understanding Giovanna’s answer to her question, for she had, as she boasted, “quite a vocabulary.” But much more than to this she trusted to the talent which Italians have for making their meaning clear through pantomime and facial expression.

As soon, in fact, as Giovanna opened the door, and before the woman had said a word in reply to “*Come sta Signor Fane?*” Aurora had understood.

Giovanna’s eyes, stained with recent weeping, looked up at the visitor without severity or aversion, seeking for sympathy; the unintelligible account she gave of her master’s condition was broken up with sighs.

Aurora felt her heart turn cold, and such agitation seize her as made her reckless of all but one thing.

"I shall have to see for myself," she thought.

With the haste of fear, she flew before Giovanna down the long hallway, around the dark corner, to the door of Gerald's room. It was half open. Checking herself on the threshold, she thrust in her head.

He was so lying in his bed that beyond the outlined shape under the covers she could see of him only a dark spot of hair. And she felt she must see his face, whether asleep or awake, to get some idea.... She tiptoed in with the least possible noise. At once, without turning, he asked something in Italian, and speaking forced him to cough; and after he had finished coughing, Aurora, who was near, could hear his breathing rustle within him like wind among dead leaves.

Giovanna had gone to the head of his bed and whispered a communication. Upon which he twisted sharply around, and Aurora, moved by an overpowering impulse, rushed to his side.

"Hush!" she said at once. "Don't try to talk; it makes you cough. I just wanted to know how you were. It would be funny, now don't you think so yourself, if, such friends as we've been, I should stop caring anything about you because you were cross the other day? I had to come and see if there wasn't something we could do for you."

The attempt to speak choked him again; he had to lift himself finally quite up from his pillow to get breath. Quicker than Giovanna, Aurora snatched up a gray shawl from a chair to put over his shoulders. The room felt to her stagnantly cold. He stopped her hand in the act of folding him in, and she knew that it was not the Gerald of last time, this one who, with an afflictive little moan, clasped and pressed her hand.

She hushed him, every time he tried to speak, until his breathing had quieted down, when he came out despite her forbidding with a ragged, interrupted, but obstinate eagerness:

"How can I ever thank you enough for coming, dear, dear Aurora? I have lived in one prolonged nightmare ever since I saw you, knowing I had behaved like a blackguard, and fearing I should never have a chance to beg your pardon. I thought I should never see you again. And here you are, so generous, so kind!"

"Hush, Gerald! Don't make anything of it. Of course I came. Keep quiet now; you mustn't try to talk."

"Dearest woman," he insisted, with his voice full of tears, "I don't even know what I said to you, but I know that the whole thing was atrocious. You standing there like a big angel, with your innocent arms full of flowers, and I barking at you like a cur!"

"Nothing of the sort. You were sick. Who lays up anything against a sick man?"

"Excuse it in me like this, Aurora, if you can: that having such regard for you, I had pride before you and could not endure that you should see me when I felt myself to be a disgusting object. So, mortified to the point of torture, I lost my temper, -I've got that bad habit, you know, -and insanely railed to keep you off."

"And didn't succeed. Come, come; what nonsense all this is! Put it out of your mind and think of nothing but getting well. Now you-"

"It is not nearly so important that I should get well," he testily persisted, "as that I should ask your forgiveness. It has been weighing upon me and burning like bedclothes of hot iron, the horror of having so meanly and ungratefully offended you."

"Why should you feel so bad about it as long as I don't? Put it all out of your mind, just as I do out of mine. There, it's all right. Now keep still except to answer my questions. You've had the doctor?"

"Yes, dear."

"What's he giving you?"

"You can see -there on the stand -those bottles."

"And hot things on your chest?"

"Yes; *semedilino*. I don't know what you call it in English."

"Flaxseed, I guess. How can poor old Giovanna do everything for you?"

"I don't know," he answered vaguely. "She does."

Perceiving that by a reaction from his excitement he was suddenly fatigued to the point of no longer being able to speak at all or even keep his eyes open, she asked nothing more, but with a practised hand straightened his bolster, smoothed his pillow and drew the covers evenly and snugly up to his chin.

"Don't you be afraid," he heard her say above him, as it seemed to him a long time after, at the same moment that he felt her give his shoulder a little squeeze to impress her saying: "I won't let anything happen to you."

He entered a state which was neither quite sleep nor quite waking. He was not dreaming, yet the world within his eyelids was peopled with creatures and varied by incidents departing from the known and foreseen. Something malevolent pertained to the personalities, something disquieting to the actions; suffering and oppression resulted from his inability to get away from them. They came and went, one scene melted into another, sometimes beautiful, sometimes repulsive, a sickly disagreeableness being common to all, and the fatigue involved with watching the spectacle of them weighing like a physical burden.

But yet beneath the unrest of fever dreams there was in Gerald, after Aurora's visit, as if a substratum of quiet and content. As a good Catholic, having confessed and received absolution, would be less troubled by either his symptoms or any visions that might come of Satan and his imps, so Gerald, with the weight of his sins of brutality and ingratitude lifted off him, could feel almost passive with regard to the rest.

He had moments through the night of recognizing the deceptiveness of his senses. He knew, for instance, that the solemn clerical gentleman in a long black coat and tall hat whom

he saw most tiresomely coming toward him down the street every time he opened his eyes was only a medicine bottle full of dark fluid, outlined against the dim candle-shine. And he knew that the tower of ice, solitary amid snows, lighthouse or tower of defense on some arctic coast, was nothing but a glass of water. And when it seemed to him, late, late in the night, that Aurora was in the room, he knew off and on that it was Giovanna, who through one of those metamorphoses common in fever had taken the likeness of Aurora. She lifted him to make him drink, and supported him while she held the glass to his lips, then laid him easily back. The delusions of fever had the sweet and foolish impossibility of fairy-stories: Aurora, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, placing upon his stiff and lacerated breast balsamic bandages of assuaging and beneficent warmth!...

The night was full of torrid heat and fiery light, in which everything looked unnatural, shifting, uncertain, but daylight, when it finally came, was of a crude coldness; under it everything returned to be itself, meager and stationary, and he knew that it was no phantasmagorical Aurora making preparations to wash his face.

He spoke no word to signify either pleasure or displeasure. He let it be, like a destiny too strong to withstand. With this acceptance there took place in him, body and spirit, a relaxing, as when supporting arms are felt by one who had been fearing a fall.

In his not very clear-headed reflections upon himself and his state, he had passed into a different category of men, where what he did, particularly as regarded worldly proprieties, had little importance, because, ill as he felt, there seemed to him such a strong probability of his actions having no result. If, on the other hand, he could manage to pull through—and he found he cared to do this, cared so much more than he had supposed he ever could care, on such desperate days as those which had sometimes seen him re-examining his revolver—if he should recover, the gladness of his good fortune would outweigh any inconvenience created by his weakness now. Life is, and should be, dearer to man than anything else, except honor. He found it difficult to separate the idea of honor from life, and make it oppose letting this robust guardian angel fulfil her promise not to “let anything happen to him.”

Gerald had too often heard those well-meaning lies which friends and nurses tell the sick, to place faith altogether in Aurora's cheerful asseverations from day to day that he was getting better.

Yet Aurora was not feigning. She entertained no doubt that with proper care he would get well. And she was providing the care. Hence a confidence which she did not allow any of those chilly creepy fears which come at about three o'clock in the morning to undermine. She was so strongly resolved to get him well, and felt so capable of doing it, that it would not seem unlikely her very hands in touching him had virtue and imparted health.

He said very little, even when the exertion of talking had ceased to make him cough. The fact that talk fatigued him was reinforced by his old fancy that talk was superfluous. One lived, one looked, one felt....

She was glad he so willingly kept quiet, because as long as he had fever it was so much the best thing he could do. He did not have to tell her that he took comfort in having her there, that everything she did for him was exactly right, that her touch was blessed and had no more strangeness for him than that of a sister—nay, than his own. She too understood those wordless things which are shed from one person, like a radiance, and inhaled by another, like a scent.

In the long silences, she sometimes read a little by the shaded candle—she had chosen the night watch for her share and let his devoted old Giovanna wait on her master during the day. But very often she sat in her easy-chair near the bed doing nothing, just thinking her thoughts, marveling at the queerness, the surprises of life. Who could have dreamed that first time she entered this big brick-floored, white-washed room, and nearly cried because she found it so dreary, that she would come to feel at home in it; that by her doing the brown earthenware stove in the corner, cold since Mrs. Fane's day, would again glow and purr; that over and over she would watch the row of flower-pots out on the terrace, with the stiff straw-colored remains in them of last year's carnations, grow slowly visible in the dawn; that from their pastel portrait the eyes of the mother would watch her placing compresses on the brow of the son!

Before going for her rest, she always waited to see the doctor, who made an early visit. After they had reissued together from the sickroom, he was interviewed by her with the help of an interpreter, Clotilde, who was in and out of the house during all that period, making herself useful. Estelle instead came only for a moment daily, having a case of her own to nurse, who was down, poor crumb, with those measles-mumps-whooping cough of puppyhood, distemper.



Aurora's eyes, fixed and starry, rested upon the little flame

On the day when Doctor Batoni had agreed that with prudence there would be nothing more to fear, the patient might be regarded as having entered convalescence, Aurora covered him with a wide and warming smile.

"Je suis son bonne amie," thus she translated the explanation of her unconcealed happiness, "I'm a good friend of his," nodding at the old man with the full sweetness of her dimples; blushing a little, too, with the pride of addressing him directly in French.

That morning Aurora was so happy she could not hurry; humming an old psalm tune she dawdled about her room, the longer to enjoy her thoughts.

When she finally slept it was more deeply than usual, and she woke with a start of fear that it was past the time. The line of sky showing between the curtains retained no remembrance of the day. It must be late, certainly. Then she heard a faint stirring just outside her door, the thing probably which had drawn her out of a sound sleep. It was the rustle of some person listening at the crack.

She bounced from bed and went to open. It was as she expected, Giovanna; come, she supposed, to see if she were ready to go on duty. At Giovanna's first words, though she did not entirely understand them, she became uneasy, because Giovanna interspersed them with sighs. Her voice sounded as if she might have been crying.

Aurora had grown accustomed to the fact that those hard old eyes of Giovanna's took easily to tears, and that she sighed by the thousand the moment she was in anxiety over her *signorino*. She knew she must not take Giovanna's fears at her own valuation. She gathered from her gestures now, combined with her talk, that Gerald, so quiet until to-day, had become restless. Giovanna impersonated him tossing and throwing his arms out of the bed-covers. Aurora, though not permitting herself to be alarmed, hurried with her dressing.

"Ain't it always so," she questioned her own image in the glass, "that the moment you feel safe something goes wrong?"

When she tiptoed into the big dim room where Gerald lay, she could not at first make out what it was that had troubled Giovanna to the point of tears. He seemed quiet enough. After she had taken his pulse and temperature, her heart subsided with a blessed relief.

He could not tell her, because he did not himself know, that just because he was better he, paradoxically, was worse. Thoughts and responsibilities had begun to trouble him again.

"Should you mind very much," he asked suddenly, "if I worked off my nervousness by singing? I have kept still, so as not to worry you, exactly as long as I can."

"Certainly," she said, "go ahead. I never knew you were a singer. What are you going to sing?"

She waited with a certain curiosity.

He began chanting. "B, a, ba; B, e, be-babe! B, i, bi-babebi! B, o, bo-babebibo! B, u, bu-babebibobu!" Then he went on to the letter C, "C, a, ca! C, e, ce-cace! C, i, ci-caceci!" and to D, and so on, one after the other, through all the consonants in the alphabet.

"The queerest rigmarole you ever heard!" Aurora called that simple Italian spelling-exercise for little beginners. It might have been funny to hear him, only it was disquieting, he did it so earnestly and so obstinately kept it up.

When he had finished, Aurora held a sedative powder all nicely wrapped in a wet wafer ready for him. He knew what it was and gratefully gulped it, composing himself after it to wait in patience and self-control for its operation. Aurora, reposing on the magic of drugs like a witch on the power of incantations, watched for the drooping of his eyelids and relaxing of his frown.

He had lain still for so long that she was congratulating herself upon the result thus easily obtained, when he opened his eyes, twice as wide-awake as before, and began to talk, as if really the object of an opiate were not to stupefy a man, but to rouse him fully. Under its influence he was almost garrulous. His vivacity partook of delirium. All that passed through his mind pressed forward indiscriminately into utterance, as if the sentinels placed on guard over his thoughts had been taking an hour off.

Aurora heard him in wonder and perplexity. He was not incoherent, he was not extravagant. He was merely talkative, expansive, and this in his case was obviously

pathological. She wondered also to see how handsome he could look, with his eyes alight; his cheek-bones burning, pink as paint; his hair, grown long, lying in dark locks over a luminous forehead.

She tried to think of something that would abate all this. She was searching her nurse's memory for some further sedative by which to counteract a first one gone wrong, when the thread of her medical meditation snapped, her attention fastened upon what Gerald was saying. Because she had a suspicion that it was about Violet he was talking. And she had from the first been curious about Violet and his feelings with regard to her. As curious as if she had been jealous.

"There is a person—" he said, in the suppressed voice of one communicating a secret, "of whom I used to dream very often. Not because I wished to. In the days when I wished to, she came seldom. But when I dreaded it, she began to come, and do what I would, oppose to her what hardness I could, she could be so sinisterly dreadful and unkind that it was like a knife in me. Try to shut her out as I might, she would force her way in and make me suffer. Why? Why did she want to?... I will tell you what I believe. Some women feel their beauty to depend upon their power to create suffering. If not happy suffering, then the other kind. If men grow indifferent to it, they feel their beauty passing, and if it goes there is nothing left that they care for. The unremitting quest of their lives therefore is to feed the blood of men to their beauty, and if they can not do it in any other manner they pick the locks of sleep and get at them in that way. But the last time this person came, a surprise awaited her. And the same, I will confess, awaited me. My heart was like so much sawdust, so far as one drop of blood that she could wring from it. And now she won't come again, I believe, for why should she come? She will look a little anxiously in the glass, very likely, to see if she has begun to fade. I should be sorry to know that the least of her golden hairs had faded—they were so lovely. It's wrong all the same to practise sorcery. You don't, Aurora, that is one reason why I like to be with you. Women as God made them are strong enough, He knows! It's unfair to use sorcery besides, to make themselves beautiful to the point of distraction, and desired to the point of pain. And then their barbarous methods! That low game of using a man's weakness for the increase of their own glory, making a jealous fool wilfully out of a decent fellow, and a baby out of a self-respecting man. You, Aurora, you are good as good bread, you are restful as a bank of moss. You would never do what the others do. Would you, Aurora? You needn't answer me. I know."

"If what you mean is that I'm not much of a coquette," she came in quickly, to prevent his continuing, "I guess you're right. Take it since I was born, I've been called a good many things, but in all my life I don't remember anybody calling me that,—a coquette. But you're talking lots more than is good for you, brother. Now I want you to quiet down and give those sleepy-drops a chance to work. Here I've fixed you something else that will help them. It's just a drink with nothing in it but something nice and cooling. Smells pleasant, doesn't it? This'll do the trick."

Slipping an arm under his neck, she lifted him, propped him against herself, and held the glass to his mouth. Instead of words pouring out, the calming draught flowed in. It was a slow process; he drank by small swallows and wished after each one to stop, but she gently forced him to go on. When it was finished and he turned his head away from the glass, he found it resting on her shoulder. He settled his cheek warmly against it, like a child burying his face in the pillow. With a long sigh he relaxed.

"Now, Aurora," he said solemnly, "be perfect-ly still."

He was very still, too. After a long moment he half lifted his head and with a long soft sigh replaced it, as if to renew his sense of a resting-place so sweet. With all her heart Aurora lent herself to this, glad to witness, as she thought, the belated effect of the soporific. In a few minutes he would be asleep.

"Aurora," he suddenly said, wakeful as earlier, but without moving his heavy head or opening his eyes, "do you remember the first evening I ever saw you? You came down the middle of the room all by yourself, like something in the theater, where the stage has been cleared for the principal character to make an effect. You were a fine large lady in a sky-blue frock with bursts of pink, your hair spangled with diamonds, a fan in one hand, a long pair of gloves in the other. That at least is what everybody else saw that looked at you. But me, what I seemed to see was America coming toward me draped in the stars and stripes. Now you know how I feel about my dear country. If I loved it why should I have fixed my abode once and for all over here? And yet when I saw it coming toward me across the room, with your eyes and smile and look of Home, I felt like the tireddest traveler and exile in the whole world, who wants nothing, nothing, but to get Home again. It was like a moment's insanity. I almost wonder that I resisted it, the desire to lay my head on your shoulder and cry, Aurora, and tell you about it, then never move again, or say another word."

Aurora readjusted her position so as to make his leaning on her even easier. She brought a warm cover safe-guardingly around him.

"Poor Geraldino!" she pitied him in the lonely past.

"Then do you remember the first time I went to see you," he asked, "and you introduced me, dearest woman, room by room, to the somewhat gruesome mysteries of your house? You walked before me holding a lamp. In the ball-room, hazy with vastness, you held the lamp high, like a torch. And I had a vision of you as America again, or Liberty, or Something, lighting the way for me.... But I treated the fancy as one treats fancies. I did not in the least intend to cultivate the acquaintance begun with your picking me up by the loose skin of the neck and plumping me down on the little seat of your victoria."

"Why-Gerald!" she drawled in a tone of reproach purposely funny. "Didn't you want to come?"

"I wanted *not* to come!" he answered, with normal spirit. "But you kept saying Jump in. When a lady has said Jump in three times it acts like a spell, a man has got to jump."

"But when it came to the hot bread and syrup, brother, you know you were glad to be there. You kept your superior look, but you ate all I buttered for you. It did me good to see you."

"Yes," he grew dreamy again, "it took me back. It took me back to so many things I had nearly forgotten. And when at the end of the evening I was leaving, do you remember, Aurora, wrapping in paper some pieces of maple-sugar and forcing me to take them home in my pocket? I felt absurdly like a little boy and again you seemed like big America; something exhaled from you that made me think of slanting silver-gray roofs and the New England spring of appleblossoms and warbling robins; yes, and of October foliage intolerably bright, and Fourth of July celebrations. Not things I dote on, exactly, but things I was born to, and restful to me after my years of chasing what is not to be caught, wanting what is not to be had, seeking all the time to adjust myself, to adjust myself, to the harshness of life, the treachery, the unaccountability, the relentlessness—restful as this heavenly shoulder, on which I have wished how many hundred times to lay my head like this and not move again, or speak again, or have anything ever change. Aurora, don't say a word, dear. Particularly, kindest Aurora, don't make any of your little jokes. Keep perfectly still, like a good darling, and let me forget everything except where my head is, and be perfectly happy."

As seriously as if a god had commanded it, Aurora preserved the silence and immobility requested of her, only making her shoulder as much wider and softer and more comforting as she could by wanting it to be so.

When by and by she felt him slip a little as he began to lose himself in sleep, she clasped her hands around him supportingly and held him in place.

A single candle burned in the room, with a book to shade it. Aurora's eyes, fixed and starry, rested upon the little flame where it was reflected in a mirror on the wall opposite, but she did not see it at all, so absorbed was she in her thoughts. In her feelings, too. In the wonder of the hour. This remarkable Gerald, with his head packed full of knowledge, with his speech that charmed you as whistling does an adder, with his capacity to paint pictures that the rest could not even understand, and then his rarity, the sweetness of his manners, the fascination of all that unknown in him which came, she had concluded, from his foreign bringing-up—he had wanted ever since he first saw her just to lay his head on her shoulder and rest....

Her common ordinary shoulder. What did he see in her? Taking for granted that he saw something, Aurora attributed this unknown quality in herself to God, and thanked Him. She tightened her clasp about Gerald, the better to feel him there. The power of the sleeping-potion had overtaken him completely. Thoughts that moistened her eyes resulted from feeling her arms full of the breathing warmth of a beloved form. Those defrauded maternal arms! That other, who would have been five years old at this time, and would have been called little Dan, after Dan, her big father, how she would have nursed him through his childish ailments, how she would have held him and rocked him! No, she would never stop yearning over him. One must suppose that God knows best.

Gerald's breathing was deep and quiet. When sure that it could be done without waking him, she let him gently down on to the pillow.

She stood beside the bed for a few minutes, in her soft garment of cashmere and swansdown which made no more sound when she moved than did her velvet shoes; she watched him sleep with emotions of gratitude beyond possibility of expression to any one but that old intimate, God. He was getting well so surely and fast. He would shortly be as well as ever.

Confident that he would want nothing more for the rest of the night, she arranged herself in her easy-chair for a good sleep, too.

On the next day she divined from his half troubled look at her, and the shy modesty of his manner, that he was wondering whether he had actually babbled last night, or in a mild delirium dreamed the whole thing. Not from her might he find out. Her easy, matter-of-fact way made any such passage seem at least unlikely.

Having slept during the night she did not retire to rest during the day, but let Giovanna go about her long neglected affairs and in her place looked after Gerald, who had waked from his deep sleep immensely refreshed. He would not need a constant watcher beside him after this, during night or day.

"What shall I do to amuse you?" she asked him, to make an interruption after she had felt him watching her through half closed lids for some time. "Don't you want me to read to you?"

"I think not, Aurora. Thank you just as much."

"Well, then, how shall I entertain you? Do you want me to be a gold-fish for you?"

"How do you 'be a gold-fish,' Aurora?"

"Look!" But the instant she changed her face into a gold-fish's and waggled up through imaginary water, opening and shutting her mouth like a rubber valve, he hid his eyes, crying sharply, "Please stop! I don't want to see it."

The gold-fish personality was dropped.

"Very well, then," she said, with unimpaired serenity, "shall I do a squirrel gnawing a nut? Every family its own circus."

"If you do it, I will not look. How can you endure, lovely as you are, to make yourself ugly-grotesque?"

"Aren't you rather hard to suit to-day, mister? Shall I be a hen, then, scratching for her

chicks? That's mild."

"No, no, no. Yes. No. I don't know about the hen. Let me have a sample."

He watched her, critically and provisionally, while with comfortable, motherly, half-suppressed chest-sounds, and a round eye cocked for finds among the dirt, remarkably altogether the appearance of a pensive white hen, she made believe to scratch up the earth with her feet. A rather sympathetic performance, he allowed, her imitation of the hen, calling up before one the vision of a farmyard, a brood of downy yellow chicks, a duckpond, sunshine, green things.

He let her do it as long as she would, or rather until to vary the thing she increased the comic beyond the line he fixed. When midday found him grudgingly laughing at her cackling, it seemed improbable certainly that midnight had seen him sleeping in her arms. But underlying their laughter was a consciousness in each that day of a thing uniting them which had not been there before.

Sitting bolstered up in bed to eat his first real meal, he looked, with his long hair parted in the middle and brushed down over his hollow temples, like one of those old masters in the Ewe-fitsy, Aurora told him. A St. John the Baptist, she specified.

She chipped the top off his egg and cut finger sizes of bread for him, so that he might have it in the foreign way he preferred.

While he languidly ate, yet with pleasure, the door softly swung inward, revealing faces of women, -Estelle, Clotilde, Livvy, Giovanna, -all equally kind, all craning for the delight of a peep at him eating his soft-boiled egg.

Because he was still weak, tears came into his eyes, and because he could not permit them to be seen, he waved and haggardly smiled toward the smiling and nodding faces without inviting them nearer.

Women! women!... What a great deal of room they had occupied in his life! How much he owed them for affection, -mother, sister, servant-girl, friends....

He had known from whispers and rustlings, from a sort of instinct, latterly from Giovanna's own lips, that his house since the coming of "that lady" to undertake the government of his sickroom had been full of people, making practical and easy the carrying out of her plots. Abundance of people and abundance of money. Old Giovanna grumbled bitterly at this invasion, but she did it inside of herself, sanely recognizing that she had subject for gratitude. Her hot dark eye looked all she thought, and her lips moved as she soundlessly said all she felt; but when she dropped into the dark church of Santa Maria degli Angeli for a moment's devotion she did not fail to ask Maria to bless "that lady" and give her great good. After which she begged Her by the seven swords of Her sorrow to hasten the day that should clear the house of the whole horde of strangers, and permit her to resume the quiet life with her signorino.

Gerald, whose nature felt the oppression of material benefits as much as Giovanna felt jealousy with regard to her rights and loves, resolved that the sole seemly return for generosity in this case would be an equal generosity, consisting in an acceptance pure of every shadow, either of obligation, or reserve, or regret.

Since the doctor said it would do the invalid no harm to admit a visitor or two, Aurora wrote to Mrs. Foss. She came at once with Leslie. Both on the occasion of this call were perfect, in tact, in warmth, in friendship. And yet with them, and the sense of the World and the World's point of view which they inevitably brought, change entered the house.

The vacuous, almost happy languor of the sick was replaced in Gerald by an irritable gloominess, decently repressed, but unconcealable.

