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THE ROYAL END

A Romance

By Henry Harland

Author Of "The Cardinal's Snuff-Box"; "My Friend Prospero," Etc.

London: Hutchinson & Co. Paternoster Row

1909

THE ROYAL END





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CONTENTS

[PART FIRST](#)

[PART SECOND](#)

[PART THIRD](#)

[PART FOURTH](#)

[PART FIFTH](#)

[PART SIXTH](#)

[PART SEVENTH](#)

PART FIRST

THE ROYAL END

I

BALZATORE, by many coquetries, had long been trying to attract their attention. At last he had succeeded.

"You have an admirer," Ruth, with a gleam, remarked to her companion. "Mercy, how he's ogling you."

"Yes," answered Lucilla Dor, untroubled, in that contented, caressing voice of hers, while, her elbow on the table, with the "languid grace," about which Ruth chaffed her a good deal, she pensively nibbled a fig. "The admiration is reciprocal. What a handsome fellow he is!"

And her soft blue eyes smiled straight into Balzatore's eager brown ones.

Quivering with emotion, Balzatore sprang up, and in another second would have bounded to her side.

"Sit down, sir; where are you going?" sternly interposed Bertram. Placed with his back towards the ladies, he was very likely unaware of their existence.

Balzatore sat down, but he gave his head a toss that clearly signified his opinion of the restraint put upon him: senselessly conventional, monstrously annoying. And he gave Lucilla Dor a look. Disappointment spoke in it, homage, dogged—'tis a case for saying so—dogged tenacity of purpose. "Never fear," it promised, "I'll find an opportunity yet."

He found it, sure enough, some twenty minutes later.

II

Ruth and Lucilla had been dining at the Lido, at the new hotel there, I forget its name, the only decent hotel, in a sandy garden near the Stabilimento. They had dined in the air, of course, on the terrace, whence they could watch the sunset burn and die over Venice, and the moon come up out of the Adriatic. Balzatore had been dining with Bertram at a neighbouring table.

But now, her eyes intently lifted, as in prayer, Lucilla began to adjust her veil.

"We can't stop here nibbling figs forever," she premised, with the drawl, whimsically plaintive, that she is apt to assume in her regretful moods. "I think it's time to return to our mosquitoes."

So they paid their bill, and set off, through the warm night and the moonlight and the silence, down the wide avenue of plane-trees that leads from the sea to the lagoon. In the moonlight and the silence, they were themselves silent at first, walking slowly, feeling the pleasant solemnity of things. Then, all at once, Lucilla softly sighed.

"Poor Byron," she said, as from the depths of a pious reverie.

"Byron?" wondered Ruth, called perhaps from reveries of her own. "Why?"

"He used to come here to ride," explained Lucilla, in a breaking voice.

I'm afraid Ruth tittered. Afterwards they were silent again, the silence of the night reasserting itself, and holding them like music, till, by and by, their progress ended at the landing-stage where they had left their gondola.

"But what has become of the wretched thing?" asked Lucilla, looking blankly this way and that. For the solitary gondola tied up there wasn't theirs. She turned vaguely to the men in charge of it, meditating enquiries: when one of them, with the intuition and the aplomb of his race, took the words out of her mouth.

"Pardon, Lordessa," he said, touching his hat. "If you are seeking the boatmen who brought you here, they went back as soon as they had put you ashore."

Lucilla eyed him coldly, distrustfully.

"Went back?" she doubted. "But I told them to wait."

The man shrugged, a shrug of sympathy, of fatalism. "Ech!" he said. "They could not have understood."

Lucilla frowned, weighing credibilities; then her brow cleared, as in sudden illumination.

"But I did not pay them," she remembered, and cited the circumstance as conclusive.

The man, however, made light of it. "Ech!" he said, with genial confidence. "They belong to your hotel. You will pay them to-morrow."

"And, anyhow, my dear," suggested Ruth, intervening, "as they're nowhere in mortal sight..."

"Don't you see that this is a trick?" Lucilla stopped her, in a heated whisper. "What you call collusion. They're lurking somewhere round a corner, so that we shall have to engage these creatures, and be let in for two fares."

"Dear me," murmured Ruth, admiring. "Who would have thought them so imaginative?"

Lucilla sniffed. "Oh, they're Italians," she scornfully pointed out. "Ah, well, the gods love a cheerful victim. You will do," she said to the man. "Take us to the Britannia." And she motioned to Ruth to place herself under the tent.

But the man, touching his hat again, stood, very deferentially, with bent back, so as to bar the way.

"Pardon, Lordessa," he said, "so many excuses—we are private;" while his glance, not devoid of vainglory, embracing himself and his colleague, invited attention to the spruce nautical liveries they were wearing, and to the silver badges on their arms.

For a moment Lucilla Dor stared stonily at him. "Bother!" she pronounced, with fervour, under her breath. Then her blue eyes gazed, wide and wistful, at the moonlit waters, beyond which the lamps along the Riva

twinkled pallid derision. "How are we to get to Venice?" she demanded helplessly of the universe.

"We must go back for the night to the hotel here," said Ruth.

"With no luggage? Two women alone? Never heard of such a thing," scoffed Lucilla.

"Well then," Ruth submitted, "I believe the lagoon is nowhere very deep. We might try to ford it."

"Oh, if you think it's a laughing matter!" Lucilla, with an ominous lilt, threw out.

Meanwhile the two gondoliers had been conferring together; they conducted their conference with so much vehemence, one might have fancied they were quarelling, but that was only the gondolier of it; and now, he who had heretofore remained in the background, stepped forward, and in a tone, all Italian, of respectfully benevolent protection, addressed Lucilla.

"Scusi, Madama, we will ask our Signore to let you come with us. There is plenty of room. Only, we must wait till he arrives."

"Ah," sighed she, with relief. But in a minute, "Who is your Signore?" caution prompted her to ask.

"He is a signorino," the man replied, and I'm sure he thought the reply enlightening. "He is very good-natured. He will let you come."

And it happened just at this point, while they stood there hesitating, that Balzatore found his opportunity.

III

One heard a tattoo of scampering paws, a sibilance of swift breathing; and a cold wet nose, followed by a warm furry head, was thrust from behind under Lucilla's hand.

Startled, she gave an inevitable little feminine cry, and half turned round—to recognise her late admirer. "Hello, old fellow—is this you?" she greeted him, patting his shoulder, stroking his silky ears. "You take one rather by surprise, you know. Yes, you are a very beautiful, nice, friendly collie, all the same; and I never saw so handsome a coat, or so splendid a tail, or such soulful poetic eyes. I am very glad to renew your acquaintance." Balzatore waved his splendid tail as if it were a banner; rubbed his jowl against Lucilla's knee; caracoled and pranced before her, to display his graces; cocked his head, and blinked with self-satisfaction; sat down on his haunches, and, tongue lolling from his black muzzle, panted exultantly, "There! You see how cleverly I have brought it off."

"Ecco. That is our Signore's dog," announced the man who had promised intercession. "He himself will not be far behind."

At the word, appeared, approaching, the tall and slender figure of Bertram, to whom, in a sudden contrapuntal outburst, both gondoliers began to speak Venetian. They spoke rapidly, turbulently almost, with many modulations, with lavish gestures, vividly, feelingly, each exposed the ladies' case.

Bertram, his grey eyes smiling (you know that rather deep-in, flickering smile of goodwill of theirs), removed his panama hat and said, in perfectly English English, with the accent of a man praying a particular favour, "I beg you to let them take you to your hotel."

The next instant, the gondoliers steadying their craft, Lucilla murmuring what she could by way of thanks, he had helped them aboard, and, after a quick order to the men, was bowing god-speed to them from the landing-stage, while one hand, by the collar, held captive a tugging, impetuous Balzatore.

"But you?" exclaimed Lucilla, puzzled. "Do you not also go to Venice?"

"Oh, they will come back for me," said Bertram, lightly.

She gave a slight movement to her head, slight but decisive, a movement that implied finality.

"We can't think of such a thing," in the tone of an ultimatum she declared. "It's extremely good of you to offer us a lift—but we simply can't accept it if it means inconvenience to yourself."

And Bertram, of course, at once ceded the point.

Bowing again, "Thank you very much," he said. "I wasn't sure we shouldn't be in your way."

He took his seat, keeping Balzatore restive between his knees.

IV

The gondoliers bent rhythmically to their oars, the gondola went gently plump-plump, splash-splash, over the smooth water, stirring faint intermittent breezes; far and wide the lagoon lay dim and blue in a fume of moonlight, silent, secret, even somehow almost sinister in its untranslatable suggestions; and before them rose the domes and palaces of Venice, pale and luminous, with purple blacknesses of shadow, unreal, mysterious, dream-compelling, as a city built of cloud.

"Perilous seas in faery lands forlorn," Lucilla—need I mention?—quoted to herself, and if she didn't quote it aloud, that, I suppose, was due to the presence of Bertram. She and Ruth sat close together, with their faces towards the prow, where, like a battle-axe clearing their way of unseen foes, the ferro swayed and gleamed; he, sidewise, removed a little to their left. And all three were mum as strangers in a railway carriage. But, like strangers in a railway carriage, they were no doubt more or less automatically, subconsciously, taking one another in, observing, classifying. "I wonder whether he's really English," Lucilla thought. He spoke and dressed like an Englishman, to be sure, yet so many Italians nowadays do that; and, with a private gondola, he presumably lived in Venice; and there was something—in the aquiline cut of his features?—in his pointed beard?—that seemed foreign. "Anyhow, he's a gentleman," she gratefully reflected; and thereat, her imagination taking wing, "Suppose he had been an ogre or a bounder?—or a flamboyant native lady-killer?—or a little fat oily *crafaud de Juif*? Besides, he has nice eyes."

About the nationality of his guests, Bertram, of course, could entertain no question, nor about their place in the world; in their frocks, their hats, their poise of head, turn of hand, in the general unself-conscious selfassurance of their bearing, they wore their social history for daws to peck at; one's eye, as it rested on

them, instinctively supplied a background of Mayfair, with a perspective of country houses. A thing that teased him, however, was an absurd sense that he had somewhere seen Lucilla before, seen her, known her, though he perfectly knew he hadn't. Her youthfully mature beauty, her bigness, plumpness, smoothness, her blondeur; those deceptively child-like blue eyes of hers, with their superficial effect of wondering innocence, and their interior sparkle of observant, experienced humour, under those improbably dark and regular brows—such delicate and equal crescents as to avow themselves the creation of her pencil; the glossy abundance of her light-brown hair; her full, soft, pleasure-loving mouth and chin, their affluent good-nature tempered by the danger you divined of a caustic wit in the upward perk of her rather short nose; the whole easygoing, indolent, sensuous—sociable, comfortable, indulgent—watchful, critical, ironic—aura of the woman: no, he told himself, she was not a person he could ever have known and forgotten, she was too distinctly differentiated an individual. Then how account for that teasing sense of recognition? He couldn't account for it, and he couldn't shake it off.

Of Ruth (egregious circumstance) he was aware at the time of noticing no more than, vaguely, that the young girl under Lucilla's chaperonage was pretty and pleasant-looking!

All three sat as mum as strangers in a railway carriage, but I can't think it was the mumness of embarrassment. I can hardly imagine a woman less shy than Lucilla, a man less shy than Bertram; embarrassment is an ill it were difficult to conceive befalling either of them. No, I conjecture it was simply the mumness of people who, having said all that was essential, were sufficiently unembarrassed not to feel that they must, nevertheless, bother to say something more. And when, for example, Bertram, having unwittingly relaxed his grip upon Balzatore's collar, that irrepressible bundle of life escaped to Lucilla's side and recommenced his blandishments, they spoke readily and easily enough.

"You mustn't let him bore you," Bertram said, with a kind of tentative concern.

"On the contrary," said Lucilla, "he delights me. He's so friendly, and so handsome."

"He's not so handsome as he thinks he is," said Bertram. "He's the vainest coxcomb of my acquaintance."

"Oh, all dogs are vain," said Lucilla; "that is what establishes the fellow-feeling between them and us."