"There's no mistake; you're getting well," remarked Aurora, when the unrest of a mind troubled by many things expressed itself in indignation against innocent inanimate objects, a drop of candle wax for burning, an ivory paper-cutter for snapping in his impatient hand. "You're getting well. I guess I can go home and feel easy about you."

And sooner than Giovanna had dared to hope when most fervently she invoked the Holy Mother, lo! the intruders, mistress and maids, bag and baggage, had left in their places room and silence. So much sooner than expected that Giovanna, clasping in her hands an incredible fee, almost found it in herself to feel regret.

CHAPTER XVI

On their last day together Gerald had asked Aurora to find the key of a certain desk-drawer and to bring him the miniature strong-box locked in it. He had taken out one by one, to show her, the little store of trinkets once belonging to his mother and given her from among them the one he thought most charming, an old silver cross studded with amethysts and pearls.

Her own house, when she reëntered it, looked faintly unfamiliar, as if she had been away much longer than she had by actual count. But her big soft bed looked good to her, she told Estelle, after the bed of granite framed in iron she had lately occupied.

She was in high good spirits. Gerald out of the woods, the amethyst cross, Estelle and her beautiful commodious house returned to, vistas ahead of good times and heart satisfactions, a sense of success and the richness of life—Aurora was in splendid spirits.

Estelle and she slept together on the first night, so as to be able to buzz until morning, as they had used to do in their young days, when one of them was allowed to go on a visit to the other and stay overnight. There ensued a very orgy of talk, a going over of all that had happened since their separation, quite as if they had not once seen each other in the interval.

It might have been thought, when their remarks finally became far spaced, as they did between two and three of the morning, that this happened because the streams were running dry as well as because the talkers were growing sleepy; but no such thing. Each had loads more that she might have told; but each, as had not been the case in the old days, was keeping back something from the other. Each locked in her breast a secret.

There had naturally been talk of Gerald. Estelle was immensely nice about him, and Aurora appeared immensely frank, but yet both knew that he was to be a delicate subject between them thenceforward, and that thoughts relating to him could not be exchanged without reserve.

There had been laughter over Estelle's subterfuges in order not to let it be learned from her, and this without directly lying, that Aurora was actually living at Gerald's. "It's a case of a cold," she had explained her friend's non-appearance upon one occasion, without mentioning whose cold.

The details of Busteretto's illness and danger had caused him to be reached for in the dark and kissed and cuddled anew.

"My, but it's nice to have you back!" Estelle said in the morning, fixing a bright, fond gaze upon her friend across the little table in the bedroom, where they sat in their wrappers eating breakfast. "A penny for your thoughts, Nell. What are you thinking about?"

Nell smiled rather foolishly, then, putting Satan behind her in the shape of a temptation to prevaricate, said:

"I was thinking what they were doing over there. Whether Gerald has had a good night, and about Giovanna, and what it's all like without me. It's hard for me now to think of the place without me. I miss myself there."

"I suppose you'll be driving round to inquire sometime in the course of the day," Estelle said, with true generosity; at which Aurora tried to look as if she were not sure; she would think about it.

With arms around each other's waists they went through all the rooms for Aurora to renew her pleasure in them after absence. They came to a standstill before her portrait in the drawing-room.

"There's no mistake, he's talented," Estelle admitted good-humoredly, after a considerable silence. "That's a fine portrait."

Aurora did not say she thought so, too. Alone in her room later, while Estelle was dressing to go out together, she looked at the other portrait to see if she were "any nearer educated up to it." It seemed to her she was, a little bit.

She started to dress. Being given to homely rather than poetic fancies, she subsequently thought of herself as having been, during the process of making herself fine for the afternoon drive and call, like some Cape Cod young one trotting happily along with her tin pail full of blueberries, just before a big dog sprang out of the roadside tangle and jostled the pail out of her hand, so that all the berries were spilled....

Even as she was buttoning her gloves a letter came for her with a parcel. All rosy with delight, she quickly found in her purse a reward for Gaetano, the bringer. Without too much hurry, like a person not eager to shorten a solid enjoyment, she opened the letter. It did not strike her as surprising, certainly not as ominous, that Gerald should write when he might expect to see her so soon. She read:

This is the fourth letter, dearest Aurora, that I have written you since waking, after a very bad night, in such a black humor that you would know I am quite myself again and life has resumed for me its natural colors. I destroyed those letters one after the other because, although written with the effort of my whole being to be what you call sweet, they sounded to me insufferably disagreeable. And now whatever I write I shall have to send because if I destroy this letter also I shall not have time to write another before you come to see me as you promised. And the reason for my wretched night was that I was haunted by all the reasons there are why you should not come. They are so difficult to put into words that I despair, after three attempts, of doing it in any but an offensive manner. Pity, Aurora, the plight of your poor patient; permit him not to go into them. Just—don't come.

Alas! that cannot be all. I have the vision of your puzzled face. Well, then, it is for yourself, in part. I have no excuse for profiting by a kindness that may be harmful to you. It is my duty to regard for you the conventions you are big-heartedly willing to disregard. I deplore the fact that I was ever so weak as to forget it.

But it is also for myself, who must not further be demoralized and spoiled.

I must not, moreover, be laid further under obligations of gratitude, the less, my dear Aurora, that gratitude is not precisely what I feel. No. I so little dote upon life that I should be glad if a merciful angel's attention had not been drawn to me, and I perhaps might have escaped the dreary prolongation of years. I am sorry, but so it is.

Pray do not conceive any relation between what I have just written and the request that follows. Will you be so kind as to return the object belonging to me which I miss from the little table-drawer at the head of my bed? You had no right to take it.

Vincent Johns is coming in a day or two. Do not think of me, therefore, as lonely or neglected.

I find I must hurry or be too late. This letter is beastly and ought to be torn up like the others. It simply cannot; it must go. I can only pray, Aurora, that you will understand.

Aurora went back to the beginning and read the letter a second time. Then she turned to the accompanying parcel and noticed that it was done up in a shabby piece of old newspaper. It contained a pair of fur-lined velvet shoes, a bow-knot of blue satin ribbon, and a bottle of almond milk, things of her own which through carelessness had been left behind. She could not know that the honest Giovanna alone was responsible for this return of her property. Coming at that moment, it formed the occasion for two stinging tears rising to the edge of Aurora's eyes. She swept them away with the back of her glove, and forbade any more to follow. To prevent them she took her lips between her teeth, and with all her strength called upon her pride.

She read Gerald's letter over again, really trying to understand, to be fair, to interpret it in the high-minded way he would wish.

"When all is said, it amounts to this,"-she reached the end of that exercise by a short cut,-"he wants to be let alone."

And after every allowance had been made for him, and all due deference paid to his excellent reasons, still it seemed to her what she couldn't call anything but a poor return. Because his letter was bound to hurt her, and he must have known it. His sending it, therefore, argued a lack of any very deep affection for her. After she had come, just from his own words and actions, to supposing....

"This is what you get for not remembering that if a person is practically a foreigner you can never expect to know them except in spots," she admonished herself.

After they had driven in the Cascine and around the Viali for the sunshine and air, Aurora asked suddenly:

"Haven't we had enough of this?" and ordered the coachman to go home.

"Why!" exclaimed Estelle, astonished, "I thought we were going to Gerald Fane's to see how he's getting along!"

"No, I guess we won't. I think it's time, after living with him for three weeks, that I began to look after my reputation, don't you?" said Aurora, with a forced lightness of rather bitter effect.

"I had a note from him, anyhow, just before we came out," she added after a moment. "He's doing all right."

Estelle understood that something was wrong. Aurora could not successfully pretend with her. Aurora's transparent face, as she now took note of it, betrayed hidden perplexity and chagrin. Estelle asked no questions, not needing to be told that Gerald's note had worked the change. Despite her affection for her friend, indeed, just because of that affection, Estelle was quietly glad of it. Her thought caressed the secret which has been referred to, a scheme which for some weeks had given her an excited feeling of having between her fingers the thread of the Fates.

After Estelle had gone to her own room for the night, Aurora sat down to compose an answer to Gerald's letter. She had reflected a good deal since receiving it, and out of confusion and complexity singled one clear and simple thought or two.

Gerald had never said or intimated that she had forced herself upon him when he was too ill to help it; but the truth was she had done that, after all his shying rocks at her, too, to keep her off. Nor had Gerald suggested that one of his reasons for wishing her not to haunt his bedside was a fear of her becoming inconveniently fond of him. A hint could be found, if one chose, that he feared becoming too fond of her, but of the other no vestige, no shadow, or ghost of a shadow. Yet by those two points the spirit of Aurora's reply must be inspired. Centuries of civilization have ground into the female of the species one particular lesson.

So the irascible man's nervous, hurried and harried scrawl, written with sputtering pen that at several places tore clean through the paper, and written under the compulsion of his soul and his good sense, received from the best of women an answer in her calmest hand, deliberately calculated to give him pain, at the same time as to convey to him unambiguously that, as far as she was concerned, he was freer than the birds of the air. She wrote:

My dear friend Gerald,

What I want principally to say is just *don't worry*. Don't worry for fear I'll come, and don't worry for fear I won't understand, and don't worry because you think my feelings may be hurt. And above all the rest, don't worry about *gratitude*, for I

don't feel you owe me any at all. Don't you think for a moment that I saved your life. You were not as sick as you imagine, I guess. It was a very light case, or how would you have got over it so soon? You were not near as sick, according to all accounts, as poor Buseretto, who has been having what they call here the *cimurro*. I took you in hand because *I am a nurse* and I couldn't keep my hands off, just as an old fire-engine horse will start to gallop when he hears a fire-alarm even if he isn't on the job. If it had been Italo Ceccherelli who was sick I would have been tempted in just the same way; so you see there is no occasion for gratitude. Put it out of your mind.

Now about the thing I took from the drawer of your night-stand. I am very sorry I can't give it back, because I flung it out in the middle of the river. That is what I did with it, and I am not sorry either. You know that we at home don't look upon certain things as you apparently do over here. We think it a disgrace for a man to kill himself. I myself am old-fashioned enough to think that that door leads to hell. I have been astonished to find that over here it is thought quite respectable, that some Italians look upon it as an honorable way, for instance, of paying their debts, and a natural way of getting over an unhappy love-affair. As I know you have a good many foreign ideas, and as you have once or twice made a remark that showed me you thought of that solution of difficulties as a possible one, I grabbed your nasty old pistol when I found it in the little drawer, and it reposes now at the bottom of the Arno. Don't get another, Gerald. No burglars are going to enter your house to steal your Roman tear-bottle or your books. When you are so blue you feel like killing yourself, say your prayers. I am very glad your friend the abbé is going to come and stay with you. He is a *good influence*, I feel sure, and a good friend.

I suppose I shall see you again some time, even if I don't do the visiting. But don't be in any hurry, not on my account. I hope that in the meantime you will get back your strength quickly. Remember that you will have to be very careful for quite a long time, because a relapse is *an awfully mean thing*.

Good-by, my dear Gerald. Please accept the very best wishes of

Yours sincerely,

Aurora Hawthorne.

P.S. I did not write four letters and tear three of them up, like you. I wrote one and corrected it, and here I have copied it out for you, hoping that in it I have made my meaning as clear to you as you made yours clear to me in your letter.

CHAPTER XVII

When the latter occurrences had shaken down in Aurora's mind, Gerald's letter, which she from time to time re-read, impressed her as a most gentle and reasonable production of his pen, while her own letter, preserved in the original scribble, appeared to her horrid, cutting, and uncalled for.

But there was now nothing to do about it. The state of mind created in her by the whole episode prepared her to welcome with open arms any diversion, any event which would restore to her self-conceit a little vitality or lay on her heart a little balm; and so when, at the psychological moment, Doctor Thomas Bewick surprisingly turned up in Florence,—it may be remembered that he was Estelle's choice for Nell,—Nell fell on his neck quite literally, and gave him a full, sonorous kiss.

"Tom! Tom!" she cried in delight, "how good it is to see you!"

This happened in her formal drawing-room, whither she had gone on the servant's announcement that a gentleman from America, who had given no card or name, asked to see her.

Their greeting over, she ran out into the hall, screaming joyfully:

"Hat! Hat! Come down this minute! Hurry up! You'll never guess who's here!"

In reply to which summons Estelle came hurrying down the stairs with an innocent, expectant air.

"If it isn't Doctor Bewick!" she exclaimed, without giving herself away by one false inflection. "Why, Doctor Bewick, this is simply too awfully nice! What *are* you doing over here? Who *would* have expected to see *you*?"

"Tom," said Aurora, "I was never in my life so glad to see any one. I didn't know how much I'd missed you till I saw you. You good old thing! You nice old boy! Aren't you a brick to have come! My soul, my soul! I didn't know till this minute how tired I am of foreigners and half-foreigners and quarter-foreigners and all their ways. I was hungry for home-folks and didn't know it. Now, please God, we'll have some talk where we know that when we use the same words we mean the same thing, and aren't wondering all the time what's really in the other's mind!"

The man to whom this was said absorbed it with a face fixed in smiles of pleasure. He was a big blond man, disposed to corpulence, and looking somewhat like a fresh-faced, gigantic boy until his eye met yours and gave the note of a fine, mature intelligence, open on every side, and unobtrusively gathering in what it had no strong impulse afterward to give out again in any open form of self-expression.

Tolerant, not from any vagueness of judgment; easy to get on with, but not to drive or to deceive, he looked strikingly the good fellow, yet kept you in respect. An air of capability, a consciousness of definite achievements, went coupled in him with the humor that would prevent bumptiousness however great the matter for pride. A quiet carelessness of other people's opinions formed part of his effect of poise; the opinions of dukes would have affected him as little as those of rag-pickers, unless they recommended themselves to that judicial spot in his brain at which he tried them. He was level-headed, unsentimental, but kind, of a kindness that like good-humor seemed almost physical, and made him stop to stroke the kitchen cat as well as see to it that the negress's baby had the right milk for its orphaned stomach.

He looked at Aurora with smiling scrutiny, and facially expressed a vast appreciation. She looked back at him with eyes of laughing tenderness. Avoiding to speak directly to her the compliments rising in his mind, he turned to Estelle.

"Hasn't she blossomed out!"

"Isn't she wonderful?" chimed in that friend, enthusiastically.

Aurora, with a comedy of pride, threw up her chin, lifted her arms, and turned as if on a pivot, to show herself off in her elegance. She had on the wine-colored street-dress bordered with black fox; over its white satin waistcoat embroidered with gold hung in a splendid loop her pink corals. The restraining Paris corset gave to her luxuriant form a charming modish correctness of line.

"Oh, Tom,"—she sank happily on the sofa beside him,—“we're having the time of our lives! Just wait till you see me in company, and hear me put on my good English, when, instead of calling things lovely or horrid, I call them amusing or beastly or impossible. But your turn first. Give us the Denver news.”

After dinner that evening, in the midst of Italo's brilliant performance, a caller came,—a thin, oldish, English-speaking lady whose black dress made no pretense of following the fashion.

Aurora had met her at Mrs. Satterlee's during a meeting appointed to raise funds for the Protestant orphanage. When this philanthropist, after a little talk of other things, mentioned the relict of a mason, left with five young children, Estelle and Dr. Bewick took it as a hint to withdraw beyond earshot. The two ladies were left talking in undertones; after a minute they found themselves alone in the room.

Estelle preceded Dr. Bewick across the hall to the dining-room, deserted and orderly, where the drop-light rained its direct brightness only on the rich and variegated tapestry cover of the table beneath it. From the sideboard—whence the marble fruit had for some time been missing—she brought a bottle of aërated water and a glass to set before him; she found

him an ash-tray, and seated herself beside the table near him in such a way as to get, through the parted half-doors, a glimpse of the visitor when she should leave.

Before speaking, she exchanged with the doctor a look of intelligence.

"You see what I mean?" she asked little above a whisper.

Dr. Bewick looked all around the room with leisurely appraising eyes, then nodded understanding. There was no intimation that he was not ready to listen, but he did not seem quite ready to talk. His white shirt-bosom was remarkably broad as he leaned back in his chair in the slightly lolling fashion of large, good-humored men. For all the nonchalance of his attitude, he looked, from evening tie to thin-soled dress-boots, beautifully spruce, as Aurora had remarked, and made an appropriate pendant to her in her Parisian finery.



Aurora, with a comedy of pride, threw up her chin, lifted her arms, and turned as if on a pivot, to show herself off in her elegance

Approval of him was written large on Estelle's pleasant, alert countenance; a quiet, comprehensive liking for her sat as plainly in the eyes reflecting her slim person and evening-frock of beaded net. Being Nell's friends made them friends, a thing not so common as one wishes. Through her they felt almost on the familiar terms of old friendship, although Estelle had never met Dr. Tom Bewick before he came to New York to see them off on their great four-stacked ocean-steamer.

"You see what I mean?" she asked, and, not expecting a regular answer, did not wait for it. "Now that woman won't leave until she has secured support for the mason's five children, and she'll do this without the smallest difficulty. In a day or two some one else will come, with the sad case of a poor father out of work who is going to have to sell his blind daughter's canary unless Nell steps in to relieve their wants. And Nell will step in. Word has been passed, just as they say a tramp at home marks a house where he's been given a meal, and every case of want in this town, it seems to me, is hopefully brought to Nell. And she listens every time; she doesn't get sick of it. And you know, Doctor, that her circumstances don't warrant it."

Bewick, as Estelle stopped for some comment on his side, made a slight motion of chin and eyelids that partly or deprecatingly agreed with her. He took the cigar out of his mouth, but having knocked the ash off, replaced it, to listen further and not for the moment speak.

"It's positively funny, the things Nell has been doing with her money," Estelle went on, in a tone that did not disguise the fact of her glorying in this prodigality while being justly frightened by it. "It's not just the ordinary charities, churches, hospitals, etc.,-all of those send in their regular bills, as you might say. It's a Swiss music-box for the crippled son of the *spazzaturaio*, or street-cleaner; it's a marriage-portion for this one and funeral expenses for that one; it's filling the mendicant nuns' coal-cellar, it's clothing a whole orphan-school in a cheerfuller color! Clotilde and Italo call her attention to every deserving case, and are guided in this by the simple knowledge that Nell can't hold on to her money. Of course it's her good heart. She's done a lot for them and their family, too, I've discovered. I don't know just how much, but I can guess by their look of licking their chops. I'm not saying they aren't all right-honest, sincere, and so forth-or that I don't like them. It's Nell's own fault that she's imposed on. I don't doubt that they're as devoted as they seem, it's only right they should be. It's right the whole city of Florence should be. I was thinking only the other day as we drove

through Viale Lorenzo the Magnificent that it would be appropriate for a grateful city to rechristen our street Viale Aurora the Magnificent."

Tom Bewick laughed, nodding to himself with an effect of relish. He murmured, "Aurora the Magnificent!"

"Aurora the Magnificent-Aurora the Magnificent is all very well," Estelle took up again with animation, "but she's already spending her capital."

Bewick did not allow himself to appear startled or troubled; still, he was made pensive by this. His look at Estelle invited her to go on and tell him the rest, just how bad it was. She was leaning forward, with her elbows on the table, one hand slipping the rings on and off a finger of the other, in her quick way.

"You know what her income is. It would have provided for all this,"-she took in the luxury around them by a gesture of the head,-"but no income can suffice to set up in housekeeping all the picturesque paupers in Florence. That's why I was so anxious for you to come, and wrote you as I did. You can curb her; I can't. I have no influence with her in that way, and I simply can't sit still and see her throw away all this good money that was intended to provide her with comforts for the rest of her life. Unless somebody looks after it, she won't have a penny left. You must talk to her, Doctor Bewick. Don't let her know, though, that I put you up to it. You can ask a plain question, as it's right and natural for you to do, then when she answers you can lecture her. She'll take it from you."

Bewick, with his sensible face, looked as if he saw justice and reason in all Miss Madison had said to him; yet he did not go on with the subject. It might be that he felt delicate, in a masculine way, about uttering to a lady's best friend any criticism of that lady's mode of doing or being-criticism which he might feel no difficulty perhaps in voicing to herself. Estelle took this into consideration and, his reticence notwithstanding, relied on him to do his duty.

A diversion occurred in the shape of a knock at the door-the door leading to the kitchen-stairs. It was but the scratch of one fingernail on the wood. Tiny as the sound was, it did not have to be repeated before Estelle ran to open. A small four-footed person entered, the bigness of a baby's muff and the whiteness of a marquis's powdered wig. Estelle caught him up from the floor and with a coo of affection, "What um doing in the kitchen, little rogums?" set him on the table, under the lamp, for Doctor Tom to see how utterly beautiful he was and have the points and characteristics of a Maltese terrier explained to him.

Busteretto was reaching dog's estate, his shape had taken on a degree of subtlety, his hair was growing long and straight and like leaves of the weeping willow. Estelle lifted the white fringe depending from his brow, and exposed to the light two great limpid brown eyes, incredibly sweet and intelligent. It was as wonderful, in its way, as if a blind beggar, insignificant and easy to pass by as he stood at the street-corner, should take off black goggles suddenly, and you should perceive that he was a masking angel come to test the hearts of men.

"Did you ever see such a little sweetheart?" gasped Estelle.

"A pretty little fellow," spoke the doctor commendingly. With the instinct to relieve discomfort he raised the veil of hair again as soon as Estelle had let it drop, and looking further into the beautiful eyes, that with the neat nose made a triangle of dark spots effective as mouches on Columbine's cheek,-"Why don't you tie up his hair like this to keep it out of the way?" he asked.

"We mustn't! Mr. Fane, who gave him to Nell, says it would be bad for him, he might go blind. They're that kind of eyes and need the shield from the light. Mr. Fane knows all about this Maltese breed of dogs."

"Is he the same one who painted her portrait?" Dr. Tom deviated from the subject of the dog, over whose eyes the curtain was allowed to drop again.

"Yes, he's an artist."

"And the same one she nursed through an illness?" asked Dr. Tom after a moment, with the mere amount of interest apparently of one asking for a topographical detail, so that he may get his bearings.

"Yes. You'd know, wouldn't you, that she'd have to, if she thought he wasn't getting the right care and didn't see any other way of providing it."

"Well, Skip," Dr. Tom returned his attention to the dog, "you're a fine little fellow. Yes, sir." He held out a large pink hand and received in it immediately a wee gentlemanly hand of fur and horn, rather smaller than any of his fingers. "Good dog," he said, and regarded their friendship as sealed. But next minute, because Estelle had whispered to him, "Make believe to strike me," he lifted his fist menacingly against her, and on the instant, with the courage of a David, there dashed against him a little wild white flurry, not to bite-the skin of man is sacred-but by a show of pearly teeth and the growlings of a lion to frighten the giant off.

"Good dog!" cheered Tom and leaned back laughing, "Well done!"

Because it was very late when Dr. Bewick left the ladies to return to his hotel they immediately repaired to their respective rooms; but before Estelle had got to bed, Aurora, half undressed, came strolling into her maidenly bower of temperate green and white.

A vague depression of spirits had overtaken Aurora, reaction, perhaps, from the excitements of the day, and she sought her friend with the instinct to make herself feel better by talking it off.

She dropped on a chair, and in silence continued to braid her hair for the night.

"Isn't he the nicest fellow!" began Estelle, setting the keynote for joyous confidences.

"Isn't he just!" replied Aurora. "I want him to have the best time in the three weeks he's

going to spend here. We've got to show him all the beauties of Florence, and then I want him to know all our friends. We must have some tea-parties and some dinners. I want it to be just as gay. Who is there I ought to lay myself out for, if not Tom Bewick?"

"I quite agree with you. Let's plan."

"No, to-morrow'll do. It's too late. I'm tired." The motions of Aurora's fingers were suspended among the strands of her hair. She fell into a muse. "Seeing Tom"—she came out of it again, and went on braiding—"has brought back, along with some things I never want to forget, such a lot of things I don't want to think of!"

"I suppose it would."

"His sisters, for instance. He doesn't look a bit like them, really—nasty bugs, godless, gutless pigs—but yet he brings them up before me. Idell rather more than Cora, and Idell was the meanest of the two, and her husband the miserablest, sneakingest cuss. Oh, how I hate the bunch of them! And I oughtn't, you know. You oughtn't to go on hating your enemies after you've got the better of them. But the moment I think of that trio, Cora Bewick—sour-bellied old maid!—and Idell Friebus, and her rotten little pea-green husband—pin-headed insect! flap-eared fool!—I get mad. If you could really know, Hat, the cold-heartedness and wicked-mindedness of those people! How they ever happened in Tom's family Goodness only knows. And such a fine father! The Judge was as good as any of those old fellows in the Bible, I do believe. *That* patient, *that* considerate, and *that* just! More than just; what he did was more than just, and those girls of his simply couldn't stand it. They couldn't stand it, after they had neglected him all through his illness so that it was a scandal, that he should treat the person who had done their daughters' duty for them the same as he treated them, no better and no worse, but just the same. The things those people did to me, Hat, the things they said about me—"

"I know, I know; you've told me," said Hattie, soothingly and deterringly.

"The things those people did to me, and the things they said about me,"—Nell, not to be deterred, repeated intensely,—“if I'd ever wanted to give up my share, those things they did and said would have made me hold on like grim death just to spite them. Oh,”—she broke off, and flung her finished braids back over her shoulders,—“why do I let myself think of them? I grow so hot! It's the sight of Tom that has started me back to thinking of all that excitement and disgustingness. Dear good Tom, who stood by me like a trump! I do wish, Hat, I didn't hate so hard when I hate. We've taken pride in my family, I'm afraid, in being good haters, as if it were part of the same trait that makes you loyal and true to your friends. But perhaps it's a mistake. I know that Gerald said once”—she yielded to the obscure desire to hear the air vibrate, as it had not done for some time, with the syllables of his name—“Gerald said once, when we were talking of things, 'We must forgive everything,' he said; 'we must forgive happenings the same as we must people.' And Gerald, you know, when he's in sober earnest, has some good ideas.”

"Talking about Gerald," Estelle came in quickly, glad of a change from the other subject, "did Livvy tell you that our cook met Giovanna at the market, and Giovanna told her that her master was doing finely; that he hadn't yet been out of doors, but that he sat at the open window in the sunshine? I'd been meaning to ask you."

"Oh." Aurora quietly took it, and thought it over a minute. "No, she hadn't told me. I suppose those long stairs would keep him from going out till he was good and strong. Did she say anything else?"

"Only that Giovanna was buying a chicken, and the abbé, she said, was still staying with them."

The ladies of the Hermitage did the honors of Florence with modest pride and a certain glibness. Before the early old masters, Aurora said to Tom:

"At first I couldn't stand them. I guffawed at the idea of there being anything to admire in them. Even now I can't pretend I like them; but I keep still and pray for light. Isn't that the beginning of polish?"

Tom was taken to make calls. Aurora took upon herself to explain Florentine society to him.

"There are little stories about most everybody," she said, "so you have to be pretty careful. If a certain General is present, for instance, whom I may have a chance to point out to you, you don't want to talk of *horses*, because his fiery steed bolted with him during an engagement once and his enemies caricatured him running away. Then if a certain viscount is present, whom I may have a chance to introduce to you, you don't want to talk of *ermine*, because that little animal is a feature in his coat of arms, and his coat of arms along with his title of nobility, scandal says, came as a reward from a royal personage for marrying the lady who was his first wife. So you'll have to look out, Tom, or you may be called upon to fight a duel."

The most splendid dinner that could be planned in council with Clotilde and the cook was prepared to honor the friend from home. To this were bidden the Fosses, Aurora's best friends; the Hunts, her next best; Manlio, whom she wished Tom to see as a truly beautiful specimen of Italian; and Landini, because she was curious to know what Tom thought of him.

Aurora had not seen the latter since the night of the *veglione*. Finding that he had not called during the interval, she had been glad to hope that his suspected mysterious project for making her his own had been dropped. That being the case, she was not at all averse to seeing him. On the contrary.

Charlie Hunt she had not seen since the variety-show. Learning that he also had not once come during her absence, she thought that this admitted of some simple explanation which

he would give on the night of the dinner.

Charlie, receiving the invitation, pondered a while before accepting. He considered himself to have been insulted, rather, by Mrs. Hawthorne. Still, he could not be absolutely sure. If, anyhow, she did not know that he knew the black crow to have been none other than herself there would be nothing in his going to her dinner-party which laid him open to scorn. And he felt more disposed to go than not. The dinner would be festive, costly, succulent. Then he desired before breaking with her-if breach there must be, which would depend upon the subtlest circumstances-to persuade her that two enormous porcelain jars owned by a dealer of his acquaintance were the very thing needed in that bare-looking ball-room of hers. There was a third reason. A lady whose friendship had latterly-since the night of the *veglione*, in fact-taken on the glow of roses and the warmth of wine, had taken it into her charming head to be jealous, fantastically, of Mrs. Hawthorne. Charlie, whose manly vanity his good fortune had, not unnaturally, reinforced; Charlie, who if he were loved much must always love less than the other, felt a certain stimulation in exhibitions of jealousy with regard to himself. He thought well of the results of saying, "I cannot come this evening, *cara*, I am dining at the Hawthorne's." So he accepted Aurora's invitation.

The dinner was superlative, but it was written he should leave the house finally in a bad humor. The feasted guest was a big Western American, of the immensely rich and not very interesting type, whom he had seen once or twice at the bank. Aurora's fond esteem for this man was open and shameless. Whether he were a "has been," an "is," or a "to be," Charlie could not determine, but only in the character of suitor could he see him in the picture.

The dark face of Landini, his Chief, across the dinner table, when his eyes sought it was indecipherable to him; but, shut as it was, he was reminded by it, not to the improvement of his spirits, of a little personal hope, a just and rational hope, which might have to be relinquished. After dinner he got his hostess into a quiet corner for a chat.

"Where's Gerald?" pure curiosity made him ask, with that impertinence which his friends were accustomed to and took lightly, because curiosity and impertinence were part and parcel of Charlie, and if you cared sufficiently for his attractive smoothness and flashing smile to wish them near you, you must put up with the bad breeding underlying his good manners. "Where's Gerald?" he asked familiarly.

"Gerald isn't well enough yet to be out," Aurora answered him, with imperfect candor. "You didn't know he'd been ill? Why, how funny! He's been having what you call here a 'fluxion of the chest.'"

This ignorance of Charlie's comforted her by proving that the news of her nursing Gerald had not spread over the town like wildfire, as she had been warned it would. Florence was not so bad or nimble a gossip as she had feared.

"I was as nice to Charlie Hunt that last evening as ever in my life," she afterward declared, "and I thought he seemed all right."

When he spoke of the precious porcelain jars, however, she did cut short his appetizing description with:

"Don't speak of it. I daresn't, Charlie. I've been lectured so much for extravagance, I daresn't buy a toothpick. If these jars you speak of cost nine francs instead of nine hundred, I couldn't, I tell you. I guess Florence has got all she's going to out of me. I've turned over a new leaf."

Aurora had all evening been so entirely her kind and jolly self that Charlie had almost forgotten the black crow. At this check, and the barren prospect opening out beyond, he remembered it, and felt a vicious little desire to pay her back for the pin she had stuck into him under, as she idiotically supposed, an impenetrable disguise. He went away, as has been said, in a bad humor.

CHAPTER XVIII

The loveliness of Florence at this point of the year, while inspiring poets, made the rest feel helpless before the task of finding words for it. Even Aurora, who could not be called contemplative, or highly susceptible to influences of form and color, was heard to heave an occasional great sigh, so was her heart oppressed, she could not think why, during their drives among the hills around Florence, by the sight of the spring flowers,—tulips, narcissi, fleur-de-lys, imagine it, growing wild, as if gold pieces should lie scattered in the road for passers to pick up!—and by the sight of the warm and tender tones of the sky, and by the silver sparks of windows flashing back the sun where the hazy city houses huddled around the Duomo's brown head and shoulders, majestically lifted above them.

It was something in the air, Aurora thought, which forced her to sigh with that half-sweet oppression and fatigue: the air was fragrant with a scent which seemed to her upon sniffing it analytically to be the breath of hyacinths; and the air was warm, it "let her down," she said.

Why, instead of delicious contentment, is a sort of melancholy, of unrest, created in us by the beauty of spring, will somebody tell?

Aurora, when she thought she could do it without attracting the notice of the other two, would slip from their presence sometimes, so as to have a few minutes by herself and stop pretending to be so everlastingly light of heart. For nothing in the world would she have had Tom know but that his visit made her happy to the point of forgetting every subject of care or annoyance.

Estelle, too, she would have preferred to deceive. She did her best, and for hours at a time appeared serene and merry. During these periods she sometimes did actually lose the sense of anxious suspense; but it kept itself alive as an undercurrent to her laughter.

When she saw how well Tom and Estelle got along together, she became less timid about arranging little absences from them; she even—such a common feminine mind had Aurora—saw in the congeniality which permitted them to remain for half an hour in each other's company without boredom the foundation of a dream, dim and distant, it is true—the dream of seeing Estelle one day settled in a fine home of her own. She feared, though, there might be bridges to cross before that event. She dreaded the bridges. She wished Tom might be diverted from what she feared was his purpose. How satisfactory, if Estelle might prove the diversion. Estelle would really have suited Tom much better than the person of, she feared, his actual choice.

Of all this she was somewhat disconnectedly thinking when she ran away from them one evening after dinner, leaving him still at the table smoking his cigar, while Estelle hunted up in a guide-book for his benefit some little matter of altitudes. A flash of good sense showed her the previousness of her calculations, and she mentally withdrew her hand from meddling. Fate would take its own way, anyhow.

She had gone upstairs with the excuse of wanting a fan. Her fan had easily been found, but instead of returning to her guests, "They won't miss me if I do stay away for ten minutes," she said, and walked to the end of the broad hallway, out through the door that stood open on to the portico roof—once glassed over for a party and dedicated to Flirtation.

How long ago that seemed! Here Gerald, a quite new acquaintance, had told her about Manlio and Brenda. Poor young things, so unhappy then, and now exultant. Brenda was just back from America. The wedding was set for the ninth of May. Only eight days more to wait.

As Aurora, leaning over the balustrade and letting her eyes rest on the garden, thought of their assured and perfect happiness, she remembered a gross fly in the ointment. She had been told that Brenda would have to agree to bring up her children in the Catholic church. The thing had seemed to Aurora appalling. Upon her dropping some hint of her sentiment to the caller who had communicated the fact, she had been further told that very likely Brenda too would in time become a Catholic—as if that made it any better. A descendant of the Pilgrim Fathers to become a Roman Catholic! Any one but a heathen to change his religion!...

The figure of Abbé Johns rose before her mind. She refrained from judgment in his case. His case, for intangible reasons, seemed separate and different. But fear, as of formless bugaboos in the dark, burned in her heart at the idea of his influence perhaps being able, creepily, stealthily, to convert Gerald.

She turned her face upward to the sky of May and sent forth a little prayer into the crystal clearness of the space lying between her and the ear which she conceived of as receiving it, the ear of a Baptist God, as opposed to a Roman Catholic God surrounded by saints and candles and incense and tin flowers.

As she did this a high pink cloud caught her eye. Embers of sunset were glowing over the river at the other side of the house. The sight of the pink cloud, so pretty and far away, comforted Aurora like a good omen. She felt better and, her reverie borrowing a ray from the cloud, went on to rejoice in the pleasantness of the garden which she might for the time being call hers. So different from the gardens at home, but in its set way how attractive it was, how suited to people with leisure, and a certain stability of taste, and a liking for privacy!

Why, in that garden—which wasn't very large, either—you could almost get lost among narrow paths bordered with shrubs. Even if the wide wrought-iron front-gate were open, and

the carriage-gate at the side open as at this moment, you could be just as much shut off from outside as in your own room, if you took your sewing or your book to that little open air round with walls of smooth-trimmed laurel, and a stone table in the middle, and stone seats.

Old Achille down there, still busy watering,—Achille who belonged to the garden and was hired along with it, was a regular artist, thought Aurora. The great oval bed in front of the house was at this season like a huge bouquet, all arranged in a beautiful pattern. Then he had edged every path with a band of pansies just inside the band of ivy overrunning the mossy border stones—the sweetest thing. His pride was pansies, he had planted them everywhere, the finest she had ever seen. He had taken a prize once at a horticultural show, for his pansies.

The light died out of the pink cloud, and Aurora's pleasure in her garden gradually died out too, while the quality of irony in her many blessings smote her. For what is the use of having everything money can buy or the bounty of spring afford if you at the same time are troubled with a toothache? All this, so grand in itself, was like a good gift wasted, as long as she was in a state of quarrel with her friend. It was full two weeks since their exchange of letters. Two weeks of absolute silence. Could it be possible that she should never see or hear from Gerald again?

No, it could not, she said. It was part of having faith in him to deny the possibility of his remaining furious forever at her hateful letter. No, she would not believe it of him; she thought better of him. She was much mistaken if he could be so mean. She would be willing to bet—

There, in fact, he was, at this very moment, entering the carriage-gate.

After one mad throb of incredulous exultation, Aurora's thoughts and feelings were for a long minute limited to an intense and immobile watchfulness. He walked over the gravel with his eyes on the door under the portico. You would have thought his purpose set, and that he would not pause until he had rung the bell.

But you would have thought wrong. Half-way between the gate and the house he stood still and looked at the ground. He was holding the slender cane one knew so well like a weapon of defense, as if ready to make a resolute slash with it to vindicate his irresolution.

After a moment he turned, grinding his heel into the earth. It was then that a voice called out above him, "Hello, Gerald!"

He turned again and removed his straw hat. He and the lady leaning from the terrace looked at each other for the space of a few heart-beats with mechanical, constrained smiles. Then she asked:

"Aren't you going to come in?"

Instead of making the obvious answer and setting about the obvious thing, he appeared to be debating the point within himself. At the end of his hesitation, he asked:

"Could I prevail upon you to give me five minutes in the garden?"

"Why, certainly," answered Aurora, appreciating the fact that Estelle would be superfluous at the peace-making that must follow.

She went very lightly down the stairs. She could hear Estelle's and Tom's voices still in the dining-room. Instead of going out by the usual door, too near to their sharp ears, she turned with soft foot into the big ball-room and passed out through that.

The great oval mound of flowers spread its odoriferous carpet before the steps leading down from the house. She turned her back upon it and followed a path bordered with pansies and ivy till Gerald saw her and came to take her hand, saying:

"How good of you!"

"Well," she sighed, put by the bliss of her relief into a mood of splendid carelessness as to how she, for her part, should carry off the situation,—looking after her dignity and all that. "How jolly this is! And you're all right again, Gerald. You're well enough to walk on your legs and come and tell me so. Yes, you're looking quite yourself again. Well,"—she sighed again heartily,—"it's good for sore eyes to see you. You're sure now it's all right for you to be out of doors after sunset? Hadn't we better go in?"

"This air is like a warm bath. I must not keep you long, anyhow."

"Oh, I haven't got a thing to do," she precipitately assured him. "Come, we'll walk up and down the path,—hadn't we better?—so as not to be standing still. Go ahead, now; tell me all about yourself. How do you feel? Have you got entirely rid of your cough? And the stitch in your side?"

He would only speak to answer, she soon found; the moment she stopped talking silence fell. Had he nothing to say to her, then? Or did he find it difficult somehow to talk? She was so determined to make the atmosphere cozy, friendly, happy—make the atmosphere as it had used to be between them—so determined, that she jabbered on like a magpie, like a mill, about this, that, and the other, sprinkling in little jokes in her own manner, and little stories in her own taste, accompanied by her rich—on this occasion slightly nervous gurgle.

"Aurora dear," he said at last, with an effect of mournful patience as much as of protest, "what makes you? I am here to beg your forgiveness, and you put me off with what Mrs. Moriarty said to Mrs. O'Flynn. Do you call it kind?"

A knot tied itself in Aurora's throat, which she could not loosen so as to go on. If she had tried to speak she would have betrayed the fact that those simple words had, like a pump, fetched the tears up from her heart into her throat. He had his chance now to do all the talking.

"Couldn't we sit down somewhere for a minute? Should you mind?" His gesture vaguely designated the green inclosure, where the stone table stood, pale among the dark laurels.

But when they were seated, he only pressed his hands into his eye-sockets and kept them there.

"I am ridiculous!" he muttered and shook himself straight. After an ineffectual, suffocated attempt to begin, "I am ridiculous!" he said again, and without further concession to weakness started in: "I ought to have written you, Aurora. But I had seemed to be so unfortunate in writing I did not dare to try it again. Heaven knows what I wrote. I don't; but it must have been a prodigy of caddishness to offend you so deeply. It doesn't do much good to say I am sorry."

"Your letter was all right," broke in Aurora. "I only didn't understand at first. Afterwards I did. I tell you, that letter *was all right.*"

"It was written in a mood—a perplexity, a despair, you have no means of understanding, dear Aurora. When your answer showed me what I had done, I could have cut my throat, but I could not have come to tell you I was not the monster of ingratitude I appeared to be. Not that a man can't get out of bed, if there is reason enough, and take himself somehow where he wants to be, but because of a sick man's unreasonable nerves, which can start him raving and make him a thing to laugh at. I had the common sense, thank Heaven! to see that I must wait. Then, as the days passed, it all quieted down. Vincent was with me, a tranquilizing neighborhood.

"It seemed finally as if it might be almost better to let things rest as they were, to let that be the way of separating from you. I had almost made up my mind to do it, Aurora. Vincent has had me out for various airings, I have gone on several walks alone, but till to-day I avoided to take the road toward this house. I am so used to pain that I've grown stoical, you know, Aurora. I can stand any pain. I shut my teeth and say, 'It will have to stop some time.' But all at once it became too strong for me—not the pain, or the wish to see you, but the feeling that I could not bear to have you thinking me ungrateful. I, who hate ingratitude as the blackest thing in the wide world, to pass with you, with you, for an ungrateful beast!"

"Don't! don't, Gerald!" Aurora hushed him. "I can't let you talk like that. You know you couldn't be ungrateful, nor I couldn't think it of you."

"No, I'm not ungrateful. I'm not, dear," he caressingly asseverated, and closing her two hands between his treasured them against his cheek. "I want you to be altogether sure of it. If I did not recognize the enormity of my debt to you, Aurora, what a clod I must be! Not, mind you, because, it is just possible to think, I owe you my life. Not that, but because you were so kind. Because you were so kind, so kind—" he reiterated feelingly, "and I a troublesome, cantankerous, distinctly unappetizing object in his helpless bed. Don't think there was one touch or gesture of these dear hands that take away headaches that I do not remember with gratitude."

"There was nothing to be grateful for, nothing at all," insisted Aurora.

"And so when I wrote you in that brutal manner, dear,—"

"That letter was all right," Aurora vigorously snatched away from him the turn to talk, in order to defend him from this misery of compunction. "It was prompted by the most gentlemanly feelings, by real unselfishness and consideration for me. You didn't want me talked about on your account, and you put it as delicately as possible. Only I was a fool; I went off the handle, and wrote while I was mad and hurt and wanted to hurt back. But, bless you, I understand it all perfectly now. You needn't say another word. I understand the letter, Gerald, and I understand you."

"I am afraid," he said, letting go her hands and drawing a little apart, as if the most complete misunderstanding, after all, separated them,— "I am afraid you do not entirely. But this much at least is clear to you, isn't it, dear, that whatever I may be, I am not ungrateful? Whatever I may do, you are to remember that I couldn't be ungrateful to you, Aurora. If I should seem to be behaving ever so, ever so shabbily, still you must know that behind it, under it, I am the very contrary of ungrateful." He pressed his hands to his eyes again, and was still for a minute, before announcing, "I shall not come to see you for a long time."

The astonished and acute attention of her whole being was indefinitely expressed by the silence in which she now listened.

"I am going to keep away from you," he went on, "till I feel out of danger."

"Why, what's the matter now?" she asked, with the vehemence of her surprise and disappointment.

"A trifle, woman dear. Oh, Lord, I see I shall have to go into it! Haven't you the imagination to see, you unaccountable person, how an unhappy mortal might be affected by such circumstances as destiny so lately prepared for your poor servant's trying? Day by day, night after night, that insidious kindness, that penetrating gentleness, that stupefying atmosphere of a woman's care and sympathy.... Didn't you tell me once yourself—" Gerald's voice stiffened, and he pulled himself up again, discarding weakness,— "Didn't you once tell me yourself—in your impossible English, almost as bad as mine—that a sick man is 'liable to fall in love with his nurse?' And, dear girl, I will not do it. I categorically refuse. It is too horrible. I have done with all that. I have just managed to creep up on to the dry sand, and you ask me to embark again on those same waters. I will not do it. It is finished. That slavery! that unrest! and fever! and jealousy! No, not again. I have served my sentence. Too many times I have waked in the black of night and waited for daylight, wishing I had been dust for a hundred years. I know now that in order to have a little peace a person must not want anything. That is the price. We mustn't want anything, Aurora. We mustn't want anything, we mustn't mind anything, we mustn't care about anything, we must submit to everything!" This counsel of perfection came from Gerald almost in a sob. "We sha'n't be happy like that, naturally, but we sha'n't be too wretched for expression, either. It's the lesson of life. I have learned it, and I will not expose myself to the old chances again. 'He who loves for the first time is a god,' says the poet, 'but he who loves for the second time is a fool,' he goes on to say. And so, Aurora—"

"You make me laugh!" exclaimed Aurora in a snort of simple scorn.

"And so, Aurora, I am going to keep away from you for-I am not at the present moment quite able to say how long."

"You're going to do nothing of the sort! There now!" burst from Aurora. "I'm not going to permit any such foolishness." She firmly proceeded to pile up a barricade against his preposterous intention. "Now, Gerald, you pay attention to what I say, child. Can't you see for yourself, now you've put it into words, what nonsense all this is? You could no more, in your sane and waking moments, be sentimentally in love with me, and you know it, than, I guess, I could with you, fond of you as I am. No, that isn't putting it strongly enough," she gallantly amended; "you couldn't do it, it stands to reason, even so easily as I could. What you felt was just the result of you being so weak, all full of fever dreams and delusions. And you still believe in it a little because you aren't yet good and strong. I thought you were, just at first, because you come so near looking it. But I know that condition. After a sickness you plump up, you get back your color, and all the while you can be so weak you could burst out crying if any one pointed a finger at you. You're trembling with nervousness this minute. You're all sunk together, as if your backbone couldn't hold you up. It's because the weakness of your illness is still on you, as anybody could see. Now you listen to what I've got to say. The wisest thing you can do, young man, instead of keeping away and having ideas and waiting till these gradually wear off-the best thing you can do, I say, is to stay right at my side and get sobered up by contact with things as they actually are. Not only the best thing, but a lot fairer to me, doesn't it seem so to you? How do you think I like to have you go kiting off the moment I've got you back again? When I've missed you so! Now, Geraldino, rely on Auroretta. Let her manage this case. Don't you be afraid; she'll cure you in two frisks."

"It just might be, you know, that you were right," said Gerald, dubiously, with the modesty of tone that would beseem a girl after a bucket of cold water had quelled her hysterics. "The truth is you do not appear to me this evening at all as I have been carrying you in my remembrance."

Aurora laughed and reinforced her expression of jolly matter-of-factness, looking into his eyes with eyes of sanative fun.

He looked back at her with meditative scrutiny, one eyebrow raised a little above the other.

She had reigned in his thoughts very largely in her appearance of his nurse, with her soft, loose robes, the blue of pensive twilights, her fair hair in easy-feeling braids, her white hands bare of ornaments. She sat near him now in a snug satin dinner-dress full of whalebones and hooks and eyes. It had elbow sleeves terminating in full frills of Duchess lace; a square-cut neck, likewise be-laced, framing an open space in part obscured again by a jeweled medallion on a gold chain. She had on rings and bracelets, a bow-knot in her hair. She had in fact "dressed up" for Tom Bewick, wishing him to see with his eyes what good she got out of the fortune with whose origin he was acquainted.

"Gracious goodness!" She bounced to her feet. "Here I was forgetting! Gerald," she said in haste, "I'm sorry, but we'll have to go indoors. They'll be wondering where I am, and starting the hunt for me."

"They? You have guests?"

"Only one. Come in, Gerald. I want you to meet him. You've heard me speak of Judge Bewick in Denver, where I lived so long. Well, this is his son, Doctor Thomas Bewick. He's in Florence just for a visit. It's a wonder, come to think of it, that you haven't heard of his being here. We've been going everywhere and seeing everything and giving dinner-parties. Well, never tell me again that news spreads so fast in Florence! Come on. I want you to know each other. You'll be sure to like him."

"I don't think I will. I mean that I don't think I will go into the house with you, Aurora."

"Now, Gerald," she said in a warning voice, at which black clouds of impending displeasure loomed over the horizon, "this isn't the way to begin. Don't be odd and trying. I should feel hurt, now truly, if I had to think your regard for me wasn't equal to doing such a little thing for me as this. Tom's one of my very best friends, and he's heard us talk so much of you. He's seen your painting of me. I do want you to know him, and I want him to know you. Then, too, Gerald dear, and this is the main reason, I want you to get good and rested, and to take a little wine before you start for home. Though you say the air is like a warm bath, your hands are cold, I notice."

Too tired from the emotions of the evening to make any valid resistance, emptied in fact of all feeling except a flat sort of bewilderment, Gerald followed, like a little boy in fear of rough-handling from his so much bigger nurse.

They found Estelle and Tom in the parlor.

"Well, I was wondering what had become of you!" cried Estelle as Aurora appeared in the doorway, and behind her shoulder the shadowy, unexpected face of Gerald.