To such modicum of truth as this proposition may not have been without, Bertram's quiet laugh seemed a tribute.

"I thought he was a collie," Lucilla continued, in a key of doubt. "But isn't he rather big for a collie? Is he an Italian breed?"

"He's a most unlikely hybrid," Bertram answered. "He's half a collie, and half a Siberian wolf-hound."

"A wolf-hound?" cried Lucilla, a little alarmed perhaps at the way in which she'd been making free with him; and she fell back, to put him at arm's length. "Mercy, how savage that sounds!"

"Yes," acknowledged Bertram; "but he's a living paradox. The wolf-hound blood has turned to ethereal mildness in his veins. And he's a very perfect coward. I've seen him run from a goose, and in the house my cat holds him under a reign of terror."

Lucilla's alarm was stilled.

"Poor darling, did they abuse you? No, they shouldn't," she said, in a voice of deep commiseration, pressing Balzatore's head to her breast.

But the gondola, impelled by its two stalwart oarsmen, was making excellent speed. They had passed the sombre mass of San Servolo, the boscage, silver and sable in moonlight and shadow, of the Public Gardens; and now, with San Giorgio looming at their left, were threading an anchored fleet of steamers and fishing-smacks, towards the entrance of the Grand Canal: whence, already, they could hear the squalid caterwauling of those rival boatloads of beggars, who, on the vain theory of their being musicians, are suffered nightly, before the congeries of hotels, to render the hours hideous and hateful.

And then, in no time, they had reached the water-steps of the Britannia, and a gold-laced Swiss was aiding mesdames to alight.

"Good night—and thank you so very much," said Lucilla. "We should have had to camp at the Lido if you hadn't come to our rescue."

"I am only too glad to have been of the slightest use," Bertram assured her.

"Good night," said Ruth with a little nod and smile—the first sign she had made him, the first word she had spoken.

He lifted his hat. Balzatore, fore paws on the seat, tail aloft, head thrust forward, gave a yelp of reluctant valediction (or was it indignant protest and recall?). The ladies vanished through the great doorway; the incident was closed.

V

The incident was closed;—and, in a way, for Bertram, as the event proved, it had yet to begin. His unknown "guests of hazard" had departed, disappeared; but they had left something behind them that was as real as it was immaterial, a sense of fluttering garments, of faint fleeting perfumes, of delicate and mystic femininity. The incident was closed, and now, as the strong ashen sweeps bore him rapidly homewards between the unseen palaces of the Grand Canal, it began to re-enact itself; and a hundred details, a hundred graces, unheeded at the moment, became vivid to him. Two women, standing in a rain of moonlight, by the landing-stage at the Lido, brightly silhouetted against the dim lagoon; the sudden tumultuous exordium of his men; his own five words with Lucilla, and the high-bred musical English voice in which she had answered him; then their presence, gracious and distinguished, there beside him in the bend of the boat,—their cool, summery toilets, the entire fineness and finish of their persons; and the wide, moonlit water, and the play of the moonlight on the ripples born of their progress, and the wide silence, punctured, as in a sort of melodious pattern, by the recurrent dip and drip of the oars; it all came back, but with an atmosphere, a fragrance, but with overtones of suggestion, even of sentiment, that he had missed. It all came back, unfolding itself as a

continuous picture; and what therein, of all, came back with the most insistent clearness was the appearance of the young girl who had so mutely effaced herself in her companion's shadow, and whom, at the time (egregious circumstance), he had just vaguely noticed as pretty and pleasant-looking. This came back with insistent, with disturbing clearness, a visible thing of light in his memory; and he saw, with a kind of bewilderment at his former blindness, that her prettiness was a prettiness full of distinctive character, and that if she was "pleasant-looking" it was with a pleasantness as remote as possible from insipid sweetness. Even in her figure, which was so far typical as to be slender and girlish, he could perceive something that marked it as singular, a latent elasticity of fibre, a hint, as it were, of high energies quiescent; but when he considered her face, he surprised himself by actually muttering aloud, "Upon my word, it's the oddest face I think I have ever seen." Odd—and pretty? Yes, pretty, or more than pretty, he was quite confident of that; yet pretty notwithstanding an absolutely defiant irregularity of features. Or stay—irregularity? No, unconventionality, rather: for the features in question were so congruous and coherent with one another, so sequent in their correlation, as to establish a regularity of their own. The discreet but resolute salience of her jaw and chin, the assertive lines of her brow and nose, the crisp chiselling of her lips, the size and shape of her eyes, and over all the crinkling masses of her dark hair—unconventional as you will, he said, not attributable to any ready-made category, but everywhere expressing design, unity of design. "High energies quiescent," he repeated. "You discern them in her face as in her figure; a capacity for emotions and enthusiasms; a temperament that would feel things with intensity. And yet," he reflected, perpending his image of her with leisurely deliberation, "what in her face strikes one first, I think, what's nearest to the surface, is a kind of sceptic humour,—as if she took the world with a grain of salt, and were having a quiet laugh at it in the back of her mind. And then her colouring," he again surprised himself by muttering aloud. But when could he have observed her colouring, he wondered, when, where? Not in the colour-obliterating moonlight, of course. Where, then? Ah, suddenly he remembered. He saw her standing under the electric lamps on the steps of the Britannia. "Good night," she said, giving him a quick little nod, a brief little smile. And he saw how red her mouth was, and how red her blood, beneath the translucent whiteness of her skin, and how in the glow of her brown eyes there shone a red undergleam, and how in her crinkling masses of dark hair there were dark-red lights....

The incident was closed, in its substance, really, as matter-of-fact a little incident as one could fancy; but the savour of it lingered, persisted, kept recurring, and was sweet and poignant, like a savour of romance.

"I suppose I shall never see them again," was his unwilling but stoical conclusion, as the gondola shot through the water-gate of Cà Bertradoni. "I wonder who they are."

VI

He saw them again, however, no later than the next afternoon, and learned who they were. He was seated with dark, lantern-jawed, deep-eyed, tragical-looking Lewis Vincent, under the colonnade at the Florian, when they passed, in the full blaze of the sun, down the middle of the Piazza.

"Hello," said Vincent, in the light and cheerful voice, that contrasted so surprisingly with the dejected droop of his moustaches, "there goes the richest spinster in England." He nodded towards their retreating backs.

"Oh?" said Bertram, raising interested eyebrows.

"Yes—the thin girl in grey, with the white sunshade," Vincent apprised him. "Been bestowing largesse on the pigeons, let us hope. The Rubensy-looking woman with her is Lady Dor—a sister of Harry Pontycroft's. I think you know Pontycroft, don't you?"

Bertram showed animation. "I know him very well indeed—we've been friends for years—I'm extremely fond of him. That's his sister? I've never met his people. Dor, did you say her name was?"

"Wife of Sir Frederick Dor, of Dortown, an Irishman, a Roman Catholic, and a Unionist M.P.," answered Vincent, and it seemed uncanny in a way to hear the muse of small-talk speaking from so tenebrous a mien. "The thin girl is a Miss Ruth Adgate—American, I believe, but domiciled in England. You must have seen her name in the newspapers—they've had a lot about her, apropos of one thing or another; and the other day she distinguished herself at the sale of the Rawleigh collection, by paying three thousand pounds for one of the Karasai ivories—record price, I fancy. She's said to have a bagatelle of something like fifty thousand a year in her own right."

"Really?" murmured Bertram.

But he could account now for his puzzled feeling last night, that he had seen Lucilla before. With obvious unlikenesses—for where she was plump and smooth, pink and white, Harry Pontycroft was brown and lined and bony—there still existed between her and her brother a resemblance so intimate, so essential, that our friend could only marvel at his failure to think of it at once. 'Twas a resemblance one couldn't easily have localised, but it was intimate and essential and unmistakable.

"So that is Ponty's sister. I see. I understand," he mused aloud.

"Yes," said Lewis Vincent, stretching his long legs under the table, while a soul in despair seemed to gaze from his haggard face. "She looks like a fair, fat, feminine incarnation of Ponty himself, doesn't she? Funny thing, family likeness; hard to tell what it resides in. Not in the features, certainly; not in the flesh at all, I expect. In the spirit—it's metaphysical. One might know Lady Dor anywhere for Pontycroft's sister; yet externally she's as unlike him as a pat of butter is unlike a walnut. But it's the spirit showing through, the kindred spirit, the sister spirit? What? You don't think so?"

"Oh, yes, I think you're quite right," answered Bertram, a trifle perfunctorily perhaps. "By the by, I wish you'd introduce me to her."

"Who? I?" exclaimed Vincent, sitting up and opening his deep eyes wide, with a burlesque of astonishment that was plainly intended to convey a sarcasm. "Bless your soul, I don't know her. I know Pontycroft, of course, as everybody does—or as everybody did, in the old days, before he came into his kingdom. It isn't so easy to make his acquaintance nowadays. But Lady Dor flies with the tippest of the toppest. And I, you see—

well, I'm merely a well-born English gentleman. I ain't a duke, I ain't a Jew, and I ain't a millionaire cheesemonger."

He leaned his brow on the tips of his long slender fingers and gloomed blackly at the marble table-top.

"I see," said Bertram with a not altogether happy chuckle. "You mean that she's a snob."

But Vincent put in a quick disclaimer. "Oh, no; oh dear, no. I don't know that she's a snob—any more than every one is in England. I mean that she happens to belong to the set that counts itself the smartest, just as I happen not to. It's mostly a matter of accident, I imagine. You fall where you fall. She isn't to blame for having fallen among the rich and great; and she looks like a very decent sort. But I say, if you really want to meet her, of course it would be the easiest thing in the world—for *you*."

"Oh? How?" asked Bertram.

"Why," answered Vincent, with the inflection and the gesture of a man expounding the self-evident, "drop her a line at her hotel,—no difficulty in finding out where she's staying; at the Britannia, probably. Tell her you're an old friend of her brother's, and propose to call. I hope I don't need to say whether she'll jump at the chance when she sees your name."

Bertram laughed.

"Yes," he said. "I don't think I should care to do that."

"Hum," said Vincent. "Of course," he added after a minute, as a sort of *envoi* to his tale, "rumour has it that Pontycroft and the heiress are by way of making a match. Well, why not? It would be inhuman to let her pass out of the family. Heigh? and the girl is really very pretty. Yes, I expect before a great while we'll read in the *Morning Post* that a marriage has been arranged."

"Hum," said Bertram.

And then the next afternoon he saw them still again, and learned still more about them. Mrs. Wilberton, the brisk, well-dressed, elderly-handsome, amiably-worldly wife of the Bishop of Lanchester, was having tea with him on his balcony, when all at once she leaned forward, waved her hand, and bestowed her most radiant smile, her most gracious bow, upon the occupants of a passing gondola. Afterwards, turning to Bertram, her finely-modelled, fresh-complexioned face, under its pompadour of grey hair, charged with mystery and significance. "Do you know those women?" she asked.

Well, strictly speaking, he didn't know them; and his visitor's countenance was a promise as well as a provocative to curiosity; so I hope he was justified in answering, "Who are they?"

The mystery and significance in Mrs. Wilberton's face had deepened to solemnity, to solemnity touched with severity. She sank back a little in her red-and-white cane armchair and slowly, solemnly shook her head. "Ah, it's a sad scandal," she said, making her voice low and impressive.

But this was leagues removed from anything that Bertram had bargained for. "A scandal?" he repeated, looking blank.

Mrs. Wilberton fixed him with solemn eyes.

"Have you ever heard," she asked, "of a man, one of our great landowners, the head of one of our oldest families, a very rich man, a man named Henry Pontycroft?"

Bertram smiled, though there was anxiety in his smile, though there was suspense. "I know Henry Pontycroft very well," he answered.

"Do you?" said she. "Well, the elder of those two women was Henry Pontycroft's sister, Lucilla Dor."

Her voice died away and she gazed at her listener in silence, meaningly, as if this announcement in itself contained material for pause and rumination.

But Bertram was anxious, was in suspense. "Yes?" he said, his eyes, attentive and expectant, urging her to continue.