"Tom," said Aurora, "this is my friend Mr. Fane that you've heard us talk so much about, the painter, you know, who painted that picture of me up there. And this is Doctor Bewick, Gerald, to whom I am under a thousand obligations, besides the obligation of his having probably saved my life out in Denver, not so many years ago, when I was dangerously ill."

Aurora was luminous with gladness. Aurora was so glad that she had not the concentration or the decency to attempt to hide it. She did not know of the flagrant betrayal of her feelings; she was not guarding against it, because her delight itself absorbed all her powers of thought. She stood there, a monument unveiled. And all the reason for it that one could see was that pindling, hollow-eyed young fellow who had entered the room in her wake.

Those who have not quarreled with a loved one, and known the pain of the fear that he may be lost to them, will surely never know the keenest joy. It takes the escape, the contrast,

to make happiness shine out as brightly as it is capable of doing.

The two men, after conversation had engaged between them, promoted and helped along by the greater lingual readiness of the ladies, observed each other. This they did indirectly and as if doing nothing of the kind. But Estelle, as profoundly uneasy as if she had foreseen already the fate of the fat to end in the fire, was aware of it. She noted in Gerald's stiffly adjusted face the unself-conscious eyebrows, formidably different one from the other; she noted how Doctor Tom, sturdy and self-collected as he was, kept knocking the ashes of his cigar into an inkstand full of ink.

It struck her whimsically that she had seen before something kindred to what was taking place under her eyes: in a barnyard at home, two crimson-helmeted champions, with neck-feathers slightly risen on end, standing opposed, ocularly taking each other's measure.

CHAPTER XIX

The Brenda who came back from America was not quite the one who had gone there. Gerald saw it in the first instant. She had gained in definiteness, assurance, even in beauty. But a silver haze, a fairy bloom, an aureole, was mysteriously departed from her. She had left her teens behind.

Yet in her stainless white, her bridal veil, a slender coronal of orange blossoms on her dark hair, and the light of love in her dark eyes, how wonderful she was! That Manlio, pale as a statue with the force of his emotion, should wear a look of almost superhuman beatitude was only natural and proper. Of those who assisted at the ceremony many were deeply moved, and few altogether untouched: to be in the church at that moment gave one the importance of being accessory to a high romance.

At the wedding reception something of this quality of emotion continued still to possess the invited guests as long as Brenda and Manlio, beneath their arch of flowers, stood smiling response to congratulations and compliments.

It was in the general experience not unlike that part of the opera where, to a matchless music, the god of flame and the glowing hearth lauds the loveliness of woman and the strength of man's pursuit; and the other gods, uplifted, look at one another with washed eyes, feeling anew how wonderful they all are, how wonderful it all is.

The heart of Leslie, nevertheless, as she bustled about, seeing to it that every one was provided with refreshment, confessed a point of bitterness. In a way, it was envy of Brenda. Not of her happiness, or her husband, of course. But she did wish the man lived and would present himself who could inspire her with such feelings as Brenda's. The kind of man who cared for her she somehow never cared for—a serious barrier to experiencing a *grande passion*. And on this day of wedding-bells it seemed a pity. The girl of many offers felt sad.

Mrs. Foss smiled a pleased, incessant smile, not "realizing" the thing which was happening, as she told her sister-in-law who had come over from America with the bride. Her chick had developed tendencies unknown among the breed, taken to the water and swum away with a swan. But the mother had confidence. She believed in marriage. The institution had been justified by her example and Jerome's. Her eyes sought him out, a little anxiously, to peruse his face. The idea could not for a moment be admitted that he had a favorite among his children, but yet it was acknowledged that Brenda had always in a very special way been near to her father's heart. From his calm and serenity in conversation with that nice big Doctor Bewick, Mrs. Foss was able to hope that he too did not "realize."

Aurora watched the bride and groom with fairly fascinated eyes, but from a certain distance. They had been nice, they had thanked her handsomely for her handsome present, but nothing could modify her regretful certitude that Brenda did not care for her. And it might so easily have been she and not the good Aunt Brenda who secured for the *sposo* his career of silver lace and sabre.... And Brenda, innocently unknowing, would just the same not have liked her. But there! Beautiful Brenda didn't go about loving everybody. She had the more glory to confer upon the one. Oh, harmoniously matched, high-removed pair! Oh, hymeneal crowning of tenderness and truth!... Aurora in a kind of awe wondered what elevated things those pale rose lips of the bride would say to the bridegroom when, the turmoil of festivity ended, they were in nuptial solitude. Impossible to imagine! It must be something altogether beyond other brides; and his words must make those of all other lovers sound common and poor.

When the arch of flowers was empty and the happy pair had left for the train, Lily and Gerald went strolling about the garden hand in hand.

Lily had been a bridesmaid, Gerald an usher. Both were in the fine apparel of their parts; thoughts of weddings hummed in both of their heads.

"Well, Lily," said the young man idly, in their walk between odorous lines of wall-flowers and heliotrope, "I suppose you too will soon be getting married."

"Oh, no!" Lily shook her head. "There is nobody I could marry."

"Why, I thought, Lily," he said, "that you were going to marry me!"

"No, Gerald," she replied promptly, but with gentleness and regret, so as not to hurt his feelings.

"I might come and live with you," she added, after a second, "and keep house for you. A cottage in the country, with beehives and ducks and a little donkey.... Gerald, do you know about Sir William Wallace?"

Though a chasm appeared to divide this subject from the last, Gerald shrewdly supposed a connection between them.

"Very little. You tell me."

"You haven't read 'The Scottish Chiefs'? I took it without permission and kept it out of Fräulein's sight. It grows light early now, you know, and I read it for hours before getting up. Then whenever I could, I read it in the daytime. And after they had left me at night, I read it with the pink candles of my birthday cake. I cried so much that when I finished I was ill with a fever and had to be kept in bed for three days."

"Why, when was this?"

"Two weeks ago."

"My poor little Lily, how came I not to be told of it? And you sent me such a beautiful

remembrance when I was ill!-Well, Lily, I know now why you won't take me. I'm not much like Sir William Wallace, that's a fact. I might grow like him in courage and prowess, perhaps, to please you, but I know that I should never be beautiful in kilts. It shall be as you say, dear. We'll be brother and sister instead. And now tell me more about this book, these Scottish.... Lily, do you see Mrs. Hawthorne on the doorstep? Do you gather that the signs she is making are meant for us? We came up together and I think she may wish to say she is ready to go, and will give me a lift back to town...."

"We came up together!" With great frequency in these days Gerald was going somewhere with Mrs. Hawthorne, not alone with her, but making one of four in an amiable party. Sometimes it was his fate to make conversation by the hour with Estelle, while Doctor Tom monopolized Aurora; on the other hand, he sometimes would succeed in getting his fingers among Occasion's hair, and secure Aurora for his share, while Dr. Tom was apportioned with the slenderer charmer. But the behavior of all was civilized and urbane, and if a thorn pricked or nettle burned, the sufferer concealed his pain and spoiled nobody's fun.

Gerald would in reality have preferred to stay away, almost as much as Estelle and possibly Doctor Tom would have preferred him to do so. But just there the incalculable, the ungovernable, in human nature came into play. A golden thread, a mere hair, strong as a steel cable, drew him to the place where he could expect to find no comfort, and had no object to accomplish except just to be there, with his eyebrows one higher than the other.

Either Estelle liked to annoy him, or she was unfortunate in doing it without malice.

"Don't they make a noble-looking couple?" she asked him, gazing at Aurora and Tom outlined side by side against the light of the window.

"Yes," he felt obliged to say, and followed it quickly, without apology for the indiscretion of the question: "Are they going to marry?"

"That remains to be seen," she said in a way which made one desire to set the dog on her. "I cherish the hope. May I offer you another cigarette?"

He sometimes remained scandalously late in the evening after dining, in spite of-oh, by so much!-knowing better. He would wait, with an artist's beautiful air of time-forgetfulness, for Dr. Tom to get up to go. He would instantly, as if remembering himself, get up to go, too, and walk with the doctor as far as his hotel, they talking together like men with respect for each other's brains, and appreciation of each other's character and company, no subject of contention in the world.

Gerald pushed courtesy so far as to go with the doctor, by themselves, on certain visits to hospitals, to certain games of pallone, certain monasteries which ladies are not permitted to enter, Aurora rejoicing in the opportunities to "get good and acquainted" which she saw these two dear friends of hers take.

After the drive back from the wedding, Gerald resisted Aurora's suggestion that he enter the house with them and remain to dine. This he did with well-masked resentfulness. As it was not Dr. Bewick's last evening, but the evening before his last, Gerald did not see that delicacy strictly demanded his sacrifice. But Estelle had without so many compliments informed him that he was not to accept. She had particular reasons, she darkly enlightened him, for the request.

So, with a paltry excuse, he jumped out of the carriage before it reached the gate, and stood looking after it, holding his hat-the glossy *tuba* which Giovanna had with her elbow stroked and stroked the right way of the silk, when she laid out her signorino's outfit for the wedding.

Earlier than usual after dinner Estelle retired, "to write up her diary," she said. Tom was left to have with Aurora that conversation which Estelle had besought him to have, and of which by a significant motion of the face she had reminded him before leaving the room. He came to the point very soon, the sooner to get it over.

"Nell," he said, and, leaning back, with one arm flung along the top of the sofa, the other offering to his lips a thick cigar, waited long enough for her to wonder what was coming, "you spend too much money."

Without shadow of attempt at evasion, she said:

"Tom, I do."

"You've got to retrench, girl. You've got to be more careful."

"Yes, I suppose I've got to."

"Let's be practical. How are you going to do it?"

"I don't know, Tom. It's so easy to spend and so hard to hold on to your money! If any one had told me a year ago I could get rid of as much money in one year as I have done, I shouldn't have known how I could do it without opening the window and throwing it out."

"Well, I'm glad you don't deny a bent toward extravagance."

"I don't deny anything that means I spend a lot of money. I have more sense. The facts are there."

"You've already broken into your capital, haven't you?"

"Did Hattie tell you that or did you guess? It's true, I have; but-" she tried to place the harm done in a harmless light-"it isn't so bad but that if I saved for a little while I could make it up again."

"If! True; but are you going to, Nell? That's the question."

"Oh, Tom, I never ought to have been given any money if I was to hold on to it!" Aurora almost groaned. "I didn't know at first. I was pleased as Punch. I lay awake nights just to gloat and feel grand. I tell *you*, I meant to hold on to it! I tell *you*, it wasn't going to get away

from me after that good fight we made for it! But—" the effect of a mental groan was repeated—"the whole thing isn't as I thought it would be, not a bit."

She stopped, and while she tried to coordinate her ideas, Dr. Tom quietly waited for explanation or illustration of her meaning.

"I don't like money, there's the whole of it!" she gave him the sum of her attempt in one cast.

Dr. Tom continued to wait, smoking.

"In fact, I hate it."

Dr. Tom continued to wait, without interrupting, or trying to help her disentangle her thought, of which he had in truth no inkling.

"I hate it, and I love it, both. That's truer, I suppose. But I can't be at rest with it."

"Never fear, girl,"—his tone was humorous,—"you'll get used to it. Just from watching you, I should have fancied you were pretty well used to it already."

"When I was a child it was just the same way with candy," she went on with her own train of thought, not minding his; "I loved it—and gobbled it right up. Some of the girls made theirs last and last. I ate mine at once. And it wasn't only because I was a pig with no self-control. I wanted to have done with it and go back to a sensible life. With this money I have the same feeling—and then another feeling that I sort of can't account for, as if I wanted to get rid of it because there was something wrong in me having it."

"That money? You sure earned it!" he came out vigorously. "Don't be a goose, Nell."

"I wasn't thinking of what you think. But I'm afraid I am a goose, Tom, an awful goose, and I'm ashamed of it. I somehow can't feel it right—there!—to have more than the rest. Come right down to it, I feel mean in having something the rest haven't got, and keeping it from them, like a nasty fat boy stuffing pie with a lot of hungry ragamuffins looking on. I know it isn't good common sense, or how could rich people be so all right and calm in their minds as they are, and have everybody's respect? Rich people are all right, I've always sort of looked up to them, with their advantages and things. I haven't a bit of fault to find. But Tom, I suppose the amount of it is I was born poor and I go on having the feelings of the poor. If any one asks me for anything and appears to need it, I've got to give it or feel too mean to live. Me, Nell, who was poor myself for so long, how would I look hardening my heart against any one who came and wanted to borrow? I'd be ashamed to look them in the eye."

"With that view of it, of course I can see why your money wouldn't last long."

"Oh, I'm extravagant besides, I'll own to that; that's the *real* trouble. I want to buy everything that takes my eye, I want to make everything run smooth, like on greased wheels, and to have all the faces around me look pleased, and everybody liking me. I love the feeling of luxury and festivity, and oh, I just love a grand good time! That's what the money was given to me for, wasn't it, so that I could have a grand good time? But when I've indulged myself, Tom, I wouldn't have the face, if I had the heart, to say no to anybody that came along and wanted me to indulge them, too. Now, I don't want you to go thinking this is generosity, Tom, or a good heart, or that I have any sneaking idea in my own bosom that it's anything of the sort. I'd be a regular-low-down-soggy-sinful sowbug, I'd be too dirt-mean to live, if I pretended it was that. When I was poor I never was generous; I never thought of it. I worked hard for what I got; and was in the same boat exactly as the rest; I was entitled to the little bit I'd worked for. But now it's different. It's like I'd won the big prize in the lottery. I can't be stingy with it and not blush. I can't sit there like a swollen wood-tick and be rich all by myself."

"All right, Nell; all right. It's a perfectly understandable way of looking at it, if it is rather far-fetched. But good-by to the hard-earned thousands. You won't have a smitch of them left."

"Good-by, then, and good riddance!" cried Aurora violently, almost pettishly. "I don't really like them, anyhow. It's too easy just to write your name on a check. At first I thought I was living in a fairy-tale; but once you've got used to it, it doesn't compare with the fun you get the old-fashioned way, working hard for a thing, and planning, and going to price it, and saving, and finally getting it, and that proud! People who haven't been poor simply don't know. Why, that one poor little silver bangle I had when I was fifteen did more to give me pure joy than any of the beautiful things I've bought this whole last year. I'm sorry if it seems ungrateful to my bloated bank-account, but it's true. Another thing, Tom. I was brought up to work. I won't say I liked it. I don't think many people who've got to work do like it. But since I gave it up, nothing I've found has really filled its place to give me an appetite and the feeling I'd a right to a good time. To sit back and let others work while you fan your face—I can't help it, I feel a sort of disgrace in it. I know better, it's just the way I *feel*. I know all the while that's the way the world was planned, some to be rich and some to be poor—Think how rich King Solomon was! And your dear father!—some to work and some not, with changes round about once in a while, like in my case, and crosses and trials and temptations belonging to every state, and the love of God and a quiet heart possible in every state. And I've always had such respect for moneyed people and their refined ways.... But if you want me to start in now and do differently from what I've been doing, I tell you truly, I don't know how I'm going to do it, Tom. I'd rather not have the money at all."

"You won't have it, Nell, dear. You've only to keep on, and you won't have it."

"All right. Then I'll go back to work and never happier in my life. I'm strong and able, I've got years of work in me. And if you think I've grown so devoted to all these frills that I couldn't give them up, you'll see!"

"Of course I haven't the faintest right to control your use of your money—"

"But of course you have, Tom,"—her tone changed at once, and was eagerly humble,—"every right. You can take it away from me any moment you please. Who has a right, I should like to

know, if not you?"

"Well, then, Nell, I'm going to make a suggestion. What you have said shows me that simple advice would be of no use in this case. Don't think, girl, that I don't get at your way of seeing the matter. If I appear cold toward it, if I don't seem to sympathize, it's because the logical results would land you in a hole from which I'd feel a call by and by to try to pull you out. See?-As a promise to keep inside of your income would apparently embitter life to you, I won't ask for it, merely suggesting the fitness of trying to observe such a restriction. Even as regards your power to throw it away, there'll be a lot more of it to throw if you respect your capital. However, the money is yours, to do exactly what you please with, but this I ask: empower me to turn some part of it into an annuity, unalienable and modestly sufficient."

"An annuity? What's that?"

"A sum of money so fixed that you receive the interest as long as you live and have no power over the sum itself. It's not yours to use, to transfer or yet to bequeath. In your case the one safe investment, the single way I see to keep you out of the poorhouse."

"Do you say so! All right, Tom; do what you think best. But see here. Whatever you arrange for me that way, you've got to arrange for Hattie, too, or it wouldn't be fair. I won't think of it unless you'll do the same for both. If I hadn't a penny left in the world, you know the Carvers would take me in a minute. Then if you do it, don't you see," she brought in slyly, "when I've spent my money, there'll always be Hattie's for me to fall back on. Don't let her know you're doing it, Tom, but fix it."

"All right. Two comfortable little annuities, enough to be independent on, and be taken care of if you're sick."

"That's it, Tom. Then everybody's mind will be set at rest. And this I promise: I'll try to be a good girl."

That subject being dropped, there was silence for a minute or two, while Tom thoughtfully smoked.

Aurora's face was a living rose with the excitement of their discussion. She put her hands to her cheeks to feel how they burned, then turned to Tom to laugh with him over it. The pink of her face enhanced the blueness of her eyes. It was not unusual for persons sitting near Aurora, women as well as men, to feel a sudden desire to squeeze her in their arms and tell her how sweet she was. Tom found himself saying a thing he had taken a solemn engagement with himself not to say.

"I had hoped"-his utterance was slow and heavy-"to find a different solution to the difficulty."

Her face questioned him, and at once looked troubled.

"I was going to try to take over all your difficulties and bundle them up with my own; but," he continued, after a moment, with force, "I'm not going to do it."

"That's right, Tom," she came out eagerly, without pretending not to understand. "If I know what you mean-don't do it! Oh, I'm so grateful, I can't tell you, that you've made up your mind that way. Because, dear Tom, whatever you wanted me to do, seems to me I'd have to do it. I don't see how I could say no to anything you asked me. It would break my heart, I guess, if I had to hold out against a real wish of yours. I couldn't do it. All the same, I know we wouldn't make just the happiest kind of couple-'cause why, we're too like brother and sister, Tom. It would be unnatural. I feel toward you, Tom, just like an own, own sister-not those mean old things, Idell and Cora, who are your sisters-but I feel toward you as I would to my own brother Charlie. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you. But if I had to marry you, there'd be something about it-well, I don't know. I can't explain. Haven't you seen how there are things that are perfect for one use and no good at all for another? I'm a pretty good nurse, ain't I, Tom? But what would I be as a bareback circus-rider?"

"We aren't going to talk about it, Nell. I told you I had given it up. But," he went on after a heavy moment, unable entirely to subjugate his humanity-"but I wish now I had asked you before you left home."

She was too oppressed with misery to speak at once, so he amplified.

"But it seemed rather more-I don't want to call it by any such big word as chivalrous,-it seemed rather whiter not to urge it, when circumstances might have seemed to lay a compulsion on you. Then it seemed better to let all the talk, the unpleasantness, in Denver die down first. Then, too, I wanted you to see the world; I liked the thought of you having your fling. But," he reiterated, "I can't help wishing I had followed my instinct and asked you before I let you go. Tell the truth, Nell. Wouldn't you have had me then?"

"I suppose, Tom, that I should have you now if you asked me. But then or now," she brought in quickly, "it would be a mistake. I couldn't love you more dearly, Tom, than I do, good big brother that you've been. Dear me, all we've been through together! Then all the fun we've had! We couldn't change to something different without all being spoiled. You don't seem to know, but I do, that I'm not the woman for you in that way. We're too much alike, Tom. What you want is a little dainty woman, delicate, quick, bright-minded, something, to find an example near at hand, like Hattie Carver. A big fellow like you wants someone to cherish and protect. How would any one go to work protecting and cherishing a little darling big as a moose!"

"I might have known"-Doctor Tom made his reflections aloud,-"that a good big husky man wouldn't have a chance with a good big husky girl while a sickly, sad-eyed, spindle-shanked son of a gun was hanging round!"

"There's nothing in that, I should think you'd know," said Aurora, quickly. "I like him, of course, and I like to have him round. Haven't you found him good company yourself? But that's just friendship. Friendship like between a fish and a bird, and no more prospect of a different ending than that. If that's troubling you, you can set your mind at rest, Tom."

"It's none of my business, anyhow," said the doctor, brusquely, flinging down his cigar and walking away from her to the mantelpiece, where he stood looking up at her portrait, but thinking of that other portrait of her, with its wizardry and strange truth, which she had not failed to show him.

"Tom, if I thought you could feel bitter, I should die, that's all," cried Aurora, jumping up and following. "You've been such a friend to me! Do you suppose I forget? Never was there such a friend. And you know, now don't you, Tom, that I think the whole, whole world of you?" Arms were clasped around his neck, -large arms, solid and polished as marble, but tender as mother birds; a head was pressed hard against his shoulder. "There never could anybody take your place with me. You'd only have to call over land and sea, and I'd come flying to serve you, to nurse you in sickness or help you in sorrow. Give me a good hug, Tom. Give me a good kiss, and say you know I mean every word! -Now, isn't this better than to see me across the table at breakfast, with my hair in curlers, and to have me snooping round being jealous of your female patients?"

"No, it's not better; but it's pretty good."

"Do you mean to tell me, Tom, that you'd be any more likely to cut my name in a tree, or kiss my stolen glove, than I'd be to wish on the first star you loved me or write poetry about my feelin's?"

"Nell, I'm not telling; the subject is closed. But any time there's anything I can do for you, anything in this world, Nell, you know you've only got to sing out."

"You'll marry, Tom dear, by and by."

"Very well. If you say so, I'll marry. But what I said will hold good if I do. It will hold good, too, if you marry, Nell. Oh, let's talk about something else."

The change of subject could hardly be effected in less time than it takes to reverse engines; a minute or two passed before Aurora inquired concerning the number of hours' travel between Florence and Liverpool, then about his steamer, his stateroom and the exact time of his starting.

"Nine o'clock in the evening. I see, so as to have daylight for the Alps. You'll dine here of course and we'll take you to the station."

He judged it more prudent to dine at his hotel and meet them afterwards at the station near train-time.

"Then-" sighed Aurora, sorrowfully, "this is our last evening! For I heard you and the consul planning for to-morrow evening together, and he to read you some chapters of his book. A compliment, Tom. He's never offered to read *us* any of it. I'm only sorry the idea didn't ripen sooner, so that we needn't be robbed of your very last evening. We must make the most of our time, then. Suppose we go into the garden, Tom, and walk across the street to the river-I don't have to put anything on for just that step. It's so pretty, looking upstream at the bridges, and across at the hills your pa was so fond of. Wasn't the Judge just crazy about Florence! For the longest time after I came I couldn't see why, but I'm beginning."

CHAPTER XX

A tired look overspread Estelle's face, when, returning home after seeing Dr. Bewick off on his way to Paris, they found Gerald waiting.

She said to herself, in tempestuous inward irritation, that it was inconceivable a young man so well up in the ways of the world shouldn't know any better.

It could not be said that Estelle did not like Gerald Fane. Considered by himself, she did like him, much more, she believed, than he liked her. His odd distinction, too subtle and complex to describe, aroused in her a vague hunger of the mind. But considered in relation to Aurora, he "was on her nerves," she said.

"That he shouldn't know any better—" she mentally scolded, behind her tired look, "than to obtrude himself the very first minute after Doctor Tom's departure!"

But Gerald was not thinking he showed a horrid want of tact. The other way, rather. He saw himself as the intimate old friend who comes to call right after the funeral, and by his presence console a little, and brighten, the bereaved.

Aurora's red eyes smote him at once. Aurora was still in tearful mood. The sense not only of her dear friend going, but going with a secret weight on his heart that it had been in her power to prevent, made her own heart miserably heavy, too. For the moment Tom counted for her more than all else, and she reproached herself that when he had done so much for her she had not been willing to do such an ordinary little thing for him as to marry him; and she reproached herself because it was a relief, despite her great wish to be loyal, to think they should not meet again until all that was well in the past.

Estelle hoped to hear her friend say to Gerald something to the effect that she was in no mood for a social call; but Aurora welcomed the visitor with unaffected warmth and sat down in her hat to talk with him. So Estelle said primly that it was late, and she was tired; if they would excuse her, she would go to bed.

Aurora talked about Tom and nothing but Tom. Sweetly, sighfully, she spoke, as more than once before, of those many things he had done for her, but spoke of them this evening more amply; his care of her, a penniless patient, in that hospital where she woke up after a space of unconsciousness; his unremitting kindness when she lived in his house and took care of his father, the dear old judge, who was sick three long years before he died; the proof of goodness more remarkable still which he gave after that.

A tremulous hope flickered up in Gerald that she would go on and tell him about the latter, perhaps filling in some of the lacunæ which her history had for him. Much had come out in their many hours of talk, but he had found her circumspect with regard to certain parts of her life, and had never put a question. In one so frank, her avoidance appeared a result of dislike to remembering those unmentioned links in the chain of events.