"But it's the other," she presently did continue, "it's the young woman with her. Of course one has read of such things in the papers—one knows that they are done—but when they happen under one's own eyes, in one's own set! And she a Pontycroft! The other, the young woman with Lucilla Dor,—oh, it's quite too disgraceful."

Again Mrs. Wilberton shook her head, this time with a kind of horrified violence, causing the jet spray in her bonnet to dance and twinkle, and again she sank back in her chair.

Bertram sat forward on the edge of his, hands clasping its arms. "Yes? Yes?" he prompted.

"She's an American," said Mrs. Wilberton, speaking with an effect of forced calm. "Her name is Ruth Adgate. She's an American of worse than common extraction, but she's immensely rich. It's really difficult to see in what she's better than an ordinary adventuress, but she has a hundred thousand pounds a year. And she's bought the Pontycrofts—Henry Pontycroft and his sister—she's bought them body and soul."

Her voice indicated a full stop, and she allowed her face and attitude to relax, as one whose painful message was delivered.

But Bertram looked perplexed. An adventuress? Of worse than common extraction? That fresh young girl, with her prettiness, her fineness? His impulse was to cry out, "Allons donc!" And then—the Pontycrofts? Frowning perplexity, he repeated his visitor's words: "Bought the Pontycrofts? I don't think I understand."

"Oh, it's a thing that's done," Mrs. Wilberton assured him, on a note that was like a wail. "One knows that it is done. It's a part of the degeneracy of our times. But the Pontycrofts! One would have thought *them* above it. And the Adgate woman! One would have thought that even people who are willing to sell themselves must draw the line somewhere. But no. Money is omnipotent. So, for money, the Pontycrofts have taken her to their bosoms; presented her; introduced her to every one; and they'll end, of course, by capturing a title for her. Another 'international marriage.' Another instance of American gold buying the due of well-born English girls over their heads."

Bertram smiled,—partly, it may be, at the passion his guest showed, but partly from relief. He had dreaded what was coming: what had come was agreeably inconclusive and unconvincing.

"I see," he said. "But surely this seems in the last degree improbable. What makes you think it?"

"Oh, it isn't that *I* think it," Mrs. Wilberton cried, with a movement that lifted the matter high above the plane of mere personal opinion; "it's known,—it's known."

But Bertram knitted his brows again. "How can such a thing be *known*?" he objected.

"At most, it can only be a suspicion or an inference. What makes you suspect it? What do you infer it *from*?"

"Why, from the patent facts," said Mrs. Wilberton, giving an upward motion to her pretty little white-gloved hands. "They take her everywhere. They've presented her. They've introduced her to the best people. She's regularly *lancée* in their set. I myself was loth, loth to believe it. But the facts—they'll bear no other construction."

Bertram smiled again. "Yes," he said. "But why should you suppose that they do all this for money?"

His question appeared to take the lady's breath away. She sat up straight, lips parted, and gazed at him with something like stupefaction. "For what other earthly reason should they do it?" she was able, at last, in honest bewilderment, to gasp out.

"One has heard of such a motive-power as love," Bertram, with deference, submitted. "Why shouldn't they do it because they like the girl—because she's their friend?"

Mrs. Wilberton breathed freely, and in her turn smiled. "Ah, my dear Prince," she said, with a touch of pity, "you don't know our English world. People in the Pontycroft's position don't take up nameless young Americans for love. Their lives are too full, too complicated. And it means an immense amount of work, of bother—you can't get a new-comer accepted without bestirring yourself, without watching, scheming, soliciting, contriving. And what's your reward? Your friends find you a nuisance, and no one thanks you. There's only one reward that can meet the case—payment in pounds sterling from your client's purse."

But Bertram's incredulity was great. "Harry Pontycroft is himself rich," he said.

"Yes," Mrs. Wilberton at once assented, "he's rich *now*. But he wasn't always rich. There were those lean years when he was merely his cousin's heir—and that's a whole chapter of the story. Besides, is his sister rich? Is Freddie Dor rich?"

"Ah, about that of course I know nothing," Bertram had with humility to admit.

"Freddie Dor is an Irish baronet, whose sole fortune consists of an Irish bog. Then where does Lucilla Dor get her money? She spends—there's no limit to the extravagance with which she spends, to the luxury in which she lives. She has a great house in town, a great house in the country—Lord Bylton's place, Knelworth Castle—she's taken it on a lease. She has a villa near Florence. She entertains like a duchess. She has a box at the opera. She has motor-cars and electric broughams—you know what *they* cost. And sables and diamonds, she has as many as an Indian begum. Where does she get her money?"

Mrs. Wilberton eyed him with a kind of triumphant fierceness. Bertram had an uncomfortable laugh.

"It's conceivable," he suggested, "that her husband's bog produces peat. But I should imagine, in the absence of other evidence, that her brother subsidises her."

Mrs. Wilberton stared at him for a second doubtfully. "Of course you're not serious," she said. "Brothers? Brothers don't do things on quite such a lavish scale."

"Oh, but Ponty's different," Bertram argued. "Ponty's eccentric. I could imagine Ponty doing things on a scale all his own. Anyhow, I don't see what there is to connect Lady Dor's affluence with Miss Adgate."

"Ah," said Mrs. Wilberton, with an air of being about to clench the matter, "the connection is unfortunately glaring. Lady Dor's affluence dates precisely from the moment of Miss Adgate's entrance upon the scene." And with an air of *having* clenched the matter, she threw back her head.

Bertram bent his brow, as one in troubled thought. Then, presently, reviewing his impressions, "I never saw a nicer-looking girl," he said. "I never saw a face that expressed finer or higher qualities. She doesn't look in the least like a girl with low ambitions,—like one who would try to buy her way into society, or pay people to find her a titled husband. And where, in all this, does Harry Pontycroft himself come in? I think you said that she had bought them both, brother and sister."

"Ah," cried Mrs. Wilberton, triumphing again, "you touch the very point. Harry Pontycroft was head over ears in debt to Miss Adgate's father."

"Oh—?" said Bertram, his eyebrows going up.

"It's wheels within wheels," said the lady. "Miss Adgate's father was a mysterious American who, for reasons of his own, had left his country, and never went back. He never went to his embassy, either: you can make what you will of that. And even in Europe he had no settled abode; he lived in hotels; he was always flitting—London,—Paris, Rome, Vienna. And wherever he went, though he knew no one else, he knew troops of young men—*young* men, mark, and young men with expectations. He wasn't received at his embassy; he wasn't received in a single decent house; he was an utter outcast and pariah; but he always managed to surround himself with troops of young men who had expectations. He was nothing more or less, in short, than a money-lender. Yes, your 'nice-looking' girl with the face full of high qualities, whom you think incapable of low ambitions, is just the daughter of a common money-lender—nothing better than that. And Henry Pontycroft was one of his victims. This, of course, was while Pontycroft was poor—while his rich cousin was alive and flourishing. And then, when the old usurer had him completely in his toils, he proposed a compact. If Pontycroft would exert his social influence on behalf of his daughter, and get her accepted in the right circles, Adgate would forgive him his debt, and pay him handsomely into the bargain. The next one knew, Miss Adgate was living with Lucilla Dor, like a member of the family, and Lucilla was beginning to spend money. Not long afterwards old Adgate died, and his daughter came into his millions. And so the ball goes on. They haven't ensnared a Duke for her yet, but that will only be a question of time."

Mrs. Wilberton tilted her head a little to one side, and smiled at poor Bertram with the smile, satisfied yet benevolent, of one who had successfully brought off a promised feat—a smile of friendly challenge to criticise or reply.

But Bertram had his reply ready.

"A compact," he said. "How can any human being have any knowledge of such a compact, except the parties to it? Besides, I know Harry Pontycroft—I've known him for years, intimately. He would be utterly incapable of such a thing. Sell his 'social influence' for money? Worse still, sell his sister's? Old Adgate may have been a moneylender, and Harry Pontycroft may have owed him money. But to get out of it by a proceeding so ignoble as that—his character is the negation of the very idea. And then, a titled husband! Surely, a girl of Miss Adgate's beauty and wealth would need little assistance in finding one, if she really cared about it. And anyhow, to act as her matrimonial agent—that again is a thing of which Harry Pontycroft would be incapable. But, for my part, I can't believe that Miss Adgate has any such desire. She looks to me like a young woman of mind and heart, with ideas and ideals, who would either marry for love pure and simple, or not at all."

His visitor's lips compressed themselves—but failed to hide her amusement. "Oh, looks!" she said. "Ideas, ideals? What do we know of the ideas and ideals of those queer people? Shylock's daughter. You may be sure that whatever their ideals may be, they're very different from any we're familiar with. A young woman who never had a *home*, whose childhood was passed in *hotels*." Mrs. Wilberton shuddered.

"Yes," agreed Bertram, "that's sad to think of. But Shylock's daughter—even Shylock's daughter married for love."

"If you come to that," Mrs. Wilberton answered him, "it's as easy to love a peer as a peasant."

"By the bye," questioned Bertram, thinking of Lewis Vincent, "if the Pontycrofts are really as mercenary as all this would show them to be, why doesn't Ponty marry her himself? He's not a peer, to be sure, but in England the headships of some of your ancient untitled families almost outrank peerages, do they not?"

Mrs. Wilberton's face resumed its look of mystery. "Henry Pontycroft would be only too glad to marry her—if he could," she said. "But alack-a-day for him, he can't, and for the best of reasons. He is already married."

Bertram stared, frowning.

"Pontycroft *married*?" he doubted, his voice falling. "But since when? It must be very recent—and it's astonishing I shouldn't have heard."

"Oh no, anything but recent," Mrs. Wilberton returned, a kind of high impersonal pathos in her tone; "and very few people know about it. But it's perfectly true—I have it on the best authority. When he was quite a young man, when he was still an undergraduate, he made a secret marriage—with some low person—a barmaid or music-hall singer or something. He hasn't lived with her for years—it seems she drank, and was flagrantly immoral, and had, in short, all the vices of her class—and most people have supposed him to be a bachelor. But there his wife remains, you see, a hopeless impediment to his marrying the Adgate millions."

"This is astounding news to me," said Bertram, with the subdued manner of one who couldn't deny that his adversary had scored. But then, cheering up a little, "Why doesn't he poison her?" he asked. "Or, better still, divorce her? In a country like England, where divorce is easy, why doesn't he divorce her, and so be free to marry whom he will?"

Mrs. Wilberton gave him a glance of wonder.

"Oh, I thought you knew," she murmured. "The Pontycrofts are Roman Catholics—one of the handful of families in England who have never recanted their Popish errors. But I beg your pardon—you are a Roman Catholic yourself? Of course. Well, surely, your Church doesn't permit divorce."

Bertram laughed, mirthlessly, grimly even.

"Here is an odd confounding of scruples," he said. "A man is low enough to take a girl's money for acting as her social tout, but too pious to divorce a woman who must be the curse of his existence."

"Oh," replied Mrs. Wilberton, not without a semblance of pride in the circumstance, "our English Roman Catholics are very strict."

"I noticed," said Bertram, playing with his watch-chain, "that you bowed very pleasantly when they passed."

Mrs. Wilberton raised her hands. "I'm not a prig," she earnestly protested. "Don't think I'm a prig. This thing is known, but it's not official. In England until a thing becomes official, until it gets into the law-courts, we treat it, for all practical purposes, as if it didn't exist. Of course, I bowed to them.... Lucilla Dor, besides being a Pontycroft, is a leader in the most exclusive set; and Miss Adgate, officially, is simply her friend and protégée. And it isn't as if they were the only persons about whom ugly tales are told. If one began cutting one's acquaintances on that score, I don't know where one could stop."

"Ugly tales," said Bertram, "yes. But this particular ugly tale—upon my word I can't see a single reason why it should be believed. The only scrap of evidence in support of it, as far as I can make out, is the fact that Lady Dor has a motor-car and a few furs and diamonds. Well, she has also a rich and generous brother. No: I will stake Miss Adgate's face and Harry Pontycroft's honour against all the ugly tales that Gath and Ashkelon between them can produce. I don't believe it, I don't believe it, and I can only wonder that you do."

Mrs. Wilberton was gathering herself together, evidently with a view to departure. Now she rose, and held out her hand.

"Well, Prince," she said, laughing, "I must congratulate you upon your faith in human nature. In a man who has seen so much of the world, such an absence of cynicism is beautiful. I feel quite as if I had been playing the part of—what do you call him?—the Devil's Advocate. But"—she nodded gravely, though perhaps there was a tinge of amusement in her gravity—"in this case I'm afraid, I'm afraid, I'm afraid that your charity is mistaken."

VII

When he came back from having conducted her to the waterside, he was followed by Balzatore and Rampicante. Rampicante leaped upon his shoulder, rubbed his bristly moustaches approvingly against his cheek, curled his tail about his collar, and, sublimely indifferent to any one's mood but his own, purred an egoist's satisfaction. Balzatore sat down before him, resting his long pointed muzzle on his knee and looked

up into his face from alert, troubled, wistful eyes. "What is the matter? What is it that's worrying you?" they asked. For Balzatore knew that his master was not happy.

No, his master was not happy. All round him were the light, the lucent colour, the shimmering warmth of Venice in early autumn, woven together in a transparent screen of beauty. The palaces opposite glowed pale gold, pale rose, pale amethyst, in the sun; the water below was dull blue-green and glassy, shot with changing reds and purples, like dark mother-of-pearl; the sky above was like blue-royal velvet; and where he sat, on his marble balcony, amid its ancient, time-worn carvings and traceries, all was cool blue shadow. But I doubt if he saw any of these things. What he saw was the face of Ruth Adgate, that odd, pretty, frank, clear face of hers, those clear frank eyes, with their glint of red, their hint of inner laughter. He saw also the brown, lined, bony, good-humoured, clever, wholesome face of Harry Pontycroft, and the fair, soft, friendly face of Ponty's sister. The charge against these people was very trifling, if you will: it implied no devastating moral turpitude, but it was more ignominious than far graver charges might have been: it implied such petty aims, such sordid doings. To buy "social influence"—to sell services that should in their nature be the spontaneous offerings of kindness,—frequently indeed as one had heard of this branch of commerce, what, when it came to an actual transaction, could be on the part of buyer and seller more contemptible? Bertram vowed in his soul, "No, I don't believe it, I won't believe it." And yet, for all his firm unfaith, he was not happy. A feeling of malaise, of disgust, almost of physical nausea, possessed him. Oh, why was every one so eager to rub the bloom from the peach? "The worst of it is that Mrs. Wilberton is not a malicious woman," he said. "She's worldly, frivolous, superficial, anything you like, but not malicious. If one could only dispose of her as malicious, her words wouldn't stick." And again, by and by, "After all, it's none of my business,—why should I take it to heart?" But somehow he did take it to heart; so that, at last, "Bah!" he cried, "I must go out and walk it off—I must get rid of the nasty taste of it."

He went out to walk it off, Balzatore scouting a zig-zag course before him, down narrow alleys, over slender bridges. He went out to walk it off, and he walked into the very arms of it. In the multitude of wayfarers—beggars, hawkers, soldiers, priests, and citizens; English tourists, their noses in Baedeker, Dalmatian sailors, piratical-looking, swartskinned, wearing their crimson fezes at an angle that seemed a menace; bare-legged boys, bare-headed girls (sometimes with hair of the proper Venetian red); women in hats, and women in mantillas—in the vociferous, many-hued multitude that thronged the Mercerie, he met Stuart Seton.

Do you know Stuart Seton? He is a small, softly-built, soft-featured, pale, kittenish-looking man, with softly-curling hair and a soft little moustache, with a soft voice and soft languorous manners. A woman's man, you guess at your first glimpse of him, a women's pet; a man whom women will fondle and coddle, and send on errands, and laugh at to his face, and praise to other men; a man, for he has the unhallowed habit of using scent, who actually seems to smell of boudoirs. Bertram did not like him, and now, at their conjunction, stiffened instantly, from the fellow mortal, into the great personage.

"I was on my way to call on you," said Seton, softly, languidly.

"I am unfortunate in not being at home," returned Bertram, erect, aloof.

"I wanted to get you to give me an evening to dine," Seton explained. "I am at the Britannia, and I have some friends there I'd like to present to you."

"Ah?" said Bertram, his head very much in the air. "Who are your friends?"

"Only two," said Seton. "One is Lady Dor, a charming woman, sister of Harry Pontycroft, and the other is Pontycroft's Faithful John—a very amusing gel named Adgate."

Faithful John? The phrase was novel to Bertram, and struck him as unpleasant. "Pontycroft's *what?*" he asked, rather brusquely.

"Yes," drawled Seton, undisturbed. "It's quite the joke of the period, in England. She is one of those preposterously rich Americans, you know,—hundred and fifty thousand a year, and that sort of thing. Pooty too, and clever, with a sense of humour. But she's gone and fallen desperately in love with poor old Harry Pontycroft, and when he's present, upon my word, she eyes him exactly as a hungry dog eyes a bone. Which must make him feel a trifle queerish, seeing that he's twenty years her senior, and by no means a beauty, and not at all in the marrying line. If he were, you can trust the British mamma to have snapped him up long before this. So she worships him from afar with a hopeless, undying flame. Poor old Ponty! Most fellows, of course, would think themselves in luck, but Ponty has all the tin he knows what to do with, and a wife would suit his book about as well as a tame white elephant. He is dog-in-the-manger in spite of himself. No others need apply."

Bertram passed his hands across his brow, asking the spirits of the air, I daresay, where is truth? He passed his hand across his brow, while his lips uttered a kind of guttural and enigmatic *Mumph*.

"There was Newhampton, for instance," Seton complacently babbled on, "the little Duke. Of course, with her supplies, she's had more or less the whole unmarried peerage after her, to pick and choose from; but she never turned a hair till Newhampton offered himself. Then she regularly broke down, and blew the gaff. A Duke! Well, a Duke's a Duke, and human nature couldn't stand it. She told him with tears in her eyes that he'd given her the hardest day's work she'd ever had to do. For I'd marry you like a shot, she said, only I'm unlucky enough to be in love with another man. Pontycroft for a fiver, said Newhampton, who's not such a fool as he looks. And, by Jove, if she didn't coolly up and tell him he was right! But the fun of it is that meantime Ponty's sister comes in for the reversion. If not the rose, she's near the rose, and she gets the golden dew. A private portable millionaire, who loves you for your brother and never shies at a bill, is a jolly convenient addition to a Christian family."

Bertram said nothing. He stood looking down the exiguous thoroughfare, over the heads of the passers-by, a cloud of preoccupation on his brow. Lewis Vincent, Mrs. Wilberton, and now this little cad of a Seton—three witnesses. But where was truth?

"Anyhow," the little cad, never scenting danger, in a minute went blandly on, "I hope you'll give me an evening. Miss Adgate is sure to amuse you, and Lady Dor is a person you really ought to know."

"Thank you," said Bertram, deliberately weighting his rudeness with a ceremonious bow, "I don't think I

should care to make their acquaintance under your auspices."

And therewith he resumed his interrupted walk, leaving Seton, open-mouthed, roundeyed, to the enjoyment of a fine view of his back.

By and bye, having (to cool his anger) marched twice round the Piazza, he entered San Marco, bidding Balzatore await his return outside. In the sombre loveliness of one of the chapels a rosary was being said. Among the score or so of women kneeling there, he saw, with a strange jump of the heart, Ruth Adgate and Lady Dor.

He turned hastily away, not to spy upon their devotions. But what he had seen somehow restored the natural sweetness of things. And the vision of a delicate head bowed in prayer accompanied him home.

PART SECOND

I

PONTYCROFT was really, as men go, a tallish man,—above, at any rate, what they call the medium height,—say five feet ten or eleven. But seated, like a Turk or a tailor—as he was seated now on the lawn of Villa Santa Cecilia, and as it was very much his ridiculous custom to sit,—with his head sunk forward and his legs curled up beneath him, making a mere torso of himself, he left you rather with an impression of him as short. That same sunken head, by the by, was a somewhat noticeable head; noticeably big; covered by a thick growth, close-cropped, of fawn-coloured hair; broad, with heavy bumps over the thick fawn-coloured eyebrows; the forehead traversed by many wrinkles, vertical and horizontal, deep almost as if they had been scored with a knife. It was a white forehead, but the face below, abruptly from the hat-line, was as brown as sun and open air could burn it, red-brown and lean, showing its sub-structure of bone: not by any means a handsome face; nay, with its short nose, perilously near a snub, its forward-thrust chin, deeply-cleft in the middle, its big mouth and the short fawn-coloured moustache that bristled on the lip, decidedly a plain face; yet decidedly too, somehow, a distinguished, very decidedly a pleasing face—shrewd, humorous, friendly; capable, trustworthy—lighted by grey eyes that seemed always to be smiling.

They were certainly smiling at this moment, as he looked off towards Florence, (where it lay under a thin drift of pearl-dust in the sun-filled valley), and spoke in his smiling masculine voice.

"Up at the villa—down in the city," he said. "I never *could* sympathise with that Italian person of quality. Surely, it's a thousand times jollier to be up at the villa. Then one can look down upon the city, and admire it as a feature of the landscape, and thank goodness one isn't there."

Ruth's eyes (with the red glint in them) laughed at him. She sat leaning back on a rustic bench, a few yards away, under a mighty ilex. She wore a frock of pale green muslin, and her garden-hat had fallen on the ground beside her, so that what breeze there was could make free with her hair.

"You are not an Italian person of quality, you see," she said. "You are a beef-eating Britisher, and retain a barbaric fondness for the greenwood tree. You are like Peter Bell, who never felt the witchery of the soft blue sky. You have never felt the witchery of brick and mortar."

Pontycroft, puffing his cigarette, regarded her through the smoke with a feint of thoughtful curiosity.

"The worst thing about the young people of your generation," he remarked, assuming the tone of one criticising from an altitude, "is that you have no conversation. Talk, among you, consists exclusively of personalities—gossip or chaff. Now, I was on the point of drawing a really rather neat little philosophical analogy; and you, instead of playing flint to steel, instead of encouraging me with a show of intelligent interest, check my inspiration with idle, personal chaff. Still, hatless young girls in greenery-whitery frocks, if they have plenty of reddish hair, add a very effective note to the foreground of a garden; and I suppose one should be content with them as they are."

Ruth ostentatiously "composed a face," bending her head at the angle of intentness, lifting her eyebrows, making her eyes big and rapt.

"There," she said, taking a deep breath, "I hope *that* is a show of intelligent interest. Let me hear your really rather neat little philosophical analogy."

"No," said Pontycroft, with a melancholy shake of the head, "that is only a show of the irreverence of youth for age. What is the fun of my being a hundred years your elder, if you are not to treat me with proportionate respect? And as for my analogy (which, perhaps, on second thoughts, is not so neat as I fancied), if I give it utterance, I shall do so simply for the sake of clarifying it to myself. It has reference to the everlasting problem of evil. Human life is like a city; and a city seen from a distance"—he waved his cigarette towards Florence—"is like human life taken as a whole. Taken piecemeal, bit by bit, as it passes, life dismays us, and terribly tries our faith, by the Evil it presents: the pain, disease, foul play, inequalities, injustices, what you will: just as a city, when we are in its streets, revolts us with its dirt, decay, squalor, stagnant air, noise, confusion, and its sordid population. But just as the city seen from a distance, just as Florence seen from here, loses all its piecemeal ugliness, and melts into a beautiful and harmonious unity, so human life viewed as a whole.... Well, you have my analogy—which, perhaps, after all, is really rather banal. Ah me, I wish I could marry you off. Why do you so systematically refuse all the brilliant offers that I so tirelessly contrive for you?"

But Ruth seemed not to have heard his question, though he underlined it by looking up at her with a frown

of grave anxiety.

"Unfortunately for us human beings," she said, "no one has yet invented a process by which we can *live* our life as a whole. It's all very well to talk of viewing it, but we have to *live* it; and we have to live it piecemeal, bit by bit."