But this evening again she stopped short of telling him what he would have liked to know—how Bewick was connected with her wealth. For it had come to her from no second husband: she had not been twice married.

She broke off with the words, "Oh, some time I'll tell you the whole story. I don't feel like it now. It always makes me so mad!"

If Aurora had been pledged to Bewick, thought Gerald, the most natural thing would have been to tell him of it this evening. In her expatiating upon all she owed to Bewick, Gerald felt a wish to explain how it was that without being engaged to him she could commit the impropriety of publicly weeping over his departure.

It seemed to Gerald rather late in the day for him to seek an excuse to call at the Hermitage; yet on the afternoon following Dr. Bewick's departure he sought for one—having reference to Estelle. He took with him a propitiatory little volume containing translations of well-known poems by one Amiel. Estelle was regarded as being immensely interested in French; she daily translated themes back and forth from her own language into that of Molière. These singularly neat and exact productions of Amiel's should delight—and disarm her.

Gerald did not dislike Estelle, far from it. He did justice to her as a good, true-hearted, self-improving American. Taken by herself, he felt for her decided regard; but taken in connection with Aurora he would sometimes have liked delicately to lift her between finger and thumb and drop her into a well.

When he entered the red-and-green room, the very least bit timidly, with his book in his hand, he perceived almost at once that something unusual was in the air, and the shades of feeling between himself and Estelle became for the moment of no importance.

Nothing was said at first of the cause for Aurora's air of repressed excitement, as she knit on a pink and white baby-jacket, or the cloudy annoyance puckering Estelle's brow as she stitched on her silk tapestry. The ladies might merely have been quarrelling, thought the visitor, and made himself as far as he could a soothing third, chatting with Estelle about Amiel and with Aurora about young Mrs. Sebastian, whose baby was to rejoice in the little garment half-finished between her hands.

"Gerald," Aurora interrupted him in the middle of a sentence, letting her hands and work drop in her lap, "something so queer and unpleasant has happened!"

He raised both eyebrows in solicitous participation, and mutely questioned.

"It's about Charlie Hunt. I never would have imagined—you wouldn't either."

"My imagination, dear friend, is more far-reaching in some ways than yours," he quickly

corrected her, "and has had more practice than yours in ways of unpleasantness. But do tell me what it is that has happened."

"Charlie Hunt! Charlie Hunt!" she repeated, like one unable to make herself believe a thing. "Charlie Hunt to turn nasty like that from one day to the next!"

"To turn—"

"He was here to dinner just two weeks ago and perfectly all right. We had a nice, long chat together on the sofa. But he didn't make his party-call quite as soon as he usually does, so when I saw him at Brenda's wedding I thought of course he'd come up and tell me how busy he'd been or some other taradiddle. But he didn't come near me. I was sort of surprised,—still, there were so many people there that he knew, and we didn't stay quite to the end, you remember. I didn't even think enough about it to mention it to Estelle. Well, this forenoon I went to the bank, and when I'd got my money, I happened to catch sight of Charlie, in the side-room, you know, where his desk is. I thought I'd like to speak to him. He's always wanted me to ask for him when I went to the bank, and I've done it more than once, and we've had five minutes' chat. I was just going to tease him a little bit about coming to see me so seldom nowadays, when he used to come so often, and ask about the lady in the case. There really is one, I guess. Italo told me. So I asked the old boy—you know the one I mean, the old servant of the bank, who's always there, to tell Mr. Hunt that Mrs. Hawthorne would like to speak with him, and then I took a seat, and in a minute in came Charlie, with just his usual look.

"Now, I want to tell you that I've never had one unpleasant word with Charlie Hunt; I've always liked him real well. I put down my foot against letting him run me and my house, but there never was a word said about it. I balked, but I didn't kick. All along I've been just as nice to him as I know how, except just one moment, when I stuck a little pin into him the night of the *veglione*, not supposing that he'd ever know who did it.

"Well, I was sitting there at the table with the newspapers, and he came and stood near, without taking a chair, as if he hadn't much time to spare. I began to talk and joke about his cutting me dead at the wedding, and he listened and talked back in a common-enough way, only I noticed that he once or twice called me Mrs. Barton instead of Mrs. Hawthorne. Now I must go back and tell you that some time ago when I was at the bank he casually asked me if I knew of any Mrs. Helen Barton in Florence, and he showed me two letters in the same handwriting, one addressed to the English bank, and the other to the American bank, Florence, that had been there at Hunt & Landini's for some time, and no one had called for and they didn't know what to do with. Now, the instant my eye lit on those letters I knew who'd written them, what was in them, and who they were meant for. All letters for Estelle and me, you know, are first sent to Estelle's house in East Boston, to be forwarded to us wherever we might be in Europe; but that letter had escaped. That letter was from a queer kind of sour, unsuccessful woman called Iona Allen, who boarded once at the same house with me on Springfield Street,—the languishing kind of critter that I never could stand, who hadn't the gumption of a half-drowned chicken, who'd never stuck to anything or put any elbow-grease into the work on hand, and whined all the time, and was looking out for some one to support her. I guessed she'd heard of my money and was writing me a sweet letter of congratulations, along with a hard-luck story. I'd have liked to get hold of her letter, but didn't exactly see how I could. I said to Charlie, 'Let me take it; perhaps I can find the one it's meant for among my acquaintances.' But he didn't seem to think that could be done; so there the matter dropped. I didn't care much. Iona Allen can look for some one nearer home to support her.

"Well, to go back. When Charlie Hunt had called me Mrs. Barton for the third time I realized from his way of doing it that it wasn't a slip of the tongue, and I stopped him short and said:

"What makes you call me Mrs. Barton all of a sudden?"

"It's your name, isn't it?" he said, with a queer look.

"No," I came right out strong and bold. And I wasn't lying either. It isn't my name. I don't really know what my name is. It's Hawthorne as much as it's anything. Jim changed his name half a dozen times, and the name he married me under I found out wasn't his real name.

"Charlie Hunt stood there a moment as if thinking it over, looking at me with the meanest grin; then he said with that hateful, sarcastic look of a person who thinks he's being smart in getting back at you:

"Is that as true," he said, 'as that you never indulged in carnival humor masked as a crow?' Then I knew he'd somehow got on to the truth about that night at the *veglione*. But I wasn't going to give it away.

"You know what you're driving at better than I do," I said. And then I said: 'What's it all about? What's your game?' And he said, as if I'd been a common swindler that he'd found out:

"What's yours?"

"Then I felt myself get mad.

"You're a mean little pest," I said, but between my teeth, and not so that any one but he could hear me. And 'You're an evil-minded little scalawag,' I said. 'You certainly don't know me if you think I've done anything in this world to be ashamed of. Go ahead,' I said; 'do what you please. Don't for one single instant think that I'm afraid of you or that you can do me any harm.' And I left him standing there, with his grin, and flounced out. But what do you think of it, Gerald? Why should Charlie Hunt behave like that to me?"

"I could judge better if I knew what you said to him at the *veglione*."

"It wasn't very bad. It might provoke him for a minute to know that it was I who said it, but it oughtn't to make him mad enough to bite. I went up to him, and I said close to his ear, in

my good English:

"You amusing little match-maker," I said, "what do you hope to get from your dusky friend marrying that *absurd* American? How much do you know about her?" I said. "Are you even sure she's as rich as she seems?" Then he said, polite but stiff:

"You have the advantage of me, madam, in knowing what you're talking about. Pray go on with your tasteful pleasantries," he said; "I'm thinking I've heard your voice before." Upon which I shut my mouth and dusted down the opera-house on Italo's arm. I was crazy that evening, I guess, with the crowd and excitement and all. When I get to training, I can't resist the impulse; I don't know where to stop. But that wasn't enough to make him want to stick a knife in me, was it? It was only fun. It was true. He had seemed to be trying to manage me so's I'd take a fancy to Landini, and I couldn't for the life of me see what it mattered to him."

"I tell Aurora," came in Estelle, "that a little joke like that would rankle terribly in any but a real goodnatured man."

"My dear Aurora," said Gerald, excited and darkly flushed, "your little joke would not have had to contain a sting nearly as sharp to rouse against you such vanity as Hunt's, unless, let me add, there were some counterweight of self-interest to keep him back. It is known that Charlie has only some parts and habits of a human being, not all. One almost, in pure justice, cannot blame him. But scorn him—oh, as for that!... He could be with you day after day, and take all you would give, and at the end of a year feel no tie; he could hear you slandered, and not take your defence; he could make a joke at your expense, if one came into his mind that he thought sufficiently witty, and never have a sense of meanness! He would have had nothing to overcome. He would only learn better if he perceived some loss of consideration, and consequent advantage to himself. That would make him more cautious, but not make him more aware. And you cannot call him wicked any more than upon any occasion you could call him good. But he's damnable!"

Consuming anger lighted up Gerald's face, his voice trembled with intensity of feeling, his vehemence now and then by jerks lifted his heels off the floor. "He is not properly a man at all," he went on to characterize his old schoolmate; "he is just an insect *en grand*. He satisfies his instincts precisely as an insectivorous insect does—the rest are there to furnish something to his life. Nothing else, he knows nothing outside. Now that you have offended him he probably won't do you any great harm. He's not a devil, and the world he lives in does not tolerate anything very black. He'd injure himself in trying to injure you. But he'll do you what harm he easily and safely can. He's nothing big, he could do nothing big, he hasn't a passion in him. He's like this: from the moment he had ceased to get any good of frequenting your house, even if you had not done the smallest thing to vex him, he would pass on a bit of gossip harmful to you for the simple glory of appearing for one moment a little better informed than the rest. No more than that. He would be capable of that; he wouldn't even have to hate you. For Charlie Hunt, as Leslie once perspicaciously said—Charlie Hunt has no real inside!"

Both women sat staring at Gerald, impressed by his heat. When he stopped, they continued for a minute in blank silence, revolving his words and readjusting their estimates, while their eyes traveled up and down, up and down the room, drawn after his figure that wrathily paced the floor.

"How do you suppose he found out about the black crow? For I'm perfectly sure he didn't know me at the time," said Aurora presently.

"That might easily enough happen in some roundabout way," said Estelle, "as long as Italo and Clotilde both knew it. They might let the cat out of the bag without intending to. He talks so much. Never knew such a talker. But what I want to know is how he knew your name was Barton."

"I've told you what I think. He's heard you call me Nell. Tom, too, called me Nell. That may have given him the hint. Then he simply opened Iona Allen's letter and read it. Something was in it, no doubt, that enabled him to put two and two together. Perhaps the name Bewick. Iona would have heard of that. She would write to say now I'd climbed out of poverty and hard work she knew I wouldn't mind lending a hand to an old friend not so fortunate. Something like that. She'd be sure to whine and beg. And Charlie Hunt, little bunch of meanness! would imagine he could hold over me the fact that I was poor once and what he would think low in the scale, because he thought I'd be ashamed of it. But no such thing. If I changed my name coming here, it wasn't on any such account as that. I'm gladder than ever now that I told Mrs. Foss all about it. I did, Gerald, quite soon after we first came, and she said, though it was in a way a mistake, she didn't see any real harm in it. As long as I'd begun that way, she said, better not make a sensation by changing back or saying anything about it. She thought my reasons were very natural. It wasn't as if I were misleading anybody, or anybody were losing money by me. I'd have told you too, Gerald, in a minute, as far as wanting just to conceal anything goes. But Gerald and I"—she seemed to place the matter before an invisible judge and jury—"never talk together of ugly things, do we, Gerald? He's more delicate-minded by a good deal than I am. With him particularly, though we've been such intimate friends, I shrank from it. There's not much poetry about me, I know that, but there'd be even less if I had to have it known all I've been through. And since the first of our association we've always lived in a sweet sort of world, haven't we, Gerald? I'd be ready, just the same, to tell you the whole story any moment you wanted to hear...."

At Gerald's swift instinctive gesture, she went on without further considering the proposition she had made. "As I said before, I don't know what my own real front-door name is. I was born Goodwin. I married Barton, but Barton wasn't Jim's real name. Aurora Hawthorne is what I called myself when we were young ones and played ladies, Hat and I. I came over here to cut loose from all the bothers that had made the last year in Denver a

nightmare. I didn't want to be connected with that dirty mess any more in anybody's mind or my own. I wanted it to be like taking a bath and starting new, feeling clean. Then, if I was Aurora Hawthorne, Hattie had to be Estelle Madison, which was her name in our old play-days. Neither of us thought of anything when we planned it but its being a grand lark. And at first, in hotels, what did it matter? But since we've been here and had friends, we've felt sorry more than once, because it seemed like telling a lie. And then we were afraid of things that might come up—just like this that has, in fact. But there wasn't anything to do about it. Because if we confessed now most anybody would think our reason for changing names must have been something disgraceful, just as it happens if a person who kills another by accident goes and hides the corpse, everybody takes it for granted it was murder. So, if Charlie Hunt tells—

"I'm not nearly as much afraid of his telling that you are here under an assumed name," said Estelle, "as that you were the black crow, and it getting to the ears of Antonia and Co."

"Well, what could they do?"

"Spoil Florence for us pretty thoroughly, I'm afraid, Nell."

"Oh, nonsense!" cried Aurora, but after a moment added in a tone of lessened assurance, "Bother!" and after another moment burst forth, with one hand clapped to her curly front hair: "To think that Tom was here yesterday, and this had to happen to-day, when he's half-way to Paris! I wish he hadn't gone. I wish I had him here to back me up."

"Why don't you telegraph for him?" suggested Estelle, eagerly.

"Oh, no, I wouldn't do that,"—Aurora's vehemence subsided,—"it's not important enough for that."

"My dear Aurora," said Gerald, stopping in front of her, his whole person expressing hurt and remonstrance little short of indignation, "if your wishing for Doctor Bewick signifies that you do not feel you have friends near you on whose attachment you can count, surely you do wrong to some of us!"

Though his tone scolded Aurora sharply for her lack of faith, Estelle's ear caught a trembling edge to his voice expressive of deep feeling. Estelle had the good sense to see that Gerald must inevitably desire to make more exposition of his allegiance, and the good feeling to know that this could be done better if she were not present. Gerald, with his little peace-offering, was at the moment in favor with Estelle. His explicitness, his righteous violence, his entire adequacy on the subject of Charlie Hunt, had charmed her. She also wanted Aurora to have any comfort the hour might afford. She on the spot feigned to understand Busteretto's pawing of her dress as an expression of desire to go into the garden and see the little sparrows. She swept him up from the floor with one hand and, tucking him under her arm, slipped out of the room.

Gerald stood grasping his elbows. He had a look like that of some man, known so far as a harmless retiring burgher, about to make a public confession which will change all, bringing his head perhaps to the block; or the look of a man on the verge of a precipice, still half resisting the desire to jump, yet knowing that he will jump, nothing can save him from it; the look of a man, in fine, pregnant with intention, but walking in a dream.

There was silence for a minute after Estelle left the room. Then Gerald said very stiffly, very formally:

"If you would do me the honor, dearest Aurora, the very great honor, of consenting to take my name, the right I should have to defend you would be—would be—part of my great happiness."

Aurora stared at him. Beneath the frank investigation of her eyes his own dropped in modesty and insuperable embarrassment.

There was another silence before he added:

"I would try very much to make you happy."

Aurora repressed the first words that came to her lips,—and set aside the next ones that rose in her mind to say. Silence again reigned for a moment. Then, with the serious face, almost invisibly rippling, that betokened in her a secret and successful fight against laughter, she said in what she called her good English, faintly reminiscent of Antonia's:

"I am aware, my dear Gerald, of the honor, the very great honor, you do me. I thank you—for coming up to the scratch like a little man. But the feeling I have that I could never be *worthy* of so much honor deceydes me to declane. Gerald," she went on, discarding her English, "don't say another word! You dear, dear boy! The things you want to defend me against don't amount to a row of pins when all I've got to do if it comes to the pinch is pack my grip and clear out. Thank you all the same, you pet, for your kindness. Don't think of it again. I am sort of glad, though, you've got that proposal out of your system. Now we can go back to a sensible life."

CHAPTER XXI

Aurora, of the excellent three-times-a-day appetite, Aurora of the good sound slumbers, picked at her food and slept brokenly for part of a week at that period, such was her impatience at the dragging length of time, the emptiness of time, undiversified and unenhanced by the presence in her house of any man devoted to her. No odor of tobacco smoke in the air, no cane in the corner; Tom on his way to America, Gerald hurt or cross or both. But, the ladies agreed, when Aurora had told Estelle the latest about Gerald, her refusal could not possibly occasion a cessation of relations, since his offer, chivalrous and unpremeditated, had been at most a cute and endearing exhibition of character. His sensitiveness could not be long recovering, and everything would be as before.

Aurora had been half prepared for his staying away all Saturday; but having been justified in that, she the more confidently looked for him on Sunday. It is simply incredible, as almost everybody has felt at least once in his life, how long the hours can be when you are waiting for something.

At the end of a singularly unprofitable day, Aurora sat in the red and green room with all the windows open to the sweet airs and odors of May, and no lamp lighted that might attract night-moths, or, worse, the thirsty, ferocious Florentine *zanzara*. She just sat, not doing a thing. Estelle after a while left her, to retire to her own quarters, close the windows and make a light.

Aurora watched the dark blue velvet sky over Bellosguardo, and thought.

A tinkling of mandolins, a thrumming of guitars, informed her of street-singers stationed under her windows. A tenor voice rose in the song she was so fond of, *La Luna Nova*, mingling at the end of the verse with other male voices that repeated the second half of it. It sounded infinitely sweet out in the warm spring night.

After *La Luna Nova* they sang *Fra i rami, fulgida*, and *Vedi, che bianca Luna*, and *Dormi pure*, all things she particularly liked. The voices struck her as being nearer than the garden railing; she thought the singers must have found the carriage gate open and slipped in without noise. She bent forth a little, and as she could not see them imagined them standing among the shrubs. She propped her elbows on the window-rail and listened, grateful for this bath of sweetness to her spirit after the day's profound ennui.

Estelle came softly into the dark room and joined her; they leaned side by side.

Mi sono innamorato d'una stella, Sognai, Io t'amerò, one sweet and sentimental song succeeded the other.

Clotilde had entered too, on tiptoe, and stood listening, just behind the others.

"It is a serenade," she whispered. "It is a compliment."

A serenade!... Aurora thrilled with a pleasant surmise. There was only one person in Florence of whom she could conceive as offering her the compliment of a serenade. She listened with a new keenness of pleasure.

After the concert had prolonged itself through some dozen pieces-

"You must invite them to enter," whispered Clotilde, presumably versed in the ceremonial of such adventures, "and offer them something for their tired throats, a little wine..."

"Oh, you think we ought...?"

"But yes, it would be courtesy."

"Go you, then, Clotilde, and show them in and order up the wine. We'll be down in a minute."

As they entered the dining-room, Clotilde burst into a peal of delighted laughter at the well-managed surprise, while Italo hastened forward to take Aurora's hand and bow over it half way to the floor.

It was within Aurora's breast as if in the dark one had clasped as she thought a sweetheart, to find when the light came that her arms were entwined around the dancing-master, or the tailor. But only for an instant. She was really touched and charmed. She became more and more eloquent in expressing delight.

The singers were presented to her individually, dark-eyed and smiling young Italians of the people, who knew no language but their own Florentine and spoke to Aurora in that, not expecting to be understood or to understand, except through smiles.

Clotilde, busy, bustling, poured for them wine which she knew to be excellent, and there was a bright half hour for all. Italo wore an air relating him to all the successful heroes that have been, to Cæsar as well as to Paganini, who also had a great nose. To manage a thing well in small justifies pride, giving earnest as it does that a large thing, such as a siege, or a symphony, would by the same capacity be managed equally well. Italo that night carried his head like one who respects the size of his nose. He was quick, he was witty, he was amiable. He had about him something a little splendid, even, due to his feeling of having been splendid-or nothing-in his tribute to the patroness from whose horn of plenty so much had overflowed into his hands.

Aurora beckoned Clotilde aside to say in her ear, "Will you run upstairs like a good girl and get my porte-monnaie?... Would it be all right, do you think?"

Clotilde made the face and gesture of one in doubt, and if anything averse, but not insuperably. The bounty of royalty, or of rich Americans, is not felt as alms.

"Go, then," whispered Aurora, "and get the purse that you'll find under some silk stockings in my second drawer, the little purse with gold in it."

One of the petty difficulties of life to Aurora since she had lived in foreign lands had been the so often arising necessity to think quickly what it would be proper to give. As the amount of the gratuity did not much matter to her she had felt a desperate wish often for the power of divination, by which to know what would be expected. On some occasions it had seemed to Aurora that it would be more delicate not to offer money; but experience had taught her that if she offered enough no offense would be taken. These singers were all poor young fellows, Clotilde had told her, musically gifted, but plying ordinary trades. This one was a wood-carver, that one a gilder. They had been taught by her brother the fine songs composing that magnificent serenade.

The gold pieces distributed among them with words and smiles of thanks were received with such charming manners that the giver—for the first moment faintly embarrassed—was soon set at her ease. When it came to the promoter and leader of the serenade, Aurora felt no more uncertainty. Money had so often gone from her hand to his. She with generous ease, as if passing a box of candy to children, tendered him some three or four times as much as to the others.

But there Italo showed what he was made of. He took a step backward and stood with soldierly rigidity, one hand held with the palm toward her, like a shield and defense against her intention to belittle him and his token of homage by a reward. His look said, and said dramatically, that her thought of him did him wrong; it said that he was ashamed of her for not knowing better. Yet there was no real dissatisfaction in it, since her want of delicacy permitted the exhibition of his delicacy, and afforded him the opportunity to make that gesture....

Her hand dropped, her whole being drooped and confusedly apologized. Then the hand that had interposed between them, uncompromising as a hot flat-iron, changed outline and pointed at a half faded rose pinned on her breast. Quickly she unfastened it and held it toward the outstretched hand. It was taken, it was held to Italo's lips while he made one of those deep bows that bent him double; then the stem of the rose was pulled through his buttonhole and secured with a pin from Aurora's dress. The great little man shook his locks and went on to the next subject.

Aurora was impressed. She was pleased with Italo in a new way, and said to herself that she must make him some rich little, but unobjectionable little, gift to remember this occasion by, a gold pencil, or a pearl scarf-pin, or a cigar case to be proud of.

She went to bed with her head full of serenade and serenaders, her head all lighted up inside with the glory of having been the object of a tribute so flattering. When after reading her chapter she blew out the candle, she knew that to-night she should sleep, and make up for the two bad nights just passed. If Gerald were so foolish as to feel annoyed and wish to stay away, he would just have to feel annoyed and stay away until he felt different. His mood couldn't help wearing off in time. But it did seem to her extraordinary that even now, after knowing him so long, she could tell so little of the workings of Gerald's mind. All, of course, because he was—such a considerable part of him—a foreigner.

Aurora was one of those healthy sleepers who have no care to guard themselves against the morning light. Her windows stood open, her bed was protected from winged intruders by a veil of white netting gathered at the top into the great overshadowing coronet.

She was in the fine midst of those sweetest slumbers that come after a pearly wash of dawn has cleaned sky and hilltops from the last smoke-stain of the night, when a sense of some one else in the room startled her awake. There stood near the door of her dressing-room an unknown female, wearing intricate gold ear-pendants and a dingy cotton dress without any collar.

"*Chi è voi?*" inquired Aurora, lifting her head.

"I am the Ildegonda," answered the woman, whose smile and everything about her apologized, and deprecated displeasure. She must be the kitchen-maid, fancied Aurora, engaged by Clotilde, and not supposed to show her nose above the subterranean province of the kitchen.

"There is the *signorino* down in the garden," Ildegonda acquitted herself of the charge laid upon her by the donor of the silver franc still rejoicing her folded fingers, "who says if you will have the amiability to place yourself one moment at the window he would desire to say a word to you."

The *signorino*. That had become the informal title by which the servants announced a guest who was let in so very frequently. Aurora understood *finestra*, window, and *dire una parola*, to say a word, and then that the signorino was *giù in giardino*.

"All right." Aurora nodded to the Ildegonda, inviting her by a motion of the hand to go away again.

Aurora rose and softly closed the door which, when open, made an avenue for sound from her room to Estelle's. She slipped her arms into a sky-blue dressing-gown, and with a heart spilling over with playful joy, eyes spilling over with childish laughter, went to look out of the window, the one farthest from Estelle's side of the house.

"Good morning! Good morning!" came on the instant from the waiting, upturned face below. "Forgive me for rousing you so early," was said in a voice subdued so as to reach, if possible, no other ears, "but you promised you would go with me one day to Vallombrosa, and one has to start early, for it is far. Will you come?"

"Will I come? Will I come? Wait and see! Got your horses and carriage?"

"Standing at the gate. How long will it take you to get ready?"

"Oh, I'll hurry like anything."

“Wash, dress, be brief in praying.
Few beads are best when once we go a Maying.”