"Well," demanded Pontycroft, cheerfully inconsequent, "what can we ask better? Given health, wealth, and a little wisdom, it's extremely pleasant to live our life piecemeal. It's extremely pleasant to take it bit by bit, when the bits are sweet. And what, for instance, could be a sweeter bit than this?" His lean brown hand described a comprehensive circle. "A bright, crisp, cool, warm September morning; a big beautiful garden, full of fragrant airs; Italian sunshine, and the shade of ilexes; oleanders in blossom; cool turf to lie on, and a fountain tinkling cool music near at hand; then, beyond there, certainly the loveliest prospect in the world to feed our eyes—Val d'Arno, with its olive-covered hills, its cypresses, its white-walled villas, and Florence shining like a cut gem in the midst. Add good tobacco to smoke, and a simple child in white-green muslin, with plenty of reddish hair, to try one's analogies upon. What could man wish better? Why don't you get married? Why do you so perversely reject all the eligible suitors that I trot out for your inspection?"

Ruth's eyes laughed at him again. It was a laugh of frank amusement, but I think there was something dangerous in it too, a quick flash of mockery, even of menace and defiance.

"Among the train there is a swain I dearly lo' myself," she lightly sang, her head thrown back. "But you've never trotted *him* out. I don't get married"—detestable expression—because the only man I've ever seriously cared for has never asked me." She sighed—regretfully, resignedly; and made him a comical little face.

Pontycroft studied her for a moment. Then, "Ho!" he scoffed. "A good job, too. I wasn't aware that you'd ever seriously cared for any one; but if you have—believe me, he's the last man living you should think of tying up with. The people we care for in our calf-period are always the wrong people."

Ruth raised her eyebrows. "Calf-period? How pretty—but how sadly misapplied. I'm twenty-four years old. Besides, the person I care for is the right person, the rightest of all right persons, absolutely the one rightest person in the world."

"Who is he?" Pontycroft asked carelessly, lighting a fresh cigarette.

Still again Ruth's eyes laughed at him. "What's his name and where's his hame I dinna care to tell," again she sang.

"Pooh!" said Pontycroft, blowing the subject from him in a whiff of smoke. "He's a baseless fabrication. He's a herring you've just invented to draw across the trail of my inquiries. But even if he were authentic, he wouldn't matter, since he's well-advised enough not to sue for your hand. Have you ever heard of a man called Bertrando Bertrandoni?"

"Bertrando Bertrandoni—Phoebus! what a name!" laughed Ruth.

"Yes," assented Pontycroft, "it's a trifle cumbrous, also perhaps a trifle flamboyant. So his English friends (he was educated in England, and you'd never know he wasn't English) have docked it to simple Bertram. Have you ever heard of him?"

"I don't think so," said Ruth, shaking her head.

"And yet he's a pretty well-known man," said Pontycroft. "He writes—every now and then you'll see an article of his in one of the reviews. He paints, too—you'll see his pictures at the Salon; and plays the fiddle, and sings. A jack-of-many-trades, but, by exception, really rather a dab at 'em all. A sportsman besides—goes in for yachtin', huntin', fencin'. But over and above all that, a thorough good sort and a most amusing companion—a fellow who can talk, a fellow who's curious about things. Finally, a Serene and Semi-Royal Highness."

"Oh?" questioned Ruth, wondering.

"Ah," said Pontycroft, "you prick up your pretty ears. Yes, a Serene and Semi-Royal Highness. Has it ever struck you how chuckle-headed—saving their respect—our ancestors were? I suppose they drank the wrong sort of tea. Anyhow, they were mistaken about nearly everything, and most of their mistakes they elevated to the dignity of maxims. Now, for example, they had a maxim about Silence being golden, and another about Curiosity being a vice. It's pitiful to think of the enormous number of more or less tedious anecdotes they laboriously imagined to illustrate and enforce those two profound untruths. Silence golden? My dear, silence is simply piggish. Your silent man is simply a monstrous Egotist, who, in what should be the reciprocal game of conversation, takes without giving—allows himself to be entertained, perhaps enriched, at his interlocuter's expense, and is too soddenly self-complacent to feel that he owes anything in return. Oh, I know, you'll plead shyness for him—you'll tell me he doesn't speak because he's shy. In a certain number of cases, I grant, that is the fact. But what then? Why, shyness is Egotism multiplied by itself. Your shy person is a person so sublimely (or infernally) conscious of his own existence and his own importance, so penetrated by the conviction that he is the centre of the Universe and that all eyes are fixed upon him, and therewith so concerned about the effect he may produce, the figure he may cut, that he dare not move lest he shouldn't produce an heroic effect or cut an Olympian figure. And then, curiosity! A vice? Look here. You are born, with eyes, ears, and a brain, into a world that God created. You have eyes, ears, and a brain, and all round you is a world that God created—and yet you are not curious about it. A world that God created, and that man, your duplicate man, lives in; a world in which everything counts, small things as well as big things—the farthest planet and the trifling-est affair of your next-door neighbour, the course of Empire and the price of figs. But no—God's world, man's life—they leave you cold, they fail to interest you; you glance indifferently at them, they hardly seem worth your serious attention, you shrug and turn away. 'Tis a world that God created, and you treat it as if it were a child's mud-pie! Good heavens! And the worst of it is that the people who do that are mightily proud of themselves in their smug fashion. Curiosity is a vice and a weakness; they are above it. My sweet child, no single good thing has ever happened to mankind, no single forward step has ever been taken in what they call human progress, but it has been primarily due to some one's 'curiosity.'" He brought the word out with a flourish, making it big. Then he lay back, and puffed hard at his cigarette.

"Go on," urged Ruth demurely. "Please don't stop. I like half-truths, and as for quarter-truths, I perfectly

adore them."

"Bertram," said Pontycroft, "is a fellow who can talk, and a fellow who's curious about things."

"I see," said Ruth. "And yet," she reflected, as one trying to fit together incompatible ideas, "I think you let fall something about his being a Serene and Semi-Royal Highness."

"My dear," Pontycroft instructed her, "there are intelligent individuals in all walks of life. There are intelligent princes, there are even intelligent scientific persons. The Bertrandoni are the legitimate grand-dukes of Altronde, the old original dynasty. They were 'hurled from the throne,' I don't know how many years ago, in a revolution, and the actual reigning family, the Ceresini, have been in possession ever since. But Bertram's father is the Pretender. He calls himself the Duke of Oltramare, and lives in Paris—lives there, I grieve to state, in the full Parisian sense—is a professed *viveur*. I met him once, a handsome old boy, military-looking, red-faced, with a white moustache and imperial, and a genially wicked eye. Anyhow, there's one thing to his credit—he had Bertram educated at Harrow and Cambridge, instead of at one of these soul-destroying Continental universities. He and his Duchess never meet. She and Bertram are supposed to live in Venice, at the palace of the family, Cà Bertrandoni, though as a matter of fact you'll rarely find either of them at home. She spends most of her time in Austria, where she was born—a Wohenhoffen, if you please; there's no better blood. And Bertram is generally at the other end of the earth—familiarizing himself with the domestic manners of the Annamites, or the religious practices of the Patagonians. However, I believe lately he's dropped that sort of thing—given up travelling and settled down."

"This is palpitatingly interesting," said Ruth. "Is it all apropos of boots?"

Pontycroft put on his hat, and stood up.

"It's apropos," he answered, "of your immortal welfare. I had a note from Bertram this morning to say he was in Florence, no farther away than that. I'm going down now to call on him, and I'll probably bring him back to luncheon. So tell Lucilla to have a plate laid for him. Also put on your best bib and tucker, and try to behave as nicely as you can. For if you should impress him favourably.... Ah me, I wish I could marry you off."

"Ah me, I wish you could—to the man I care for," responded Ruth, with dreamy eyes, and wistfulness real or feigned.

II

"But I have already met them, your sister and Miss Adgate," Bertram announced, with an occult little laugh. Pontycroft looked his surprise.

"Really? They've kept precious mum about it. When? Where?"

"The other day at Venice," Bertram laughed. "I even had the honour of escorting them to their hotel in my gondola."

Pontycroft's face bespoke sudden enlightenment.

"Oho!" he cried. "Then you're the mysterious stranger who came to their rescue when they were benighted at the Lido. They've told me about that. And oh, the quantities of brain-tissue they've expended wondering who you were!"

Bertram chuckled.

"But how," asked Pontycroft, the wrinkles of his brow tied into puzzled knots, "how did you know who *they* were?"

"I saw them the next day when I was at the Florian with Lewis Vincent, and he told me," Bertram explained.

Pontycroft laughed, deeply, silently. "Thank Providence I shall be present at the scene that's coming. The man of the family brings a friend home to luncheon, and lo, the ladies recognise in him their gallant rescuer. It's amazing how Real Life rushes in where Fiction fears to tread. That scene is one which has been banished from literature these thirty years, which no playwright or novelist would dare to touch; yet here is Real Life blithely serving it up to us as if it were quite fresh. It's another instance—and every one has seen a hundred—of Real Life sedulously apeing ill-constructed and unconvincing melodrama."

Bertram, leaning on the window-sill, and looking down at the yellow flood of the Arno, again softly chuckled.

"Yes," he said; "but in this case I'm afraid Real Life has received a little adventitious encouragement." He turned back into the room, the stiff hotel sitting-room, with its gilt-and-ebony furniture, its maroon-and-orange hangings. "The truth is that I've come to Florence for the especial purpose of seeing you—and of seeing this introduction."

"Oh?" murmured Ponty, bowing. "So much the better, then," he approved. "Though I beg to observe," he added, "that this doesn't elucidate the darker mystery—how you knew that we were here."

"Ah," laughed Bertram, "the unsleeping vigilance of the Press. Your movements are watched and chronicled. There was a paragraph in the *Anglo-Italian Times*. It fell under my eye the day before yesterday, and—well, you see whether I have let the grass grow. My glimpse of the ladies was extremely brief, but it was enough to make me very keen to meet them again. After all, I have a kind of prescriptive right to know Lady Dor—isn't she the sister of one of my oldest friends? Miss Adgate," he spoke with respectful hesitancy, "I think I have heard, is an American?"

"Of sorts—yes," Ponty answered. "But without the feathers. Her father was a New Englander, who came to Europe on the death of his wife, when Ruth was three years old, and never went back. So she's entirely a European product."

His smiling eyes studied for a moment the flowers and clouds and cupids painted in blue and pink upon the ceiling. Then his theme swept him on.

"He was a very remarkable man, her father. I think he had the widest, the most all-round culture of any man I've ever known; he was beyond question the most brilliant talker. And he was wonderful to look at, with a great old head and a splendid tangle of hair and beard. He was a man who could have distinguished himself

ten times over, if he would only have *done* things—written books, or what not.

“But he positively didn't know what ambition meant; he hadn't a trace of vanity, of the desire to shine, in his whole composition. Therefore he did nothing—except absorb knowledge, and delight his friends with his magnificent talk. He made me the executor of his will, and when he died it turned out that he was vastly richer than any one had thought.. Twenty odd years before, he had taken some wild land in Wyoming for a bad debt, and meanwhile the city of Agamenon had been obliging enough to spring up upon it. So, when Ruth attained her majority, I was able to hand over to her a fortune of about thirty thousand a year.”

“Really?” said Bertram, and thought of Mrs. Wilberton. This rhymed somewhat faultily with the story of a money-lender. Then, while Pontycroft, his legs curled up, sat on the maroon-and-orange sofa, and puffed his eternal cigarette, Bertram took a turn or two about the room. He didn't want to ask questions; he didn't want to seem to pry. But he did want to hear just as much about Ruth Adgate as Pontycroft might be inclined to tell. He didn't want to ask questions, and yet, after a minute, as Pontycroft simply smoked in silence, he ended by asking one.

“I think Miss Adgate is of the Old Religion?”

“Yes—her father was a convert, and a mighty fervent and eloquent one, too,” Ponty replied nowise loth to pursue the subject. “That was what first brought us together. We were staying at the same inn in one of the Protestant cantons of Switzerland, and on Sunday morning all three of us tramped off nine miles to hear Mass, Ruth being then about ten. He was a man who never went in for general society. He never went in for anything usual or conventional. His life was extraordinarily detached. But he had his own little group of friends, of old cronies and young disciples, in pretty nearly every town of Europe, so that he never needed to be lonely. And he had a brother, an elder brother, whom he was always going out to America to see; General Adgate, United States Army, retired, residing at Oldbridge, Connecticut. Every spring, every summer, every autumn, old Tom Adgate made his plans to go and visit the General, and then he put the visit off. I think he'd never really got over his grief for the death of his wife, and that he dreaded returning to the places that were associated with her.”

Bertram did not want to ask questions—yet now he asked another.

“But Miss Adgate herself—has she never been to America?”

“No, she won't go,” Pontycroft said. “We've urged her, pressed her to go, Lucilla and I—not to stop, of course—but to see the place, to *faire acte de presence*. Lucilla has even offered to go with her. And the General has written fifty times begging her to come and stay with him at Oldbridge. She really ought to go. It's her native country, and she ought to make its acquaintance. But she seems to have imbibed a prejudice against it. She's been unfortunate in getting hold of some rather terrible American newspapers, printed in all the colours of the rainbow, in which the London correspondents made her and her affairs the subject of their prose. And then she's read some American novels. I'm bound to confess that I can understand her shrinking a bit, if American society is anything like what American novelists depict. The people seem entirely to lack manners,—and the novelists seem ingenuously oblivious of the deficiency. They present the most unmitigated bounders, and appear in all good faith to suppose they are presenting gentlemen and ladies.”

“Yes,” agreed Bertram, smiling, “one has noticed that.” Then, thoughtful-eyed, pacing the floor, the world-traveller spoke: “But America is very big, and very heterogeneous in its elements, and the novelists leave a good deal out. There's no such thing as American society,—there are innumerable different societies, unassimilated, unaffiliated, and one must pick and choose. Besides, Oldbridge—didn't you say—is in New England? New England is an extraordinary little world apart, as unlike the rest of the country as—as a rural dean is unlike a howling dervish. The rest of the country is in the making, a confusion of materials that don't match; New England is finished, completed; and of a piece. Take Boston, for instance,—I really don't know a more interesting town. It's pretty, it's even stately; it's full of colour and character; it's full of expression,—it expresses its race and its history. And as for society, Boston society is as thoroughbred as any I have ever encountered—easy, hospitable, with standards, with traditions, and at the same time with a faint breath of austerity, a little remainder of Puritanism, that is altogether surprising and amusing, and in its effect rather tonic. No, no, there's nothing to shrink from in New England—unless, perhaps, its winter climate. It can't be denied that they sometimes treat you to sixty degrees of frost.”

Pontycroft blew a long stream of smoke, “I'll ask you to repeat that sermon to Ruth herself.”

Bertram halted, guiltily hung his head. “I beg your pardon—my text ran away with me. But why doesn't—if Miss Adgate won't go to America, why doesn't America come to her? Why doesn't General Adgate come to Europe?” Pontycroft's brows knotted themselves again. “Ah, why indeed?” he echoed. “Hardly for want of being asked, at any rate. Ruth has asked him, my sister has asked him, I have asked him. And it seems a smallish enough thing to do. But in his way, I imagine he's as unlike other folk as his brother was in his. He's a bachelor—wedded, apparently, to his chimney-corner. There's no dislodging him—at least by the written word. So Ruth, you see, is rather peculiarly alone in the world, as I'm afraid she sometimes rather painfully feels. She has Lucilla and me, a kind of honorary sister and brother, and in England she has her old governess, Miss Nettleworth, a cousin of Charlie Nettleworth, who lives with her, and might be regarded as a stipendiary aunt. And that's all, unless you count heaps of acquaintances, and scores of wise youths who'd like to marry her. But she appears to have devoted herself to spinsterhood. One and all, she refuses 'em as fast as they come up. She's even refused a duke, which is accounted, I suppose, the most heroic thing a girl in England can do.”

“Oh—?” said Bertram, in a tone that by no means disguised his eagerness to hear more.

“Yes—Newhampton,” said Ponty. “As he tells the story himself, there's no reason why I shouldn't repeat it. His people—mother and sister—had been at him for months to propose to her, and at last (they were staying in the same country house) he took her for a walk in the shrubberies and did his filial and fraternal duty. I'm not sure whether you know him? The story isn't so funny unless you do. He's a tiny little chap, only about six-and-twenty, beardless, rosy-gilled—looks for all the world like a boy fresh from Eton. 'By Jove, I thought my hour had struck,' says he. 'I'd no idea I should come out of it a free man. Well, it shows that honesty *is* the best policy, after all. I told her honestly that my heart was a burnt-out volcano—that I hoped I should make a

kind and affectionate husband—but that I had had my *grande passion*, and could never love again; if she chose to accept me on that understanding—well, I was at her disposal. After which I stood and quaked, waiting for my doom. But she—she simply laughed. And then she said I was the honestest fellow she'd ever known, and had made the most original proposal she'd ever listened to, which she wouldn't have missed for anything; and to reward me for the pleasure I'd given her, she would let me off—decline my offer with thanks. Yes, by Jove, she regularly rejected me—me, a duke—with the result that we've been the best of friends ever since.' And so indeed they have," concluded Ponty with a laugh.

Bertram laughed too—and thought of Stuart Seton.

"The Duchess-mother, though," Ponty went on, "was inconsolable—till I was fortunate enough to console her. I discovered that she had an immensely exaggerated notion of Ruth's wealth, and mentioned the right figures. 'Dear me,' she cried, 'in that case Ferdie has had a lucky escape. He surely shouldn't let himself go under double that.' But now"—Ponty laughed again—"observe how invincible is truth. There are plenty of people in England who'll tell you that they were actually engaged, and that when it came to settlements, finding she wasn't so rich as he'd supposed, Newhampton cried off."

Bertram had resumed his walk about the room. Presently, "You know Stuart Seton, of course?" he asked, coming to a standstill.

"Of course," said Ponty. "Why?"

"What do you think of him?" asked Bertram.

"A fine puss-gentleman that's all perfume," Ponty laughed. "Oh, he's a harmless enough little beast, but it's a pity he oils his hair."

"Hum," said Bertram, with an air of profound thought.

Ponty looked at his watch.

"I say," he cried, starting up; "it's time we were off."

III

There was, however, no such scene at Villa Santa Cecilia as the man of the family (I'm afraid with some malicious glee) had anticipated. The ladies indeed recognised in his friend their gallant rescuer, and no doubt experienced the appropriate emotions, but they made no violent demonstration of them. They laughed, and shook hands, and bade him welcome; Bertram laughed a good deal, too—you know how easily he laughs; and that was all. Then they went in to luncheon, during which meal, while the ball of conversation flew hither, thither, he could observe (and admire) Ruth Adgate to his heart's content: her slender figure, her oddly pretty face, her crinkling dark hair with its wine-coloured lights, her brown eyes with their red underglow, their covert laughter. "High energies quiescent"—his own first phrase came back to him. "There's something tense in her—there's a spring—there's a tense chord. If it were touched—well, one feels how it could vibrate." A man, in other words, felt that here was a woman with womanhood in her. 'Tis a quality somewhat infrequently met with in women nowadays, and, for men, it has a singular interest and attraction.

Pontycroft, I am sorry to record it, behaved very badly at table. He began by stealing Ruth's bread; then he played balancing tricks—sufficiently ineffectual—with his knife and fork, announcing himself as *élève de Cinquevalli*; then, changing his title to *élève du regretté Sludge*, he produced a series of what he called spirit-rappings, though they sounded rather like the rappings of sole-leather against a chair-round; then he insisted on smoking cigarettes between the courses—"after the high Spanish fashion," he explained; and finally, assuming the wheedling tone of a spoiled child, he pleaded to be allowed to have his fruit before the proper time. "I want my fruit—mayn't I have my fruit? Ah, *please* let me."

"Patience, patience," said Lucilla, in her most soothing voice, with her benignant smile. "Everything comes at last to him who knows how to wait."

"Everything comes at once to him who will not wait," Ponty brazenly retorted, and leaning forward, helped himself from the crystal dish, piled high with purple figs and scarlet africani.

They returned to the garden for coffee, and afterwards Ponty engaged his sister in a game of lawn-golf, leaving Ruth and Bertram to look on from the terrace, where Ruth sat among bright-hued cushions in a wicker chair, and Bertram (conscious of a pleasant agitation) leaned on the lichen-stained marble balustrade.

"Poor Lucilla," she said to him, the laughter in her eyes coming to the surface, "she hates it, you know. But I suppose Harry honestly thinks it amuses her, and she's too good-natured to undeceive him."

"There are red notes in her very voice," said Bertram to himself. "Poor lady," he said aloud. "'Tis her penalty for having an English brother. A game of one sort or another is an Englishman's sole conception of happiness. And that is the real explanation of Anglo-Saxon superiority. Englishmen take the most serious businesses of life as games—war, politics, commerce, literature, everything. It's that which keeps them sane and makes them successful."

Ruth looked doubtful. "Anglo-Saxon superiority?" she questioned. "Do you believe in Anglo-Saxon superiority? To be sure, we're always thanking Heaven that we're so much better than our neighbours; but apart from fond delusions, *are* we better?"

"You're at any rate fresher and lighter-hearted," Bertram asseverated. "Englishmen always remain boys. We poor Continentals, especially we poor Latins, grow old and sad, or else sour, or else dry and hard. We take life either as a grand melodrama, or as a monotonous piece of prose; and it's all because we haven't your English way of taking it as a game—the saving spirit of sport."

Ruth laughed a little. "Yes, and a good many Englishwomen remain boys, too," she added musingly. "How is that beautiful dog of yours?" she asked. "Have you brought him with you to Florence?"

"Balzatore? No, I left him in Venice. He's rather a stickler for his creature-comforts, and the accommodations for dogs in Italian trains are not such as he approves of."

Ruth opened wide her eyes. "Can they be worse than the accommodations for human beings?" she

wondered.

"All I can tell you," Bertram replied, "is that I once took Balzatore with me to Padua, and he howled conscientiously the whole way. I have never known a human being (barring babies) to do that. They shut him in a kind of drawer, a kind of black hole, under the carriage."

"Brutes," said Ruth, with a shudder. "Don't you rather admire our view?" she asked, first glancing up at her companion, and then directing her gaze down the valley.

"There never *were* such eyes," said Bertram to himself. "There never *was* such a view," he said to her. "With the sky and the clouds and the sun—and the haze, like gold turned to vapour—and the purple domes and pinnacles of Florence. How is it possible for a town to be at the same time so lovely and so dull?"

Ruth glanced up at him again. "Is Florence *dull*?"

"Don't you think so?" he asked, smiling down.

"I'm afraid I don't know it very well," she answered. "The Ponte Vecchio seems fairly animated—and then there are always the Botticellis."

"I dare say there are always the Botticellis," Bertram admitted, laughing. "But the Ponte Vecchio doesn't count—the people there are all Jews. I was thinking of the Florentines."

"Ah, yes; I see," said Ruth. "They're chiefly retired Anglo-Indians, aren't they?"

"Well, isn't that," demanded Bertram, with livelier laughter, "an entire concession of my point?"

"What are you people so silent about?" asked Pontycroft, coming up with Lucilla from the lawn. Lucilla sank with an out of thankfulness into one of the cushioned chairs. Ponty seated himself on the balustrade, near Bertram, and swung his legs.

"Never play lawn-golf with Lucilla," he warned his listeners. "She cheats like everything. She even poked a ball into a hole with her toe."

"A very good way of making it go in," Lucilla answered. "Besides, if I cheated, it was for two good purposes: first, to hurry up the game, which would otherwise have lasted till I dropped; and then to show you how much more inventive and resourceful women are than men."

She fanned her soft face gently with her pocket-handkerchief.

Ponty turned to Bertram. "Tell us the latest secret tidings from Altronde. What are the prospects of the rightful party?"