“I won’t pray, I won’t put on beads. But, see here, what about what they call in this country my collation? You know I’m a gump on an empty stomach.”

“We’ll have our coffee on the road, at a little inn-table out of doors in the sunrise.”

“Fine! By-by. See you again in about twenty minutes.”

Every fiber composing Aurora twittered with a distinct and separate glee while she hurried through her toilet, a little breathless, a little distracted, and mortally afraid Estelle would hear and come to ask questions. From her wardrobe she drew the things best suited to the day and her humor: a white India silk all softly spotted with appleblossoms, of which she had said when she considered acquiring it that it was too light-minded for her age and size, but yet, vaulting over those objections, had bought and had made up according to its own merits and not hers; a white straw hat with truncated steeple crown, the fashion of that year, small brim faced with moss-green velvet, bunch of green ostrich-tips, right at the front, held in place by band and buckle.

Her parasol was a thing of endless lace ruffles, her wrap a thing of vanity.

She passed out through the dressing-room, she crept down the stairs, laughing at her own remark that it was awfully like an elopement. The house was not yet astir; only the Ildegonda sweeping out the kitchen, and old Achille out in the garden picking early insects off his plants.

At the door she greeted Gerald with all the joy of meeting again a playmate. He had on the right playmate’s face. She gave him both hands, and he clasped them to the elbow, shaking them with satisfactory fire, while their eyes laughed a common recognition of the adventure as a lark.

At the gate waited the open carriage, a city-square cabriolet, but clean and in repair, drawn by two strong little brown horses, with rosettes and feathers in their jingling bridles, ribbons in their whisking braided tails, and driven by a brown young man of twenty, with a feather, too, in his hat, which he wore aslant and crushed down over his right ear. To make the excursion pleasanter to himself, he was by permission taking along a companion of his own age, who occupied the low seat beside his elevated one, and in contrast with his vividness, the pride of life expressed by his cracking whip, the artistically singular sounds he made in his throat to encourage the horses, was a washed-out personality, good at most to do the jumping off and on, to readjust harness, to investigate the brake, or to offer alms from the lady in the carriage to the old man breaking stones in the roadside dust.

They were off; they sped through the gate of the Holy Cross, the fresh young horses making excellent time. Out of the city, along the river, across it, past hamlets, past villas, past churches and *camposanti*, past vineyards and *poderi* and peasants’ dwellings....

It seemed to Aurora that never had there been such a day, so fresh and unstained and perfect, a day inspiring such gladness in being. The sense of that priceless boon, the freedom of a whole long day together, elated her with a joy that knew only one shadow, and that unremarked for the first half of it—the shortness of the longest earthly day.

Now the horses slowed in their pace; the ascent had begun among the shady chestnut-trees. The driver’s friend scrambled down and plodded alongside the horses; the driver himself descended and walked, cheering on his beasts with noises that nearly killed Aurora, she declared.

As it took them between four and five hours to reach their destination, and as Aurora chattered all the time, with little intervals of talk by Gerald, to report their conversation is unfeasible. Aurora, wanting in all that varied knowledge which those who are fond of reading get from books, had yet a lot to say that some unprejudiced ears found worth while. The dwellers upon earth and their ways had for her an immense and piercing interest. In vain had circumstances circumscribed her early life: neighbors, Sunday-school teacher, minister, village drunkard, fourth of July orator, had furnished comedy for her every day. The human happenings falling within her ken became good stories in their passage through a mind quick in its perception of inconsequence, faulty logic, pretense, all that constitutes the funny side of things. Aurora’s love of the funny story amounted to a fault. Aurora was not always above promoting laughter by narratives no subtler than a poke in your ribs. Aurora, in the vein of funny stories, could upon occasion be Falstaffian. But only one half of humanity had a chance to find out the latter. When in company of the other sex, by instinct and upbringing alike she minded her Ps and Qs.

Gerald said that Aurora on that day regaled him with over a thousand comic anecdotes, this being the expression of her frolicsome and exuberant mood. He furnished her with a few to add to her store, Italian ones, proving that he was not wholly without some share of her gift in that line; but he now and then politely stopped her flow and led her to admire with him the beauties of the road, natural or architectural, a distant glimpse, a form, a fragrance. He would explain things to her, impart scraps of pertinent history, which she would appear trying to appreciate and imprint on her memory.

As he leaned back in the carriage at her side, bathed in the wavering green and gold light of the chestnut-trees among which the road wended, a recent description of him, which she had said over to herself, to qualify it by mitigating adjectives, seemed to her to have become altogether unfair. Gerald’s face, beneath the brim of his pliable white straw, bent down over the eyes and turned up at the back, Italian style, did not look sickly. On the contrary, it looked better and stronger since his illness; he even had a little color. He was not sad-eyed, either, that she could see, though his eyes must always be the thoughtful kind. As for spindle-shanked, he filled his loose woolen clothes better than before.

He had made himself modestly fine for the day to be spent in company of the fair: he had on a necktie which, if expressive of mood, declared his outlook on life to be cheerfuller: it was a vibrant tone of violet that accorded agreeably with his gray suit. A rose-geranium leaf and a stem or two of rusty-gold *gaggia*, odors that he loved, occupied at his buttonhole the place of those decorations which distinguished elderly gentlemen are sometimes envied for, and which-it is a commonplace-are not worthy to be exchanged for the flower Youth sticks at his coat to aid him to charm.

It grew very warm; the way, though pleasant, was beginning to seem long when they arrived. The old monastery, now a school of forestry; the Cross of Savoy, where pilgrims rest and dine, gleamed white in the cloudless noon, amid the century-old trees that long ago, before Dante's time even, earned for the spot its beautiful name of Vallombrosa, Umbrageous Vale.

Aurora was by this time starving again, and Gerald knew the pleasure of purveying to the demands of a stomach as untroubled by any back-thought relating to its functioning as that of a big bloomy goddess seated before a meal of ambrosia. He suggested that she accompany her artichoke omelet, her cutlet with the sauce of anchovy, parsley and mustard, by a little red wine. But she would not, even to be companionable. She could never bring herself to touch wine, any more than to use powder on her cheeks, which in truth did not need it, or a pencil to her eyebrows, which would have looked better for that accentuation.

In a state of physical and mental well-being such as can be bought only by an early rising, an inconsiderable breakfast, a long ride in the warmth of Tuscan mid-May, an abundant and repairing repast, taken, amid sweet conventual coolness, in company which leaves nothing to wish for beyond it, they went forth to spend the time that must be granted the horses for rest before the return to Florence.

After loitering in the inn garden, they went to look at the memorials relating to Saint John Gualberto, founder of the monastery. She listened to the picturesque history of his life, death, and miracles, but was not to be rendered sober-minded by any such thing. In the midst of Gerald's instructive account of the holy abbot's endeavors to purify the monastic orders from the stain of simony, her hand clutched his, and doing a delicate cake-walk she compelled him along with her, announcing, "The Hornet and the Bumble-bee went walking hand in hand!" Fancying this prank not to have been without success, she next performed an improvised *pas seul* illustrative of the text, "The mountains shall skip like little lambs!"



"Come, let us reason together, Aurora"

There was artfulness, as has been suspected, in Aurora's frequent jests upon her size. Their gross exaggeration was fondly counted upon to make her appear sylphlike by comparison with the images she raised.

To relieve the seriousness of Short Lessons on Great Subjects she presently invented interrupting them at intervals to introduce Gerald and herself to some rock or tree or mountain, as if it had been a poor person standing by neglected. "Jack Sprat," she said, "and The Fat!" "A busted cream-puff," she said, "and a drink of water!" Further, "Dino and Retta!" Finally, with imagination running dry, "Gerry and Rory!"

Yes, by such little jokes-what Leslie called Jokes of the First Category, Aurora sought to enliven the hour for Gerald. He never omitted to laugh, without being able to enter enough

into her fun to join her in the same species. An incapacity. Still, there was no disguising the basking enjoyment possessing him, his love of her gaiety, if not at all moments of the form it took.

Finding it entrancing up there, they decided not to start for home till the last minute possible. A limit was set to the time they might linger by the necessity for some degree of daylight in making the descent. From the edge of the curving road the mountain dropped away without the protection of any parapet.

When they had found their ideal place in which to sit on the warm earth in the shade and look off over valleys and mountains into azure space, Aurora at last consented to be still. She became dreamy, appeared sweetly fatigued, and was for a long time mute.

Though the mere quality of her voice still had power to stir Gerald's heart to pleasure, yet to be silent with Aurora was pleasure of a different order from hearing her voice of rough velvet recount preposterous events or propound humorous riddles.

It looked from where they sat as if the land had at some time been fluid, and been tossing, green and purple, in a majestic storm, when some great word of command had fixed it in the midst of motion, and the waves became Apennines; then in an hour of peculiar affection for that plot of the earth a faultless artist from the skies had been set to oversee nature and man at their work there, and prevent the intrusion of one note not in harmony with his most distinguished dream.

"If Italy should perish and all else remain," said Gerald, whose eyes had been feasting on beauties of line and color such as he conceived were not to be found outside this land of his idolatry, "the world would be irreparably impoverished. If all the world besides should perish and Italy remain, the world could still boast of infinite riches."

Aurora gave a nod of at least partial assent. She was growing accustomed to the thought that Italy was the fairest of countries and Florence the fairest of Italian cities. She found herself beginning to like this creed.

In the quiet that descended upon them the native piety in each groped for some acknowledgment to make of his consciousness at the moment of unusual blessing. In him it took the form of a renewal, more devoted perhaps than ever, of the determination to maintain an uncompromising purity of aim in his work. The incomparable scene stimulated within him a sense of power to produce things rivaling what lay under his eyes; he, atom, rivaling his Maker in the creation of beauty. In her it was a determination of greater loyalty toward the Provider of undeservedly happy days to man, whose heart is wicked from his birth, as her mother had been wont to tell her.

Hearing her hum very softly to herself, he asked what she sang. She said, her mother's favorite hymn, and gave it aloud, with the words:

Father, what e'er of earthly bliss
Thy sovereign will denies,
Accepted at Thy throne of grace
Let this petition rise:

Give me a calm, a thankful heart,
From every murmur free;
The blessings of Thy grace impart
And make me live to Thee.

Like one with an impeccable ear, but with small esteem for his gifts as a singer, Gerald murmured the melody after her, just audibly, to show he cared to have his share in her memories.

But mainly the two of them thought of each other.

Gerald, regarding Aurora's hands as they lay in her lap-innocent-looking, loyal-looking, rather large hands, which during his illness he had liked to think were Madonna hands, but when seen in health they were not, really-was amazed to remember the day when their making passes over his face had filled him with perverse repugnance.

And Aurora, remembering the first time she had seen Gerald and nicknamed him Stickly-prickly, while feeling him more than three thousand miles removed from her, was amazed....

So they sat, two little dots, two trembling threads, against the screen of the universe and eternity, and their two selves, under the spell of a world-old enchantment, loomed so large to each that the universal and the eternal were to them two little dots, two threads.

Gerald saw how the afternoon was mellowing toward sunset.... And the important things of the day had not been touched upon.

Our hero had traversed great spaces in the region of sentiment during the two days allowed the Hermitage to stand or crumble without him. The first of them had been spent far from it, even as Aurora supposed, for the sake of letting the impression of having been laughed at wear off a little. Already for some time before that forced climax Gerald had been haunted by the feeling that he ought to offer himself to Aurora, as it were to regularize his status in her house. After hanging around as he had been doing, one might almost say that good manners demanded it. Her fashion, on that evening in the garden, of treating the idea that he could be enamoured of her assured him that she would refuse. He would have done his duty, and they would continue to drift, he shutting his eyes to the penalty awaiting his self-indulgence, the taxes of pain rolling up for the hour when her necessary departure would involve the uprooting of every last little flower in that wretched garden of his heart.

With such a mental pattern of the future he had gone to bed at the end of the first day.

On the next morning something perhaps in deep dreams which he did not remember, or in the happy manner of the new day lighting a scarlet geranium on the terrace ledge, or simply perhaps the whisper of an angel, had effected a change. A heart-throb, a stroke of magic, had so lifted him up that over the top of the wall edging the road of life for him he had seen a thrilling garden outstretched, smiling in the sun, a sight that so enkindled him with the witchery of its promises that he felt he should seek for a way into that garden till he found it; should, if necessary, demolish the wall.

That day he went walking on the hills beyond Settignano, and the new light, the intoxication, persisted—the vision of himself as Aurora's lover. Why not? An escape from the past, a different adventure from all prefigured in his dull expectations before.... In his theory of living Gerald had always admitted the gallant advisability of burning ships. There was room in his theory of living for just such a divergence from design as he now meditated. When the call comes, summon it to never so improbable places, the poet and artist obeys. He had gone to bed on the second night with these thoughts and a plan for the morrow.

Now that morrow was wearing to an end and all the floating splendid courageous thoughts and feelings, brave in the assurance, along with the determination, of victory, must be somehow caught and compressed and turned into the language—how poverty-stricken, how stale!—of a proposal of marriage; even as a great variegated, gold-shot, butterfly-tinted, cloud-light tissue of the Orient is drawn into a colorless whipcord twist that it may pass through a little ring.

As he revolved in his mind what he should say to start with, Gerald saw appropriateness for the first time in the methods of the historic Gaul, who seized by her hair the charming creature whom he felt allied to him by deep things, seated her on the horse before him, and rode away. But what he would have liked so much the best would have been to lay his head in Aurora's willing lap, embrace her knees tenderly, and have her understand all without a word being spoken.

Now he cleared his throat, took a reasonable air, a tone almost of banter, to say what, influenced by the long precedent of their converse together, he could say only in that manner, covering up as best he could the fact that his heart trembled and burned.

"Shall we resume our conversation of last Friday?" he asked, with a fine imitation of the comradely ease which had marked all their intercourse that day.

He was looking over the valley, as if still preoccupied with its beauty rather than with her.

Thus misled, she did not guess right. She said:

"About Charlie, you mean? Just fancy, I haven't thought of him once all day! Little varmint! Don't I wish I had the spanking of him! But I guess it would lame my arm."

"Not about Charlie. I asked would you marry me, and you said you would not. Will you to-day?"

"Not for a farm!" she answered, with emphasis equal to her precipitation.

"Why not?" he asked, undisconcerted.

"Because."

"Come, let us reason together, Aurora." He changed position, arranging himself on his elbow so as to be able to look at her. His eyes were steady. "For a man to ask a woman to marry him is of course the greatest piece of impertinence of which he could be guilty. But from such impertinences, Auroretta, has been derived every beautiful thing that has blessed our poor world from the beginning. No man is good enough for any woman, let that stand for an axiom. But there again, Auroretta, it's not according to merit that those rewards, gentle and beautiful ladies, are dispensed. I have rather less to offer than any man in the world, but I am bold because you, dear, are just the one to be blind."

"Oh, it's not *that*, of course," said Aurora, hurriedly.

"Don't suppose for a moment that I am troubled by the size of your fortune or the size of my own. You haven't any money, dear. Others have your money. I have almost to laugh at the splendid speed with which that open granary of yours will be eaten clean by all the birds coming to pick one seed at a time."

"You needn't laugh, then. Some of it is going to be pinned to me solid, so that nothing can get it away from me, not even I myself."

"I am sorry to hear it. The other was so complete. Well, if you had nothing, I should still have just enough to keep us from hunger, though perhaps not from cold in these dear old stone houses of Italy. And you—I know you well enough to be sure of it—you are exactly the one to learn how much there can be in life besides its luxuries. Since my illness, too, Aurora, let me confide to you, there have been in me reawakenings.... I have felt the beginning—I am speaking with reference to my work,—I have felt intimations—No, it is too difficult to express without seeming to boast, which is horribly unlucky. In short, I have felt that I might do the turn still of forcing a careless generation to pay attention."

"Oh, Gerald, how nice it is to have you say that!" she warmly rejoiced. "I'm so glad to hear it!"

"Now tell me why it is you won't marry me. Stop, dear. Don't say because you are not in love with me. I have difficulty in seeing how any one in her right senses could be in love with me. It would be enough, dear, that you should be to me as you were during those happy, happy days when I was so beastly ill. You are so generous, it would be merely fulfilling your nature. And I, upon my word, dear, would try to deserve it. I would give you reason to be kind. I am not without scraps of honor—wholly; I would do my best to make you happy."

"No,"—she shook her head decidedly,—"no, Gerry," she added, to take the sharp edge off her refusal, "no, Gerry; Rory won't."

"You have only to lose by it, that is obvious, and I to gain, and nothing could equal the

indecent of insistence on my part; but I feel that I am going to persist to the point of persecution. You are fond of me, you know. I only dare to say you are fond of me because you have said it yourself more than once. And you are always sincere, and I wouldn't be likely to forget. Now, if you are fond of me,—very, very fond, you have said repeatedly,—why do you refuse? I wouldn't be a bore of a husband, I promise. I would leave you a great deal of liberty."

"No, Geraldino; no."

"You needn't tell me there's somebody else. I don't believe it. Though you feel only fondness for me, I know that you are not in love with anybody else. When one is in love, there is no room in life for such warm and dear friendship as you have frankly shown me. It's that, after all, which has given me courage."

"No, no; there's nobody else."

"Well, then, why can't you? Why won't you?"

"I—" She hesitated, as if to think. There was a silence. Then she asked slowly, like one who finds some difficulty in laying her tongue on the right words: "Do you remember all those things you said that evening in the garden, the night you came in to meet Tom for the first time? How you wouldn't for anything in the whole world let yourself get tangled up again with caring for a person?"

"Perfectly. I could only picture it as meaning more of trouble and unrest. But things change, dear. We change. There has taken place in me since that, no matter for what reason, an increase of self-confidence and confidence in fate such as turns men into nuisances or makes them successful. In the last twenty-four hours particularly. Now, as I look at the inconvenience of getting tangled up again with caring for a person, I find I don't mean at all to suffer. I mean to bother you until you say yes, and then to be happy. You could never wilfully torment me, I know; you are incapable of it. Then, when you have graciously consented to marry me, I feel as if I might build up my life on new lines."

"I can't, Geraldino; I can't."

"You can't. So you have said. And I have asked you to tell me your reasons, that I may combat them one by one."

"It's no use. We're too different."

"That we are different, thank God! is a reason for and not against."

"No, no; not when it's such a huge difference. We're like—a bird and a fish."

"Don't call me a fish. I object."

"We don't think the same about hardly anything."

"But we feel alike on everything of importance."

"There's hardly a thing I do that's quite right as you see it. No, don't take the trouble to contradict me; let me do the talking for a minute. You're so critical and so conventional and so correct! No matter how much you say you aren't, you *are*. And while we're like this I don't have to care. I rather enjoy shocking you. And while I'm none of your business, you don't have to care what I do or what I'm like. We can have our fun and be awfully fond of each other, and it's all serene and right. But if I were Mrs. Gerald Fane, all my faults and shortcomings, my not knowing the things that everybody in your society knows, my not having any elegant accomplishments, would show up so glaring that I should know you must be mortified. You couldn't help it."

"Stop, dear! You enrage me. You put me beside myself. You are so superficial. And dense. And you hold me up to myself in the features of a beastly cad! I won't have it. For one thing, let me tell you that if I were the Lord Ronald Macdonald of that song we've heard Miss Felixson sing, and you were that canny lass Leezie Lindsay, I should know jolly well that after I'd carried you off to the Hielands my bride and my darling to be, it would be a very short time before Lady Ronald Macdonald had all the airs and tricks of speech of my sisters and cousins. That, however, is neither here nor there. Who wants you to be different? Aurora, if you only knew yourself! Ceres, or Summer, or Peace sitting among the wheat-sheaves, what would it matter that she had not been educated at a fashionable boarding-school? Let her just breathe and be,—beautiful, benign, and any man not utterly a fool will prefer to lie at her knees, keeping still while her silence appeases and reconciles him, to hearing the most brilliant conversation of a lady novelist."

"You can talk beautifully, Gerald, that's one sure thing; but talk me over you can't. Seems to me I should have to be crazy to forget all in a moment what I've said over and over to myself, and drilled myself not to lose sight of. After you asked me the other day, though I knew it was just on the spur of the moment, I thought it all out in the night as much as if it had been serious, and I saw what would be the one safe course for little me. I mustn't; that's all there is to it. Everything is wrong for it to turn out happy in the end. I'm terribly fond of you, but I should be scared to death of you, simply scared to death, as a husband. We're not the same kind. If I could forget it on my own account, I have only to remember how it would strike Estelle. And Estelle's got no end of horse sense. It's according to horse sense we must act when it comes to settling the real things of life. I expect"—she had the effect of turning a page or a corner; she dropped from heights of argument to low plains—"I expect I shall be big as a mountain by and by. I don't see any help for it. I starve myself, I drink hot water, I take exercise,—nearly walk my legs off,—and the next time I get weighed I've gained three pounds! What's the use? Then, I'm older than you."

"Not at all. I'm older than the everlasting hills; you are the youngest thing that lives."

"That's all right, but you were twenty-eight your last birthday, and I'm thirty. I'm afraid my character's already pretty well fixed in its present form. When it comes over me, for instance, to play the clown, I've got to do it or burst. And you're naturally a tyrant, you know."

"I am. I am critical, carping, conventional, and a tyrant, everything you say, but just because I am those things, you ought to be able to see, dear Aurora—because I am those things and know it, they are the things least to be feared in me. Do you suppose Marcus Aurelius was really calm and philosophical? Because he, on the contrary, was anxious and passionate, he wrote those maxims to try to live by. When you *would* go and be a negress, did I make a scene? I gnashed my teeth and gnawed my knuckles, but when I saw you afterward, wasn't I decently decent?"

"Yes, but you took to your bed. If I were Mrs. Gerald, and the Pope of Rome sent for me to do Lew Dockstader for him and his cardinals, you know you wouldn't let me go."

"You are wrong. I should make a point of it. I should only ask to be permitted to retire into solitude until all the vulgar people had stopped talking about it."

"Ah, you're a dear, funny boy; but put it out of your mind, Geraldino, do, dear, when we're so happy as it is. Let's go on just as we've been going; you know yourself that it's the wisest, and what really you would prefer. If you've asked me to-day-mind, I don't say you *have*; but if you have—to save my vanity and back up the proposal you didn't really mean the other day,—because you're always such a gentleman; you'd rather die than not behave like a gentleman,—let it go at that. But if you should feel now that you've got to back up your declaration that you're going to persist and follow this up, just ask me over again every few days to show there's no unkind feeling, and I promise it will be safe; I'll refuse you every time. It'll be our little standing joke. For don't you go dreaming that I'm going to let go of you! You can call me pudgy if I let you get away. I love you too dearly. Wasn't everything all right and lovely until the other day when you came out with that stilted speech, 'doing you the honor'? We'll take up again just where we left off, and bimeby make fun of all this. You who've read all the books ever written, don't you know of cases where two like us went on being just friends, and taking comfort in each other on and on to the end of the tale?"

"There have been examples, yes, a very few, and not on the whole encouraging."

"You know we never thought of anything else until three days ago, and were perfectly contented. Let's call all this in between a mistake, like taking the wrong road and having to turn back to be where we were before. Let's go back."

"Yes, let's go back. I won't bore you any more."

He had all in an instant changed to cool dryness. They would get no further along with talk on this occasion, that was clear. And to clasp her knees, laying his head on her lap, and penetrate her in silence with the conviction that they belonged together in a manner that turned all the sensible things she said into folly, could not be done outside the world of dreams and fancies. He jumped to his feet.

"I meant, you know, let's go back to Florence. I'm afraid it's high time. We ought to have daylight at least until we get to the foot of the mountain."

"Cross, Geraldino?"

"Not at all."

"Good friends as ever?"

"Assuredly."

"Oh, I've had such a beautiful day!" she sighed, getting up by the help of his two hands, and brushing down her dress. "I certainly do love to be with you!"

With the inconsequence of a woman she wanted, in order to console him for rejecting him, to make him sure she loved him deeply nevertheless; and so she said, turning upon him eyes of sweetest, sincerest affection, "I certainly do love to be with you!"

In the carriage they were silent, like people tired out by the long day, talked out, and certain of each other's consent to be still.

The two young fellows on the box were quiet, too. The horses now needed no encouragement to go; the scraping of the brake gave evidence rather of the need to hold them back. The driver's friend, named appropriately Pilade, sat hunched with chilly sleepiness; but Angelo, the driver, was kept visibly alert by the responsibility of making a safe descent in the fast-failing light. Owing to the dilatoriness of the *signori* they had been later in starting than was prudent.

When they emerged at last from the shadow of the chestnut-trees and the brake blessedly was released, it was accomplished evening. The dome of the firmament spread above them so wonderful for darkly luminous serenity that the signori behind in the carriage arranged themselves to contemplate it comfortably, with their feet on the forward bench, their heads propped on the back of the seat.