"Oh yes, do tell us of Altronde," said Lucilla, dropping her handkerchief into her lap, and looking up with eagerness in her soft eyes. "I've never met a Pretender before. Do tell us all about it."

Bertram laughed. "Alas," he said, "there's nothing about it. There are no tidings from Altronde, and the rightful party (if there is one) has no prospects. And I am not a Pretender—I am merely the son of a Pretender, and my father maintains his pretensions merely as a matter of form—not to let them, in a legal sense, lapse. He is as well aware as any one that there'll never be a restoration."

"Oh?" said Lucilla, her eyes darkening with disappointment; then, hope dying hard: "But one constantly sees paragraphs in the papers headed 'Unrest in Altronde,' and they seem to enjoy a change of ministry with each new moon."

"Yes," admitted Bertram, "there's plenty of unrest—the people being exorbitant drinkers of coffee; and as every deputy aspires to be a minister in turn, they change their ministry as often as they have a leisure moment. 'Tis a state very much divided against itself. But there's one thing they're in a vast majority agreed upon, and that is that they don't want a return of the Bertrandoni."

"Were you such dreadful tyrants?" questioned Ruth, artlessly serious.

Pontycroft laughed aloud.

"There spoke the free-born daughter of America," he cried.

"I'm afraid we were, rather," Bertram seriously answered her. "If History speaks the truth, I'm afraid we rather led the country a dance."

"In that respect you couldn't have held a candle to your successors," put in Ponty.

"The Ceresini really are a handful. Let alone their extravagances, and their squabbles with their wives—I've seen Massimiliano staggering-drunk in the streets of his own capital. And then, if you drag in History, History never does speak truth."

"I marvel the people stand it," said Lucilla.

"They won't stand it for ever," said Bertram. "Some day there'll be a revolution."

"Well—? But then—? Won't your party come in?" she asked.

"Then," he predicted, "after perhaps a little interregnum, during which they'll try a republic, Altronde will be noiselessly absorbed by the Kingdom of Italy."

"History never speaks truth, and prophets (with the best will in the world) seldom do," said Ponty. "Believe as much or as little of Bertram's vaticination as your fancy pleases. In a nation of hot-blooded Southrons like the Altrondesi, anything is possible. For my part, I shouldn't be surprised if their legitimate sovereign were recalled in triumph to-morrow."

"Perish the thought," cried Bertram, throwing up his hand, "unless you can provide a substitute to fill what would then become my highly uncomfortable situation."

Ruth was looking curiously at Pontycroft. "What has History been doing," she inquired, "to get into your bad graces?"

Pontycroft turned towards her, and made a portentous face.

"History," he informed her in his deepest voice, "is the medium in which lies are preserved for posterity, just as flies are preserved in amber. History consists of the opinions formed by fallible and often foolish literary men from the testimony of fallible, contradictory, often dishonest, and rarely dispassionate witnesses. The witnesses, either with malice aforethought, or because their faculties are untrained, see falsely,

malobserve; then they make false, or at best, faulty records of their malobservations. A century later comes your Historian; studies these false, faulty, contradictory records; picks and chooses among 'em; forms an opinion, the character of which will be entirely determined by his own character—his temperament, prejudices, kind and degree of intelligence, and so forth; and finally publishes his opinion under the title of *The History of Ballywhack*. But the history, please to remark, remains nothing more nor less than an exposition of the private views of Mr. Jones. And please to remark further that no two histories of Ballywhack will be in the least agreement—except upon unessentials. So that if Mr. Jones's history is true, those of Messrs. Brown and Robinson must necessarily be false. No, no, no; if you go to seek Truth in the printed page, seek it in novels, seek it in poems, seek it in fairy tales or fashion papers, but don't waste your time seeking it in histories."

While the others greeted his peroration with some laughter, Pontycroft lighted a cigarette.

"I'm sure I'd much rather seek it in fashion papers," drawled Lucilla. "They're so much lighter and easier to hold than great heavy history books, and besides they sometimes really give one ideas."

"But don't, above all things," put in Ruth, "seek it in a small volume which I am preparing for the press, and which is to be entitled, *The Paradoxes of Pontycroft*."

IV

As Bertram walked back to Florence, down the steep, cobble-paved lanes, between the high villa walls, draped now with flowering cyclamen, while glimpses of the lily-city came and went before him, something like a phantom of Ruth Adgate floated by his side. Her voice was in his ears, the scent of her garments was in his nostrils; he saw her face, her eyes, her smiling red mouth, her fragile nervous body. "I have never met a woman who—who moved me so—troubled me so," he said. "Is it possible that I am in love with her? Already?" It seemed premature, it seemed unlikely; yet why couldn't he get her from his mind?

Be thou chaste as ice, pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny. He thought as he had thought again and again to-day, of Mrs. Wilberton. "Just so certainly," he argued, "as a woman is alone in the world, and young, and good-looking, just so certainly must slanderous tongues select her for their victim. Add wealth,—which trebles her conspicuousness,—which excites a thousand envies,—and—well, the Lord help her and those who profess themselves her friends. That exquisite young girl! Her fine old father was a moneylender, and she is paying the Pontycrofts to push her in society. Likely stories: Yet how are you to prevent people telling and believing them?"

He raised his hands towards the blue empyrean, and let them fall heavily back beside him, as one summoning angels and archangels to mark the relentless logic of evil. And the nine peasants who just then rattled past him in a cart drawn by a single donkey, rolled their eyes, and muttered among themselves, "Another mad Inglese."

"But oh, ye Powers," he groaned, groaned in the silence of his spirit, while audibly he laughed with laughter that really was sardonic, "if Ponty knew, if Ponty half suspected!" Pontycroft was a man with magnificent capacities for anger. If Pontycroft should come to know, as any day he might, as some day he almost inevitably must,—it was not pleasant to picture the rage that would fill him. And would it not extend, that rage of his, "to us, his friends," Bertram had to ask himself, "for not having put him on his guard, for not having given him a hint?" Alas, it almost certainly would. "What! You, my friends, you heard the beastly things people were saying, and you never warned me—you left me in fatuous ignorance of them!" Yes; bitter, scathing, would be Pontycroft's reproaches; and yet, and yet—Imagining a little the case of the man who should undertake to convey that warning, Bertram was conscious of a painful inward chill. "It is not for me to do it—no, I should simply never have the courage." The solution of the whole difficulty, of course, would be her marriage. "She should marry someone with a name and a position—a name and a position great enough in themselves to stifle scandal. If she should marry—" Well, a Prince of the house of Bertrandoni, for example.... But he did not get so far as quite to say these words. At the mere dim adumbration of the idea, he stopped short, stood still, and waited for his nerves to cease tingling, his heart to pound less violently.

"Is it conceivable that I am in love with a girl I've only seen twice in my life? And what manner of likelihood is there that she would have me? She refuses everyone, Ponty says; and that odious little Stuart Seton says she is in love with Ponty himself. No, I don't suppose I have the ghost of a chance. Still—still—she certainly didn't look or behave as if she was in love with Ponty; and that odious little Seton is just an odious little romancer; and as for her refusing everyone, *tant va la cruche à l'eau*—! Anyhow, a man may try, a man may pay his court. And if—But, good Heavens, I am forgetting my mother. What would my mother say?"

There were abundant reasons why the sudden recollection of his mother should give him pause. His mother was by no means simply the Duchess of Ultramaré, the consort of the Pretender to a throne. She was something, to her own way of measuring, much greater than this: she was an Austrian and a Wohenhoffen. Mere Semi-Royal Bertrandoni, mere Dukes of Ultramaré, mere Pretenders to the throne of Altronde, might marry whom they would; lineage, blood, quarterings, they might dispense with. But to a Wohenhoffen, to a noble of the noblesse of Austria, lineage, blood, quarterings were as essential as the breath of life. And Ruth Adgate was an American. And—have Americans quarterings? A daughter-in-law without them would, in all literalness, be less acceptable to his proud old Austrian Wohenhoffen of a mother, than a daughter-in-law without her five senses or without hands and feet; would be a thing, in fact, unthinkable. For people without quarterings, to the mind of your Austrian Wohenhoffens, constitute an entirely separate, not order, not estate, an entirely separate Race, an alien species, no more to be intermarried with than Esquimaux or Zulus.

Yes, there were plenty of reasons why the recollection of his mother should dash his soaring fancies. But fancies are stubborn things and by and bye they began anew to stir their pinions. True, his mother was an Austrian and a Wohenhoffen, yet at the same time she was the smiling embodiment of good-humour and good-nature, and she was the most sociable and the most susceptible soul alive,—she loved to be surrounded by amusing people, she formed the strongest friendships and attachments. If she were at Florence now, for example, and if the inhabitants of Villa Santa Cecilia were presented to her, she would take each of them to

her heart. She would like Pontycroft, she would like Lucilla, above all she would like Ruth; she would like her for her youth and freshness, for her prettiness, for her gaiety, for everything. She would like her, too, because she was a Catholic, the Duchess of Oltramare being an exceedingly devout daughter of the Church. And it would never occur to her to ask whether she had quarterings or not—it would never occur to her that so nice a person could fail to have them. And then—and then, when the question of quarterings *did* arise—Well, even Austrians, even Wohenhoffs, might perhaps gradually be brought to accustom themselves to new ideas. And then—well, even to a Wohenhoffen, the fact that you possess a handsome fortune will by no means lessen your attractiveness.

“As I live,” cried this designing son, “I’ll write to my mother to-night, and ask her to come to Florence.”

V

Of course, no sooner had Bertram left them, than Pontycroft turned to the ladies, and said, “Well——?”

“Well what?” teased Ruth, trying to look as if she didn’t understand.

“Boo,” said Pontycroft, making a face at her.

“He’s delightful,” said Lucilla; “so simple and unassuming, and unspoiled. And so romantic—like one of Daudet’s *rois en exil*. And he has such nice eyes, and such a nice slim athletic figure. Do you think it’s true that his people have no hope of coming to the throne? I’ve felt it in my bones that we should meet him again, ever since that night at the Lido. I knew it was all an act of Destiny. How wonderfully he speaks English—and thinks and feels it. He has quite the English point of view—he can see a joke. Oh, I’ve entirely lost my heart, and if I weren’t restrained by a sense of my obligations as a married woman I should make the most frantic love to him.”

Ruth lay back in her chair, and shook her head, and laughed.

“Oh, your swans, your swans,” she murmured.

“Dear Lady Disdain,” said Ponty, regarding her with an eye that was meant to wither, “it is better that a thousand geese should be mistaken for swans, than that a single swan should be mistaken for a goose. Oh, your geese, your geese!”

“Dear Lord Sententious,” riposted Ruth, “what is the good of making any mistake at all? Why not take swans for swans, geese for geese, and blameless little princelings for blameless little princelings? Yes, your little princeling seemed altogether blameless, an exceedingly well-meaning, well-mannered little princeling, but I saw no play of Promethean fire about his head, and when he spoke it sounded as if any normally intelligent young man was speaking.”

“Had you expected,” Pontycroft with lofty sarcasm inquired, “that, like the prince in *The Rose and Ring*, he would speak in verse?”

But next morning, in the most unexpected manner, she totally changed her note. Pontycroft found her seated in the sun on the lawn. It was a cool morning, and the sun’s warmth was pleasant. Here and there a dewdrop still glistened, clinging to a spear of grass; and the air was still sweet with the early breath of the earth. In her lap lay side by side an open letter and an oleander-blossom. Her eyes, Pontycroft perceived, were fixed upon the horizon, as those of one deep in a brown study.

“You mustn’t mind my interrupting,” he said, as he came up. “It’s really in your own interest. It’s bad for your little brain to let it think so hard, and it will do you good to tell me what it was thinking so hard about.”

Slowly, calmly, Ruth raised her eyes to his. “My little brain was thinking about Prince Charming,” she apprised him, in a voice that sounded grave.

Pontycroft’s wrinkled brow contracted.

“Prince Charming——?”

“The young Astyanax, the hope of—Altronde,” she explained. “Your friend, Bertrando Bertrandoni. I was meditating his manifold perfections.”