Thus they passed through glimmering hamlets, between high walls of orchards, past iron gates opening into cypress avenues with dim villas at the other end, terraces of vine-garlanded olive-trees, all of a dark silvery blue, and did not vouchsafe a look at anything but the inverted cup of the nocturnal sky.

Even this they did not see more than in a secondary way, for the interposing thoughts and images.

The eyes of both were wide, and in their fixity the lights of heaven were glassed. The face of the one burned with a red spot on the visibly-defined cheek-bone; the cheeks of the other were, for a marvel, pale.

Aurora, uplifted on a great wonder and pride and illogical happiness, was thinking of the days to come, the immediate to-morrows, rich in a tenderness profounder still than that which had linked her before to the companion staring at the stars beside her; she thought of how she should through a wise firmness and God's help steer their course into ways of a safer and longer happiness than that which he had tendered.

"It would seem rather unnecessary—" came from him through the transparent darkness in what was to the young driver's ears a monotonous bar of insignificant sound, "it would seem to me almost imbecile, to say to you that I love you, when for months I have been hovering around you, as must have been evident to the dullest, like the care-burthened honey-fly, possessed with the fixed desire to hide his murmurs in the rose. When for months I have been, in fact, like a dog with his nose on your footprints, asking nothing but to lie down at your feet with his muzzle on your shoe."

She impulsively felt for his hand, and pushed her own into it. "Don't say another word, Gerald. I daresn't do what you wish, I just daresn't. I'm plain scared to! And I'm such a fool that I'm nearer to it this minute than I like to be by a long sight. I'm fond enough of you for almost anything, and you know it, but I must keep my level head. It can't be done—a greyhound tied down to a mudturtle. I know what I'm like,—no disparagement meant, Mrs. Hawthorne,—and what you're like, and I won't let myself forget. I'm looking out first of all for myself, but I'm looking out for you, too, dear boy. Don't say any more about it to-night, Gerald, please, with the stars shining like that, and the air so sweet that all the fairy-tales you ever heard seem possible. I want to keep solid earth under my feet."

Gerald was not so devoid of the right masculine spark as not to recognize the moment for one of which advantage should be taken by any creature capable of growing a mustache. The thing to be done was to put his arms around her like a man, and lay his head on her shoulder like a child, and treat as not existing the barriers which she described as dividing them.

Often enough in his life Gerald had wished he might have been a masterful man, capable of the like things. But already a vague sickness of soul had succeeded his momentarily dominant mood. Distrust filled him—of his own character, his aims, his talent, his health, and his destiny. His dreams had but recently taken the form in which he had that day expressed them; he had not grown into them. Under the depressing effect of failure he was no more sure than she had professed to be that the proposed union would not be a rash mistake. He saw the wisdom of a return to his gray policy of wanting nothing, asking nothing. Heaviness possessed him; he made no motion.

Signs of the nearing city came thicker and thicker; the street lamps became frequent and consecutive. Aurora sat up and composed her appearance. The lighted house-fronts threw back the skies to inexpressible altitudes.

She continued aloud for Gerald to hear a conversation she had been holding mentally:

"Estelle says we must go away somewhere for the summer, because it's awfully hot down here in Florence, we're told. We're thinking of taking some sort of place at the seashore for the bathing season. You'll be coming down to visit us, won't you? Then by and by, when I've had pretty near enough of the kind of life I'm leading, tell you what I'm thinking I'll do. Give up the house I've got and take another, different, and fit it up for a children's hospital, a small one, of course, to be within my means, and run it myself, and do what I can of the nursing. I've been thinking of it for some time as a good thing to do instead of spending my money and nothing to show for it. It would be something to do for the sake of little Dan, to make it so it wouldn't be the same as if he never had passed through the world. Then I shall have my work just as you have yours, Gerald. And so we'll live on, each so interested in all the other does. And you'll come to see me, and I'll go to see you—chaperoned, if you insist, though I understand a studio can be visited without impropriety, and—"

"You can leave me out of your plans for the future. I am going away to forget you."

"Oh, no, you're not. You're coming to see me to-morrow. Five o'clock at the very latest, hear?"

"I'm afraid you will have to excuse me."

"You wouldn't break my heart like that for anything, Gerald Fane! You wouldn't let the foolish doings of this day destroy all the months have built up! You're not so mean. When I tell you it'll be all right and just as it was before—"

But he stubbornly would not agree, and they quarreled, as so often, half in play, half in real exasperation, each calling the other selfish.

But at her door, when he took her hands to thank her for the day she had given him, he dropped quite naturally, "Until to-morrow, then," and she entered her great white hall with a happy, shining face.

In the half-light of the solitary hall-lamp the white-and-gold door between the curving halves of the stairway stood open on to the blackness of the unlighted ball-room. At the threshold appeared Estelle, and stood with folded arms until the servant who answered the bell had been heard retreating down the back stairs. She came forward with a tired, troubled, pallid, and severe face.

"Well, I'm glad you've got back!" she said, as much as to say that she had given up looking for her. And as Aurora unexpectedly cast mischievous, muscular arms around her and tried to squeeze the breath out of her, she gasped amid spasms of resistance: "Stop! Don't try to pacify me! I'm in no mood for fooling! I'm as cross with you as I can be!"

"You little slate-pencil! You little lemon-drop, you!" said Aurora, squeezing harder, then suddenly letting go.

"I'm in no mood to be funny, you—you county-fair prize punkin! I've been worried half to death. Where've you been so long, 'way into the night, long past eleven o'clock?"

"Didn't you find my note on the pin-cushion? That informed you where I've been."

"I thought you must have met with an accident, to make you so terribly late, or else made up your mind to go off with that young man for good and all. Tell you the truth, I didn't quite know which I should prefer, which would be better for you in the end."

"Do you mean to tell me you've been sitting here all day stewing and fretting about that? Didn't you ever in your life go buggy-riding with a feller, and did it always ends with the grand plunge? You know it didn't. You know you could ride from Provincetown to Boston, with the moon shining, too, and not even exchange a chaste salute."

"Nell, there's one thing I know, and it's that my scolding and warning and beseeching will do exactly as much good as an old cow mooing with her neck stretched over a stone wall. You know what I think. I've had plenty of time for reflection, walking up and down the floor in there in the dark; and long before you finally got home I'd made up my mind not to be an idiot and make myself a nuisance trying to influence you. It's your funeral. What you choose to do is none of my business. What I said when you came in just escaped me.—Stand off and let me look at you."

While making the request, she herself drew off to get a more comprehensive view of her friend.

Something of the sunshine, the mountain sweetness, the unpolluted breezes and wide perspectives of the heights, the dreams of the starlit homeward ride, the triumph in man's love, was shining forth from Aurora, with her fresh sunburn, her untied hair, and softly luminous eyes. Estelle felt herself suddenly on the point of tears. But she stiffened.

"Well, you do look as if you'd had a good time, you crazy thing!" she said dryly. "What made you put your best dress on if you were going to sit round on the ground? You've got it all grass stains. Oh, Nell," she melted, "while you've been off gallivanting, I've just about worried myself sick over a paper Leslie left. I've been longing for you to get back to see what you make of it."

"A paper? What do you mean?"

"A newspaper. Come on upstairs. I left it on the desk. Leslie called in the forenoon, but I had gone out. Then she came again in the afternoon, so I knew it must be something special. But I simply couldn't bring myself to see her and let her know you'd gone off for the whole day with Gerald Fane. So I got the maid to tell her we were both out. Everybody does that over here. Anyway, I went and stood on the terrace while the maid was delivering my message. So Leslie went off, but she left this Italian paper for the maid to give us. And, my dear,—now don't faint,—there's a long piece in it about you."

"For goodness' sakes! About me? Why? Where?"

"There. It isn't marked, and I was the longest time trying to discover why Leslie had left the paper. After I'd gone all over it hunting for a marked passage, I thought it must be a mistake and that she'd simply left it because she was tired of carrying it round, and the maid hadn't understood. But going over it column by column, I at last saw the word Hawthorne and those other names. '*Una Americana*'—'An American'—the article is entitled. It looks to me, Nell, as if your whole life's history might be printed there."

"For the land's sake! Now, who do you suppose can have done that? What on earth would anybody want to—"

"I've been puzzling over it and puzzling over it till I'm about played out trying to make sense of it, and my head aches like fury. Oh, never mind my head! Now you've got back I don't care."

"And your French doesn't help you to translate it?"

"Yes, it does help—some. I can pick out lots of words, and here and there a whole sentence; but what I can't get at is the spirit of the whole, whether it's meant to be friendly or not."

"Have you tried with a dictionary? Where's the dictionary? Get it, and we'll pick it out if it takes all night."

"Indeed, I wish I had a dictionary. Mine's French-English. I asked Clotilde if she had an Italian-English or an Italian-French, and she said yes, but at home. Isn't it provoking? I certainly wasn't going to show this to her, and get her to translate it for me before I'd consulted with you."

"Bother!" said Aurora, thoughtfully, with her eyes on the cryptic print. Estelle sat close, examining the sheet over her shoulder. "*Elena* means Helen, doesn't it? I guess it must, as it comes here before Barton. They've got my old name. And there's Bewick-Bewick, and here's Colorado. They've got the whole thing, fast enough. It's the doing of an enemy; there can be no doubt of that."

"I know who you're thinking about."

"Charlie Hunt, of course. Scamp! Worm! Cockroach! Low down, ungrateful, pop-eyed pig!" Nor did the reviling stop there. For the space of about forty seconds Aurora was unpublishable.

"But how on earth did he get at it?" wondered Estelle.

"After he'd opened that letter of mine, he wrote to the amiable writer thereof and asked for information."

"Honestly, Nell, I don't think he's had time."

"I guess he has—just time. The languishing Iona hurried for once. Well, I don't care!" Aurora folded the paper tight and flung it from her. "Enemies may do what they please; I've got friends. If everything comes out as it really happened, I haven't anything to fear, except that it's mighty unpleasant. It's only lies, and people believing them, that could do me harm. I've got friends in Florence. Oh, not many true ones, I don't suppose. It's paying my way that has made me popular, I'm not such a gump as not to know that. But some true friends I've got, and their backing will be my stay. One friend I've got— Pride and a sudden battle-light flashed in Aurora's eye. "One friend I've got, who if I gave the word would kill Charlie Hunt for this, or put him in a fair way to dying. I do believe, Hat, that Gerald Fane would call Charlie Hunt out to fight a duel to punish him for a slur on me. Oh, he can fence just as well as the Italians he was brought up with. I've seen the fencing-swords in his studio. But"—she

calmed down—"I wouldn't permit that sort of thing. It's ridiculous. I don't believe in it."

Cooling to normal, she laughed, with a return to the light of reality. "He doesn't believe in it, either, I shouldn't suppose."

CHAPTER XXII

Leslie, arriving early next day, read off the newspaper article, making a free translation of it, as follows:

When a thing is too successful, it is seldom natural; and so when there appeared in our city a *signora*, blond of hair, azure of eye, with the complexion of delicate, luminous roses, red and white, whose name was at once Aurora and *Albaspina*,—Hawthorne,—floral counterpart of dawn, we should have had suspicions. That we had none does not prevent our feeling no very great surprise when we learn that the bearer of the poetic and more than appropriate name is called in sober truth Elena Barton. The more beautiful name was adopted by a child acting out its fairy-stories; it was remembered and re-adopted by a woman when she wished to detach her life from a past which neither charity, fidelity, nor devotion to a sacred duty had succeeded in keeping from sorrow and the deadly aspersions of malignity.

The *gentilissima* person of the irradiating smile, which, however briefly seen, must be long remembered, whom we have grown accustomed this winter to meeting in the salons where assembles all that is most distinguished among foreigners, whose name we have grown accustomed to finding foremost in every work of charity, has a title to our esteem far beyond the ordinary member of an indolent and favored class. To alleviate suffering has been the chosen work of those hands that Florence also has found ever open and ready with their help. It was in effect the extent of their beneficence which brought about the black imbroglio from which Elena Barton chose to flee and take refuge in the City of Flowers under the *soave* and harmonious name by which we know her.

Her life had been for several years devoted to the care of an old man afflicted with a most malignant and terrible cancer in the face. She had filled toward him so perfectly the part of a daughter that his gratitude made her upon his death an equal sharer in his fortune with the children of his blood. Thence the law-case Bewick *versus* Barton, which for a period filled the city of Denver in Colorado of the United States as if with poisonous fumes. The literal daughters, two in number, who had shown no filial love for the unfortunate old man, in trying to annul their father's will, left nothing undone or unspoken that could help their *turpe*, or evil, purpose, even attempting to prove that not only had the devoted nurse been their father's *amante*—[You can guess what that is, Aurora. They are much simpler here than we at home about calling things by their names, and much more outspoken on all subjects], but had likewise been the *amante* of the son, sole member of the family who supported her claim to the share of the fortune appointed by the father. Justice in the event prevailed, but a tired and broken woman emerged from the conflict. What to do to regain a little of that pleasure in living which blackening calumnies and rodent ill-will, even when not victorious, can destroy in the upright and feeling nature? The imagination which had prompted in childhood the acting out of fairy-stories here came into play: Leave behind the scene of sorrows, take ship, and point the prow toward the land of orange and myrtle, of golden marbles and wine-colored sunsets; change name, begin again, do good under a beautiful appellation which the poor should learn to love and speak in their prayers to the last of their days....

"The rest, Aurora dear, is pure flattery, which it becomes me not to speak nor you to hear. I won't read it."

"Well, I never!" breathed Aurora. "Who did it?"

"We did it! My father and your Doctor Bewick and Carlo Guerra and I. We did it to be before anybody else, set the worst that could be brought up against you in a light that explains and justifies. We did our best to fix the public mind and show it what it should think. You know what the mind of the public is. We've hypnotized the beast, I hope; it has taken its bent from us."

"But—"

"This was the way of it, my dear. The day after Brenda's wedding I was at the Fontanas,—she was a Miss Andrews, you know, of Indianapolis,—and there was Charlie, too, and there was likewise Madame Sartorio, who is Colonel Fontana's niece by his first marriage. We were talking in a little group when something, I forget what, was said about you, Aurora. Charlie—for what reason would be hard to think, unless one had a sharp scent for what goes on under one's nose—Charlie interrupted, to introduce as a sort of parenthesis, 'Mrs. Hawthorne, whose real name, by the way, is Helen Barton.' The others were naturally taken aback, except Madame Sartorio, who could not quite disguise a cat-smile. For a moment none of us knew what to say, and Charlie went on, with his air of knowing such a lot more than anybody else—

"Yes. It seems that all winter we have been warming in our bosom, so to speak, the heroine of a *cause célèbre* at a place called Colorado in America."

"That was enough for me. I stopped him."

"Don't say any more, Charlie. All I wish to know about Mrs. Hawthorne is what she cares to tell me herself,' and I insisted that the conversation should return to other things."

"When I got home I told mother, and she repeated to me what you, Aurora, confided to her when we first knew you. We told father, and when Doctor Bewick came that evening to say good-by we consulted, and here in this newspaper you have the result, put into Italian journalese by Carlo Guerra, whom we called in to aid us. He likes you so much, Aurora; did

you know it? He met you at Antonia's. So there you have the whole story. I'm bitterly ashamed of Charlie, my dear, and I'm sorry about him, too. One never looked upon him as a particularly fine fellow, still, one liked him. He had never done anything that disqualified him for a sort of liking, and we've all grown up together." Leslie wrinkled her forehead in puzzlement. "It's curious, somehow, to think of him, who, we have said so often, has no real inside, as being sufficiently under the dominion of a passion to care to please his lady by offering up you, who have, after all, been to him a source of a good many pleasures, with your open house, invitations to dinner, and so on. I don't quite understand it."

"Never mind about him!" Aurora flicked him aside. "I don't care. And you say Tom helped. And he never told me, or wrote me a word about it. I had a letter from him this morning. Well, well. You certainly did make a good-sounding story of it, among you. And the main facts are true, far as they go; I can't say they aren't. But, oh, my dear Leslie, there was a lot more to it than that. I've got to tell you, so's not to feel like a fraud. You're so sharp; you know me pretty well by this time, and I guess you don't suppose in me any of those awfully 'fine feelin's' that could make a blighted flower of me because, while innocent as a babe unborn, I'd been dragged through the courts by wicked enemies. My enemies were pretty wicked; I stick to that. Cora Bewick, off living abroad studying some strange religion, while her kind old pa was dying at home, and she never once coming near him till he was under ground; Idell Friebus, never coming into his room except with her nose wrinkled up with disgust at the smell of disinfectants—or disgust at him, it was none too plain which. They made a fine pair of daughters. But when it came to fighting over the will, the lawyers on the Bewick side gave out just what it was that a perfectly noble woman would have done in my place of the old man's nurse. And my lawyers would have it that everything that didn't accord with that ideal simply must be kept dark, or public feeling would go against us. It's that that made it so nasty—pretending, and avoiding this, and keeping off the other. It amounted to lying, no matter what they said. But they told me if I didn't do as my counsel instructed me, the result would be the worst lie of all. I should be believed guilty of just that undue influence I was accused of, and lose the money into the bargain. So I had to hedge and shuffle and mislead.... And me under oath to tell the truth! You needn't wonder if I'm sick still at the thought of it, or wonder that I'd like to forget it. The truth was I *did* know beforehand the Judge meant to leave me one fourth of his money, and I was tickled to death. I gloried in it. I loved to imagine the rage it would throw his wicked daughters in, and his mean little miserable son-in-law. I was glad, besides, out and out, to think I should have the money. I plain wanted it, I did. Maybe a real noble woman wouldn't have. Maybe it showed a degraded nature. Well, that's the way it was. Sometimes I feel disposed to be ashamed of it, but mostly I don't. For one thing, I felt then and I feel now, I deserved that money by a long sight more than those bad-hearted girls of his. I was a comfort to Judge Bewick. I won't say I earned the money, it was too much: but there were some hours of my tending him, poor soul, when it did seem to me a nurse came pretty near earning anything the patient could afford to pay. All the same, I would have done what I did for the old boy if he hadn't had a cent, I had so much respect for him, as much as for my own father, and I felt I owed so much to his son. Then about his son, the doctor. If Cora's old nurse-girl, who was kept on in the house as a servant, though she was past her usefulness, lied in court when she said she saw Tom and me kissing at such an hour, in such a place, still, the truth was that I had at different times kissed Tom. You can't tell why it seems all right to you to kiss one man when it would seem a very queer thing to do to kiss another. When Tom had been away for any length of time, I always kissed him when he came back; it seemed natural to both of us. But there in court I had to try to appear as if I never could have descended to committing such an immoral act, as well as to give the impression that if I'd known the old man had any notion of making me co-heir with his own children I would have strained every nerve to stop it, called them all in to help me curb him if necessary. Pshaw! the humbug of it turns my stomach now. Leslie, my verdict is, you can't come through a law-suit *clean*. I'd give a good deal to cut that page out of my life."

Aurora's eyes, filled with the shadows of the past, and her face, with the dimples expunged, were to Leslie almost unfamiliar. Aurora, oppressed in her moral nature, gave a glimpse of herself that would change and enlarge the composite of her aspects carried in Leslie's mind.

"There, stop thinking of it!" said Estelle. "You always work yourself up so."

"The point of my coming bright and early like this," Leslie nimbly managed a diversion, "was, as you have guessed, to catch you before you could possibly go out. My mother desires you, dear ladies, to accompany me back to lunch—a triumphal lunch, Aurora, to grace which she has collected those special pillars of society whose countenance and support ought to make you scornful of any little weed-like growth of gossip that might sprout up from seed of Charlie's sowing. You know them all more or less, having been associated with every one of them in some form of beneficence. I might more accurately describe it: having donated largely to each of their pet charities. It is not a very admirable world—" Leslie's young face took that little air of knowing the world which sometimes amused old gentlemen so much, "it is a selfish society, not indisposed, or, I am afraid, altogether displeased, to believe evil of its neighbor, and not always disinclined to turn and rend its favorites. But it would be a pity, really, if you should have poured forth upon it as you have done, Aurora, money and smiles, bouquets and banquets and sunbeams, good-will and baby-socks and knitted afghans, and it did not rise up when you are attacked and say, 'No. An exception has to be made in this case. We have all been bought!'"

Aurora, who had been listening with expanded, gathering-in eyes, cheeks flushing deeper and deeper, turned her head sharply away to try to keep from falling or being seen two unaccountable tears half blinding her.

The sight of her, by infection, moistened the eyes of the other women.

Estelle sought a quick way out of the emotional silence.

"Nell," she said, albeit with cracked voice, "if we're going out to lunch, I guess we ought to be dressing. Go along, child, put on your best bib and tucker."

"Oh, my best bib and tucker!" wailed Aurora. "Sent to the cleaner's this morning, all green stains at the back!"

If Leslie had not called it a triumphal lunch, it might not have appeared so very different from any other women's lunch at the season of roses. Leslie herself, though, found in it the flavor of old-fashioned romance, just faintly platitudinous, in which poetic justice is done. Mrs. Foss, the more simple-minded organizer of it, felt that she should remember it as an occasion when she had risen to the level, placed the right cards in the fist of destiny, and created an event worthy to take rank at least with those little triumphs of good housewives at whose home the president of their husband's company arrived one night unlocked for and was entertained with brilliant credit.

To the heroine of the feast, no need to say it was an inexpressibly exciting, grand, and memorable occasion. Aurora hardly knew herself, so much the object of attention and graciousness. She was in the mood to give half of her goods to the poor. After the hostess had risen and made a little speech, Aurora, unexpectedly to herself, and as if under inspiration, responded by a little speech of her own, composed on the spot. It was drowned at the end by hand-clapping all around the table. Aurora seemed to herself to be living in a fairy-story.

As it was after five o'clock when she reached home, she was sure she would find Gerald waiting for her. She had the whole day long been looking forward with a sweet agitation to the moment of being with him and telling him all about it.

She was more disappointed than she remembered ever being, even as a child, not to find him or any word from him. She did not allow it to become later by more than half an hour before she scratched a line and sent the coachman to his house with it.

The man came back with nothing but the barren information, received from Giovanna, that the *signorino* was absent, having gone to Leghorn.

"Well, here's a pretty howdydo!" thought Aurora, sore with surprise and the smart of injury. "If every time I refuse him he's going off like this to stay away for days and days, what am I going to do?"

CHAPTER XXIII

"If this is the way it was going to be, and I'd known it before, I'd have kept better watch over my affections," said Aurora to herself, reflecting upon Gerald in Leghorn, where he was bending his will industriously, no doubt, to the work of forgetting her.

Beside the large sharp thorn of this thought, she was troubled by what was a small, merely uncomfortable thorn: the knowledge of Gerald exposed so closely to the influence of Vincent, that persuasive young man of God, who bowed to images and believed in the Pope. At the end of every wearisome day she gave thanks that for still another twenty-four hours she had by grace of strength from on high been able to fight off the temptation to write to Gerald.

This for nine days—the nine days it takes for a wonder to become a commonplace or a scandal to lose its prominent place in conversation. Then, in the way once sweetly habitual, there came a rapping at the door, the entrance of a servant, and the announcement, "*C'è il signorino.*"

Aurora for a second either did not really grasp the import of the words or did not trust her senses. She asked:

"What *signorino*? *Signorino*What?"

"The *signorino* who has come back," said the servant, unable on the instant to recall the foreign name. And if he had felt interest in the complexion of one so far removed from him as his mistress, he might have seen her turn the hue of a classic sunrise.

On her way down the stairs Aurora rejected the idea of a tumultuous reproachful greeting, such as, "Where have you been so long, you mean thing?" Or of a cool and cutting one, such as, "You're quite a stranger." She decided to behave like a nice person, and show respect for her friend's freedom, after having so explicitly left it to him.

The Italians performing the service of the house arranged it according to their own ideas of fitness, and on this warm afternoon the drawing-room was in soft-colored twilight, the Persian blinds being clasped, and their lower panels pushed out a very little so as to let in a modicum of the whiteness of day.

Gerald stood, very collected, if a trifle pale, holding, like a proper votary, a bouquet-starry handful of sweet white hedge-roses,—which he offered as soon as Aurora entered, saying he had picked them for her that morning in the country near Castel di Poggio.

The meeting, in Aurora's jubilant sense of it, went off beautifully. She said in a pleasant, easy tone and her company English,

"So you've got back. It's awfully nice to see you again. How well you are looking. I was sure a change would do you good."

And Gerald said yes, he had found the sea air tonic. He had been staying with the Johns, Vincent's mother lived in Leghorn. He had worked a little, made a few drawings. Digressing, he mentioned a trifling gift he had brought her, and produced a small brass vessel, fitted with two hinged lids, meant to contain grains of incense for the altar. He said he had found it in an antiquarian's shop and thought she might care for it to drop her rings into; he supposed she took them off at night. Its shape seemed to him to possess more than common elegance.

Aurora called it adorable, and his giving it to her sweet. They talked as if they had been making believe, for the benefit of an audience, to be the most ordinary friends.

And each of them meanwhile, with heart and head gone slightly insane in secret, was considering a marvel. The long separation—it had been long to them—had recreated for both something of the capacity to receive a fresh impression of the other. The marvel to Aurora was that this choice being, with his intellectual brow (that was her adjective for Gerald's brow) his difference from others, all in the way of superiority to them, the indescribable fascination residing in his every feature, mood, or word, should be walking the world unclaimed and unattached, for her to take if she were so minded. Her to take! It was vertiginous.

And the marvel to him was, in beholding that bounteous temple of a soul, with its radiance of life, its share, so rich, of the mysterious something which made the earliest men care to build homes; its gifts, so large, of comfort and warmth—the marvel was that he should have dared aspire to conquer it, should have set that to himself as a thing he was going to persevere in trying to do until—until he had done it, he, puny, poor in inducements, light of weight.

The two of them, there could be no doubt of it, had passed within the portals after which a change comes over the eyes, and those who enter see each other endowed with qualities raising the capacity for wonder to an ecstasy: so much engaging beauty, so much dearness, are not to be believed!... It can never be established whether the eyes only see truly when under this charm, or whether then more than at other times illusion makes of them its fool.

If he had been analytical on the subject of his sentiment for Aurora, as so often on other subjects, and said to himself that he saw this woman in a golden transfiguring light because he was in good primordial fashion in love with her—because, that is to say, obscure affinities of flesh and blood united with the esteem created by her virtues to make of him a candle which the touch of her finger-tip miraculously could light—he would have felt it as a blessed and not a base secret at the bottom of his attachment.

While they talked of the weather, as they fell to doing when they had disposed of the subject of the little incense-holder; and, after that, while they talked of Leghorn and the

various seaside places which Aurora had to choose from for her summer sojourn, a vastly deep conversation was taking place between them, which we think it not amiss to report, because by the nature of things the words they would say aloud on this occasion would be meager and colorless by comparison with the things they would feel and to some extent convey to each other through mere proximity.

"O Aurora," exhaled from Gerald, while, looking not far from his usual self, he said that Ardenza by the sea, a mere three miles from Leghorn, was a very pretty place, "Aurora, you are warmth, you are shelter, you are rest. I have no hearth or home except as you let me in out of the desperate cold of loneliness, and grant me to warm myself at your big heart. You should see, woman dear, that my thankfulness would make you happy. Nature, the divine, so formed you that my love would kindle yours. And when you had given your hand into mine I should find paths of violets, enchanted paths, for us to walk in which you could never find without me, nor I find for myself. Put up no petty shield against me, Aurora; fight me with no petty lance, for I verily am that guest you were awaiting when on balmy spring evenings you felt, and knew not why, that your life was incomplete."

And Aurora, mechanically pulling off her rings and putting them into the brass receptacle, then taking them out of it and putting them back on her fingers, while she chattered, describing the advantages of a furnished villa at Antiniano, to be preferred because they were some Italian friends of Leslie's who desired to let it, was in her inmost speaking to the inmost of Gerald. The hardly self-conscious meanings within her bosom made as if an extension of her in the air, comparable to the halo around the moon on a misty night; and this atomized radiance had language, it said: "Oh, to draw your head down where it desires to be! To warm and comfort you! To be to you everything you need! I lean to you, I cling to you like a vine with every winding tendril. But I am so afraid of you! so afraid! I am of common, you of finest, clay. How can I give into any hand so much power to hurt me? If I were to dare it, then find I could not make you happy, your disappointment would be my heart-break, and my tragedy might spoil your life. But this know, Gerald, dearer to me for having been so unhappy, nothing my life could contain without you would seem to me so good as life with you in a poor workman's attic, under falling snow, and I to make it home for you!"

While two souls thus trembled and gravitated toward each other, bathing in each other's light, it is almost mortifying to have to show to what degree that which took place at the surface was different and inferior; to what degree the fine abandon of words spoken and actions performed in thought was replaced by a shivering prudence keeping guard on one side, and on the other a deplorable timidity trying awkwardly to be bold.

Heard through the door, the scene that ensued between these two curious lovers, when they had worked their way through preliminaries and come to the point at which they had parted after the day at Vallombrosa, must particularly have seemed lacking in purple and poetry; for then the soft light in Aurora's eyes would not have been seen, nor the deep flash in Gerald's, as he by a point scored felt himself nearer to the goal.

"Now, what made you run off like that, I want to know," Aurora asked in the flowing American which she reserved for real friends and sincere moments, "after you'd said when you left me at the door, 'Good-by till to-morrow'?"

"My reasons were several, all simple," he replied, with a faun-look up from the corner of his eye, which watched her expression. "First, I wished to flee from that newspaper article-dreadful!-till the danger of any reference to it in my hearing was greatly reduced. Then, aside from a slight natural need to recover myself, I felt I must for manners' sake allow a little time to pass before I approached you again on the subject of marrying me. One scruples to make himself a bore. It therefore would be better not to see you, and, in order not to see you, better not to be in town. Lastly, Auroretta, I conceived the infernal ambition to make you suffer from absence the minutest fraction of what I should suffer myself."

"Don't say a word! I've missed you so my bones felt hollowed out!"

"Reflect then, my dearest, upon the sufferings you are preparing for yourself if you haven't a kinder answer for me than the other day to the same question. All the reasons you gave for saying no were such bad ones, founded upon a bad opinion of me. I can't take your refusal for final, don't you see, without first being sure I have convinced you at least that you are wrong in thinking me a fish or a mudturtle, and wrong in attributing a lack of intelligence to me which could betray me into confusing great things with little, little with great."

"Oh, Gerald, you oughtn't to keep on trying! I do wish you wouldn't! No! Don't say any more about it!" she pleaded in weak anguish. "You oughtn't to go on battering against the little bit of common sense I've got left."

"Common sense! I advise you to speak of it!" he affected to jeer, remarkably braced by her misery. "Common sense, as represented by a decent concern for your good name, ought to prompt you enter as quickly as you can into an engagement with me. I met our dear Doctor Batoni in the street yesterday on my way home from the station, and he amiably asked how was my *fidanzata*, or betrothed? It was a difficult moment for me, because he told me that *you* had told him you were that."

"I told him nothing of the sort! I said I was your friend, in French."

"A friend, in French, may mean a good deal. Save your reputation, dear; I give you the chance."

"What nonsense! I explained to him as well as I could, in French, that I was there taking care of you because I was your friend."

"You are hopelessly compromised. Look to me to set you right."

"Gerald, I shall do nothing of the kind."

"Ah, I see that your prejudices hold firm. I was afraid of it when I came." His mask of

flippancy slipped for a moment; deep feeling made his voice uncertain. "I am not that hardy and masterful man, Aurora, who could break them down and clutch you above their ruin. But you will find me very faithful to a hope—which, in fact, to relinquish now would be beyond what I can expect of my courage." He resumed bluntness. "I told Vincent he might look for my return to-morrow."

"No, sir!" she came out with lively directness. "You're not going back to Leghorn if I can help it! I-I have a plan."

"You have a plan? From your face I am afraid not a good one. You look so dubious."

"Perhaps it isn't a good one, but it's the only way I can see. Listen." She looked down at her hands, and kept him waiting. "One evening last winter at a party a young Italian naval officer got talking to me in a green bower under a pink paper lantern away from the rest. Something in the atmosphere, I guess, made him want to talk to somebody of his love-affairs, and he chose me, though we scarcely knew each other. He told me he had been very much in love with an American girl, but they hadn't the money to marry on or the hope of ever having it-like Brenda and Manlio at first. Yet they couldn't keep apart, and so they just became engaged, knowing it couldn't end as an engagement is supposed to do. In that way they could see each other all they wanted, and be seen together without anybody making a remark. And then when she was obliged to go home and it had to end, it looked merely like a broken engagement."

"And you propose—"

"We might try it, Gerald. Then if it didn't work well, if I found I was all the time outraging your sensibilities, and you hurting my feelings, we'd call it off. In any case we'd give ourselves plenty of time to realize our foolishness. And you'd promise that when the time came you'd go like a lamb, with a pleasant face, not saving up anything against me. Make up your mind, now, that it'll have to be a long, *long* engagement—if we don't repent and break it off inside a week. But as it seems so likely we will, let's don't tell the others right off, Gerald; not, anyhow, for a week or ten days."

"Admired Aurora, it surely is the most immoral proposition that ever came from fair lady so well brought up as you!" cried Gerald, in a proper state of excitement. But yet, such were his limitations, nothing in any proportion with the throbbing fire inside him, the immensity of his incredulous joy, appeared on his outside, where merely the mollified lines of his face gave him a look of greater youth, and his cool-colored eyes let through a faint testimony of the inward light. "I accept without hesitation. I promise whatever you ask. From this moment onward we are *fidanzati*, then. And, my blessed Auroretta, you who are such a hand at calling names, have your servant's permission to call him all the names you can think of that signify an ineffable blunderer on the day when you succeed in freeing yourself from him!"

Many more things were said, not worth recording. But at last devout silence reigned. In the twilight room, with all the bad pictures and trivial ornamentation, to shut out the offense of which he had once closed his eyes, Gerald now closed them again to concentrate more perfectly upon the rapture of feeling Aurora's shoulder beneath his cheek.

CHAPTER XXIV

The servant who opened the door for Leslie on this softly brilliant June morning, being well accustomed to admitting her, obligingly anticipated her question, "Are the ladies at home?"

"The *signorina* is in the *salottino*," he said. From which Leslie understood that the person whom she chiefly had come to see was out. It did not really matter, for she had time to wait. Aurora was likely to come back for lunch.

She released the man from attendance by a little wave of her hand, "Never mind announcing me!" and directed her footsteps toward the tall white-and-gold door standing partly open.

On her way to it she picked up off the floor a small lawn handkerchief.

The ball-room impressed her anew as being very vast, very empty, furnished almost solely as it was by the sparkling chandeliers, every pendant of which to-day was gay with reflections of the green and flowery and sun-washed outdoors.

She turned toward the *salottino*, remotely wondering by what chance Estelle was preferring it to the favorite red and green sitting-room upstairs. The *salottino* had utility when a party was going on, but to sit and embroider or study French surrounded by all those fountains of love....

A sharp bark preceded the tumbling out through the *salottino* door of a little white mop on feet. Upon recognizing Leslie, this performed evolutions expressive of great joy.

She had stopped to pat the excited little swirl of silk when Estelle came forward to see who was there.

With delighted good mornings the women exchanged the foreign salute, which Leslie had adopted and Estelle submitted to, a mere touching of cheeks while the lips kiss the air.

They sat down on the rococo settee to talk, Leslie, quick of eye, wondering what had happened to give Estelle that unusual air, an air of-no, it was indefinable. Excitement had a share in it, and possibly chagrin, and, it almost seemed, exaltation. The chief thing about it, however, was that she was trying to conceal it; doing her best, but it was a poor best, to appear natural. Leslie graciously allowed her to suppose she was succeeding, and entered at once upon the reason for her early call.

"I really think, Estelle, that the villa at Antiniano would suit Aurora. As for you, I am positive, my dear, that you would adore it. It is a little out of the thick of things, but has a very fine view of the sea, also a very pretty garden. Certain conveniences, of course, it hasn't, but, then, you mustn't expect those of an Italian villa. I saw Madame Rossi yesterday, and she said she wished you would make an excursion to Antiniano to see for yourselves. She is sure you would be charmed. One request she would make: that the peasant family be allowed to continue in their little corner of the house, where they wouldn't be the least in your way, and then that the little donkey should be allowed to remain in the stable. But in return you could use him, she said."

"Ride him?"

"Yes, or harness him. For the country, why not, my dear? They are ever so strong little beasts."

Estelle began to laugh, presumably at the picture of Aurora on donkey-back, or, with herself, exhilarating the country-side by the vision of them drawn in a donkey-cart. Leslie joined in her merriment, but expostulatingly, and, warned by a note in Estelle's laugh, watched her with suspicion while it developed into a nervous cackle. She saw her cover her eyes with one hand, and with the other vainly feel in her pocket. She was crying. Leslie tendered the little handkerchief found on the floor, and knew then that it had dried tears before on that same day. She waited, tactfully silent, merely placing a condoling hand over her friend's.

"I might as well tell you," Estelle got out, when her crying fit permitted her to speak, "that Aurora isn't going to take any villa at Antiniano this summer.... She's gone away."

"Gone away? What do you mean?" asked Leslie, surprised into a very complete blankness of expression.

"What I say." And in her incalculable frame of mind Estelle again was laughing. "Oh, I don't know which to do, whether to laugh or cry!" she explained, with eyes bright at once from laughter and from tears. "One moment I laugh, next moment I cry. I feel as if I were walking in my sleep. I guess what I need is a nerve-pill."

"You say that Aurora has gone away. Where?"

"Where Gerald pleases, I guess. She's gone with him."

"With Gerald? Now, my dear friend, please explain. You laugh, you cry. You say Aurora has gone away with Gerald. Please collect yourself and tell me what it means. 'Gone away with Gerald.' How do you mean gone away with him?"

"I mean they have eloped, or as good as."

"No, no; people don't elope when there is neither an inconvenient husband, nor unamenable parents, nor any possible reason why they should not have each other if they wish to."

"I wonder what you would call it, then. As late as twelve o'clock last night I didn't know a thing about it, and this morning early they left together in a carriage, with her trunk strapped on the back."

Leslie lifted her hands to her temples and pressed them as if to keep her head from a

dangerous expansion with the size of the new idea that must find a home there.

"So it was in earnest!" she said aloud, yet as if speaking to herself. "Mother has won her bet, and I have lost. Well,"—she tossed her head and faced Estelle,—“I am glad of it. We knew, of course, that there was something, and we felt that nothing nicer could happen than that they should make a match of it. Mother prophesied they would. But I did not believe it. I was afraid of Gerald—that disposition in him to consider too finely, to halt on the brink, that negative, renunciatory way he has settled into. I thought the thing would end in mere philandering. I am glad”—she threw the weight of conviction on the word,—“glad it hasn’t! I don’t see, my dear Estelle, what you can find to cry about.”

"Is that the way it strikes you?"

"My dear, I couldn’t say which I thought the luckier, Gerald to get Aurora, or Aurora to get Gerald."

"You surprise me. To me it seems just about the riskiest combination that could be imagined. I have felt it all along. Those two have no more in common, I have said, than a bird and a fish."

"Nonsense, my dear girl! Nonsense!"

"I have heard him get so impatient with her because simply she didn’t pronounce a word right. I’ve seen him so annoyed he nearly trembled trying to choke it down."

"But did she mind? I mean, his impatience?"

"I can’t say she did; but—"

"There you have it. They are marvelously suited. Listen and let me talk to you for your comfort. This, do you hear, is exactly the most delightful thing that could have happened. Haven’t you noticed that complex natures are rather given to uniting with simple ones, and finding happiness with them? An artist—how often!—marries his model, a philosopher marries a peasant."

"Go on!" sighed Estelle. "Go on! I love you for making me feel better!" Her eyes moistened again in an almost luxurious melancholy.

"One of the reasons for mother and me wishing for this consummation was the broadening of life it would afford Gerald. Gerald doesn’t think about money. Aurora’s money, all the same, will do a lot for him in making possible his getting away from here, where the truth is he stagnates. Then, too, she will cure him of his morbidness. He sees red if one so much as breathes the suggestion that his art is morbid. But of course it is."

"Aurora said they might go to live in Paris, because she thought it would be good for his art."

"Now that’s what I want to hear about. Go on and tell me what Aurora said and what happened between midnight and their extraordinary elopement, as you call it. But, first of all, why, in the name of common sense, did they elope? From what did they elope?"

"From me, I guess. I don’t see what else. Oh, yes, I do. From the talk there would be. But principally, I suspect, he hurried her into it to make sure of her, for she, too, had her moments of doubting the wisdom of what she was doing. That much I know. They had only been engaged two weeks, and all that time I didn’t even know they were engaged. I hadn’t been nice about Gerald, I feel bound to confess, so she thought best not to tell me. She didn’t want to hear how I would take it, we’ve been so used to speaking our minds to each other. He came oftener than ever and stayed longer, till it got so I made a point of getting up and making an excuse to leave the room. It was my way of being spiteful. But Nell didn’t take it up with me in private, as I expected she would. They were tickled to death to have me leave the room, I can see now. She went around the house singing an Easter carol and fixing flowers in the vases, with a look of cheerfulness apart from me that made her seem like a stranger. I was pretty sore, I can tell you, but I wouldn’t speak of it. I don’t know how I thought it would end. Funny, I can’t remember how everything looked so short a time ago as yesterday, but I know I was eaten up with mean thoughts. I went to bed last night thinking to myself, ‘Well, Nell Goodwin, if you think I’m going to stand much more of this, you’re mistaken. There’ll be some plain talk before long.’ And I fell asleep. First thing I knew I was awake, looking to see who’d come into my room. And there was Nell in her night-dress, holding her hand round the candle so it wouldn’t shine in my eyes. I simply can’t tell you what it was like,—the candle lighting nothing but her made her seem like a vision in the middle of a glory. Nobody can know how fond I am of Nell, what friends we’ve been since little bits of girls. All I could think of was that she’d come to make up with me, she couldn’t wait another minute. It would have been just like her. And while I waited for her to speak first, I thought with my heart just melting what a lovely big thing she is, with that sort of fair look to her neck, and those warm cheeks, and something so kind about her from head to foot. She put down the candle and, instead of going into explanations, bent over and gave me a good hug. And I said, hugging back: ‘You better had, you horrid thing! You better had!’ Then she sat down on the bed. ‘Hat,’ she said, ‘I was going to do a mean thing, but I’m not going to do it. I was going to slip away without a word, but I’m going to tell you the whole story. I’m going to marry Gerald,’ she said.

"Then she went on to tell me, and what do you think, I didn’t say one word in objection, not one! Because I could see she was dead in love, and what was the use except to spoil her happiness, and I didn’t want to. She told me how they’d decided it would be just as well not to wait, but take a short cut. If they stayed in Florence, she said, she’d feel they must have a big wedding and ask all their friends, and then she should have to have a trousseau; it would all take lots of time, and Gerald would so hate the fuss and the chatter. So they’d made up their minds to go off to Leghorn without a word to anybody,—whose business is it anyhow but their own?—and be married just as soon as it could be done, where they wouldn’t get so much as the echo of any remarks on their haste or the way they preferred to do. She’ll be staying

with Mrs. Johns till the ceremony. She said she should write your mother from there. Then she showed me Gerald's ring that she'd been wearing on a chain round her neck where I wouldn't see it, and she talked about Gerald's wonderfulness. She's perfectly wrapped up in him. All I hope is he appreciates it."

"His inducing her to elope with him would seem to indicate some warmth of feeling on his part. The suggestion can hardly have come from her."

"You're right. I guess it's as bad with him as with her. She talked about the wonderfulness of his love, such as she never could have believed, and never could deserve. She said she could be happy with Gerald in a garret that let the snow leak in. Oh, they're both crazy. What do you think she gave as one reason for this haste? 'Life is short,' she said, 'and love is long!' Gerald must have said it to her before she said it to me, but what do you think of it? 'Life is short and love is long!'"

"Do you mean"-asked Leslie, with the least touch of severity,-"that I ought to share in a cynical view of that saying? I can't, my dear Estelle. There are my father and mother, you know. In their quiet way they bear out the idea that love may be as long as life."

"Yes, of course," said Estelle hurriedly, with a faint air of shame. "My father and mother, too, make a united couple."

"My belief is that when two people marry who are in love as they ought to be, and who in addition are good-By good I think I mean people-" Leslie, with her look of wisdom beyond her years, paused to take a survey of life, "-people who have a sense of the other person's rights, and, as a matter of heart, not principle, feel the other's claims just a little more strongly than their own-in the case of such people, when the passion they marry on dies out with their growing older, as we generally see it do, something takes its place that deserves the name of love every bit as much."

"Aurora is good," said Estelle, from her soul. "You would never know how good unless you had stood in need of kindness."

"Gerald is good, too," said Leslie, with an effect of more impartiality but no less positiveness. "He would disdain to be anything else."

"What is wrong with me is that I'm selfish, I guess," said Estelle, looking contrite, "and don't like having to give her up to him, after all the beautiful things we'd planned together. What I ought to feel is nothing but thankfulness for her having such a chance of happiness, and then thankfulness for all she did, trying to make up for her desertion."

Without transition, Estelle went back to the story of the past night. "You can imagine there wasn't any more sleep for that spell. I got up, and we went to her room, where she had all the lights lighted and was in the middle of packing her trunk. She only took one, and about a quarter of her things. Gerald's going to design wonderful costumes for her, the style he prefers. I could see she's ready to do just anything to please him. I'd already noticed how she'd altered her way of doing her hair, but wasn't smart enough to recognize the signs!... While she was at work packing she planned for my summer,-that I'm to invite Mademoiselle Durand to go traveling with me, so I can improve my French at the same time as give that poor hard-working creature a real vacation and treat. Then when they go to Venice, she wants me to join them, and the three of us have a regular jamboree. Then next winter, after I've got home, she wants me to go to Colorado to visit the Grand Cañon and see the great sights of my native country before settling down again in East Boston. She made me a present of Ami."

"Ami?"

"I've changed his name from Busteretto. Don't you like it better? Little Tweetums! He's the only darling I've got left!" She pressed a kiss on the warm top of his head. "She made me a present of all the clothes and things she wasn't taking with her. She made me a present of everything in this house that we didn't find in it when we took it-turned it all over to me to do what I please with. And I'm sure I don't know what I shall do with it all unless I set up a store. Anything you see and think you'd like to have, please say so."

"She gave you all these things? Do you mean it?" asked Leslie, surprised despite what she had already known of Aurora.

"Yes, and along with the things, of course, the responsibility of settling up everything, dismissing the servants, sending Livvy back to New York. Such a job! Luckily, there's no hurry; the lease doesn't expire until October. When you came I'd been sort of looking round. I was just wondering what to do about this Fountain of Love. Nell paid a frightful lot for these four panels. I'd been trying to see if they could be carefully peeled off and the wall behind restored, and while I was looking the sight of that winter scene broke me all up. It doesn't tell a very cheerful tale, you know, this series of pictures. After what I'd just been through, saying good-by to them, it worked on me like a bad omen."

"Don't be foolish. Then you saw Gerald, too, before they left?"

"Yes. I could have done without, but she'd have been hurt. So I shook hands, and managed to wish him joy. He was nice, but, then, Gerald always is that. I've never for a moment said anything different. He said he wanted me to feel that I hadn't lost a sister, but acquired a brother. Just as they were driving off I remembered something, and called after Nell, 'What about your portrait?' for I couldn't think she meant to give me that along with the rest. Gerald said before she could speak, 'Take it away!' And Nell said right off, 'Oh, yes. Keep it, Hattie; keep it!' That lovely portrait he painted of her! I don't see how she could bear to part with it. But, of course, now she has him she can have as many portraits as she wants. Come and tell me what you think, whether it would be safe to pack it, frame and all, or better to unframe it, or, better still, to take the canvas off the stretcher and roll it."

Accordingly, they left the room of the cupids and garlands, traversed the vasty ballroom where the chandeliers, like two huge ear-rings, divided up the light into twinkling diamond

and rainbow showers, entered the drawing-room of the dignified sixteenth-century chairs, which from the first had suffered an undeserved neglect, and passed thence into the familiar parlor of the multitudinous baubles and the grand piano and the portrait; performing in the contrary direction the pilgrimage on which, at a period which seemed so immemorably far as to have become legendary, Gerald had followed Aurora walking before him with a light.

They stood beneath the portrait, and with the image present to their minds of painter and sitter hastening on their way to be wed, saw this equivocal masterpiece with a difference. Not Aurora alone looked forth from the canvas,—throat of lily, cheek of rose, heaven-blue eyes, smile and ringlets of immitigable sunniness. Gerald, self-depicted in every subtle brush-stroke, looked, too.

“It takes sober, solid, careful people to be interesting when they commit a rashness,” thought Leslie. Then, with a little surge of envy in her well-regulated breast, “To be swept off one’s feet,” she thought, “how educative it must be, how enlarging.”

But a doubt fell, shadow-like, across her vision of future fortunes. If a person never found it possible to fall in love with those who fell in love with her, would it necessarily follow that the Some One she should someday love would regard her with coldness?

Estelle gazed upward at the portrait with a wistful, well-nigh solemn look. Not being able, hampered by a dog in her arms, to clasp her hands, she expressed the same impulse by clasping the dog close to her breast in token that her wishes for her dearest friend’s good were more than wishes, were a prayer.

She felt a hand laid lightly on her forearm.

“You needn’t be afraid,” said Leslie, “they’ll be happy.”

THE END

[Transcriber’s Note: As originally published, this book had two consecutive chapters labeled as “CHAPTER XV.” Chapter numbers have been resequenced in this text.]

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK AURORA THE MAGNIFICENT ***

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