Pontycroft shook his head. “I miss the point of your irony,” he remarked.

“Irony?” protested she, with spirit. “When was I ever ironical? He’s perfectly delightful—so unassuming and unspoiled; and so romantic, like a king in exile. And with such a nice thin figure, and such large sagacious eyes. And he speaks such chaste and classic English, and is so quick to take a joke. If I weren’t restrained by a sense of what’s becoming to me as a single woman, I should make desperate love to him.”

Pontycroft shook his head again. “I still miss the point,” he said.

“I express myself blunderingly, I know,” said Ruth. “You see, it’s somewhat embarrassing for a girl to have to avow such sentiments. But really and truly and honestly, and all jesting apart, I think he’s an extremely nice young man, quite the nicest that I’ve met for a long, long while.”

“You sang a different song yesterday,” said Pontycroft, bewilderment and suspicion mingled in his gaze.

“*La nuit porte conseil*,” Ruth reminded him. “I’ve had leisure in which to revise my impressions. He’s a fellow who can talk, a fellow who’s curious about things. I hope we shall see a great deal of him.” She lifted up her oleander, pressed it to her face, and took a deep inhalation. “Bless its red fragrant heart,” she said.

“I never can tell when you are sincere,” Ponty hopelessly complained.

“I’m always sincere—but seldom serious,” Ruth replied. “What’s the good of being serious? Isn’t levity the soul of wit? Come, come! Life’s grim enough, in all conscience, without making it worse by being serious.”

“I give you up,” said Ponty. “You’re in one of your mystifying moods, and your long-suffering friends must wait until it passes.” Then nodding towards the open letter in her lap, “Whom’s your letter from?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” said Ruth, smiling with what seemed to him artificial brightness.

“Don’t know? Haven’t you read it?” he demanded.

“Oh yes, I’ve read it. But I don’t know whom it’s from, because it isn’t signed. It’s what they call anonymous,” Ruth suavely answered. “Now isn’t *that* exciting?”

"Anonymous?" cried Ponty, bristling up.

"Who on earth can be writing anonymous letters to a child like you? What's it about?"

"By the oddest of coincidences," said Ruth, "it's about *you*."

"About *me*?" Ponty faltered, a hundred new wrinkles adding themselves to his astonished brow: "An anonymous letter—to *you*—about me?"

"Yes," said Ruth pleasantly. "Would you care to read it?" She held it up to him. He took it.

Written in a weak and sprawling hand, clearly feminine, on common white paper, it ran, transliterated into the conventional spelling of our day, as follows:—

"Miss Ruth Adgate, Madam.—I thought you might like to know that your friend, H. Pontycroft, Esq. who passes himself off for a bachelor is a married man, eighteen years ago being married privately to a lady whose father kept a public in Brighton of the name of Ethel Driver. The lady lives at 18 Spring Villas Beckenham Road Highgate off a mean pittance from her husband who is ashamed of her and long ago cast off.

"Yours, a sincere well-wisher."

Pontycroft's wrinkles, as he read, concentrated themselves into one frown of anger, and the brown-red of his face darkened to something like purple. At last he tore the letter lengthwise and crosswise into tiny fragments, and thrust them into the side pocket of his coat.

"Let me see the envelope," he said, reaching out his hand. But there was nothing to be got from the envelope. It was postmarked Chelsea, and had been addressed to Ruth's house in town, and thence forwarded by her servants.

"Who could have written it? And why? Why?" he puzzled aloud.

"The writer thought I 'might like to know,'" said Ruth, quoting the text from memory. "But, of course, it's none of my business—so I don't ask whether it is true."

"No, it's none of your business," Ponty agreed, smiling upon her gravely, his anger no longer uppermost. "But I hope you won't quite believe the part about the 'pittance.' My solicitors pay all her legitimate expenses, and if I don't allow her any great amount of actual money, that's because she has certain unfortunate habits which it's better for her own sake that she shouldn't indulge too freely. Well, well, you see how the sins of our youth pursue us. And now—shall we speak of something else?"

"Poor Harry," said Ruth, looking at him with eyes of tender pity. "Speak of something else? Oh yes, by all means," she assented briskly. "Let's return to Astyanax. When do you think he will pay his visit of digestion?"

PART THIRD

I

HE paid his visit of digestion as soon as, with any sort of countenance, he could—he paid it the next afternoon; and when he had gone, Pontycroft accused Ruth of having "flirted outrageously" with him.

Ruth, her head high, repudiated the charge with a great show of resentment. "Flirted? I was civil to him because he is a friend of yours. If you call that flirting, I shall know how to treat him the next time we meet."

"Brava!" applauded Ponty, gently clapping his hands. Then he knotted their bony fingers round his knees, leaned back lazily, and surveyed her with laughing eyes. "Beauty angered, Innocence righteously indignant! You draw yourself up to the full height of your commanding figure in quite the classic style; your glances flash like fierce Belinda's, when she flew upon the Baron; and I never saw anything so haughty as the elevated perk of your pretty little nosebud. But

How say you? O my dove—

let us not come to blows about a word. I don't know what recondite meanings you may attach to 'flirting'; but when a young woman hangs upon a man's accents, as if his lips were bright Apollo's lute strung with his hair, and responds with her own most animated conversation, and makes her very handsomest eyes at him, and falls one by one into all her most becoming poses, and appears rapt into oblivion of the presence of other people—flirting is what ordinary dictionary-fed English folk call it."

And he gave his head a jerk of satisfaction, as one whose theorem was driven home.

Ruth tittered—a titter that was an admission of the impeachment. "Well? What would you have?" she asked, with a play of the eyebrows. "I take it for granted that you haven't produced this young man without a purpose, and I have never known you to produce any young man for any purpose except one. So the more briskly I lead him on, the sooner will he come to—to what, if I am not mistaken"—she tilted her chin at an angle of inquiry—"dictionary-fed English folk call the scratch."

Pontycroft gave his head a shake of disapproval. "No, no; Bertram is too good a chap to be trifled with," he seriously protested. "You shouldn't lead him on at all, if you mean in the end, according to what seems your incorrigible habit, to put him off." Ruth's eyebrows arched themselves in an expression of simplicity surprised.

"Why should you suppose that I mean anything of the sort?"

Pontycroft studied her with a frown. "You unconscionable little pickle! Do you mean that you would accept him?"

"I don't know," she answered slowly, reflecting. "He's a very personable person. And he's a prince—which, of course, rather dazzles my democratic fancy. And I suppose he's well enough off not to be after a poor girl merely for her money. And—well—on the whole—don't you see?—well—perhaps a poor girl might go further and fare worse."

She pointed her stammering conclusion by a drop of the eyelids and a tiny wriggle of the shoulders.

"In fact, when you said you would die a bachelor, you never thought you would live to be married," Pontycroft commented, making a face, slightly wry, the intention of which wasn't clear. He felt about his pockets for his cigarette case, lighted a cigarette, and smoked half an inch of it in silence. "At any rate," he went on, "here's news for your friends. And what—by the by—what about deathless Aphrodite? 'The only man you ever really cared for'—what becomes of that poor devil?"

A light kindled in Ruth's eyes; not an entirely friendly light; a light that seemed to threaten. But all she said was, "How do you know that that poor devil isn't Bertram Bertrandoni himself?"

The gesture with which Pontycroft flicked the ash from his cigarette proclaimed him a bird not to be caught with chaff.

"Gammon," he said. "You'd never seen him."

"Never seen him?" retorted Ruth, her face astonished and reproachful. "You are forgetting Venice. Why shouldn't I have lost my young affections to him that night at Venice? You haven't a notion how romantic it all was, with the moonlight and everything, and Lucilla quoting Byron, and then Astyanax, in a panama hat, dashing to our assistance like a knight out of a legend. Isn't it almost a matter of obligation for distressed females to fall in love with the knights who dash to their assistance?"

"Hruff," growled Pontycroft, smoking, "why do you waste these pearls of sophistry on me?"

Ruth laughed.

"All right," she unblushingly owned up. "The only man I've ever seriously cared for isn't Bertrando Bertrandoni. But what then? Let us look at it as men of the world. What has that poor devil got to do with the question of my marriage? You yourself told me that he was the last man alive I should think of leading to the altar. You said the persons we care for in our calf-period are always the wrong persons. And what some people say carries double weight, because"—that not entirely friendly light flickered again in her eyes for a second—"because they teach by example as well as precept."

And of course the words weren't out of her mouth before she regretted them.

Pontycroft said nothing, made no sign. It may be that his sun-burned skin flushed a little, that the lines of his forehead wavered. He sat with his homely face turned towards Florence, and appeared to be considering the effect of his cigarette-smoke on the view.

Ruth waited, and the interval seemed long. She looked guilty, she looked frightened, her eyes downcast, her lips parted, a conscious culprit, bowing her head to receive the blow she had provoked. But no blow fell. She waited as long as flesh and blood could stand the suspense. At last she sprang up.

"Oh," she cried wildly, "why don't you crush me? Why don't you tell me I'm a beast? Why don't you tell me you despise me—loathe me—for being—for being such a cad? Oh, Harry, I am so sorry."

She stood before him with tight-clasped hands, her whole form rigid in an anguish of contrition. To have taunted him with a thing for which she should have greatly pitied him, a secret she had no right even to know, a grief, a shame, to which in decency she should never remotely have alluded—oh, it was worse than brutal, it was cattish, treacherous, it was base.

But he smiled up at her from calm eyes.

"What's the row?" he asked. "What are you sorry about? You very neatly scored a point, that's all. Besides, on the subject in question, a fellow in the course of years will have said so many stinging things to himself as to have rendered him reasonably tough. And now then"—he gaily shifted his key—"since Bertram isn't the favoured swain, let us hope he soon will be. It's every bit as easy to fall in love with one man as with another, and often a good deal easier. Come—sit down—concentrate your mind upon Bertram's advantages—and remember that words break no bones."

Ruth's attitude had relaxed, her face had changed, contrition fading into what looked like disappointment, disillusion, and then like a kind of passive bitterness. Pontycroft waved his hand towards her chair. Automatically, absently, she obeyed him, and sat down.

"I must beg pardon," she said, with rather a bitter little smile, "for my exhibition of emotion. I had forgotten how Englishmen hate such exhibitions. It is vulgar enough to *feel* strong emotions—a sort of thing that should be left to foreigners and the lower classes; but to *show* them is to take an out-and-out liberty with the person we show them to, the worst possible bad form. Well, well! Words breaks no bones; 'hearts, though, sometimes,' the poet added: but there again, poets are vulgar-minded, human creatures, born as a general rule at Camberwell, and what can they know of the serene invulnerability of heart that is the test of real good-breeding? Anyhow"—her face changed again, lighting up—"what you say about its being often a good deal easier to fall in love with one man than with another is lamentably true—that's why we don't invariably love with reason. Your thought has elsewhere found expression in song—how does it go?" Her eyes by this time were shining with quite their wonted mirthful fires, yet deep down in them I think one might still have discerned a shadow of despite, as she sang:—

Rien n'y fait, menace ou prière;
L'un parle bien, l'autre se tait;
Et c'est l'autre que je préfère,—

"Thank goodness," cried the cheerful voice of Lucilla. "Thank goodness for a snatch of song." Plump and soft, her brown hair slightly loosened, her fair skin flushed a little by the warmth of the afternoon, she came, with that "languid grace" which has been noted, up the terrace steps, her arms full of fresh-cut roses, so that she moved in the centre of a nebula of perfume. "Only I wish now it had been a blackbird or a thrush. I've spent half an hour wandering in the garden, and not a bird sang once. The silence was quite dispiriting. A garden without birds is a more ridiculous failure than a garden without flowers. I think I shall give this villa up." She shed her roses into a chair, and let herself, languidly, gracefully, sink into another.

"Birds never do sing in the autumn—do they?" questioned Ruth.

"That's no excuse," complained Lucilla. "Why don't they? Isn't it what they're made for?"

"Robins do," said Ponty, "they're singing their blessed little hearts out at this very moment."

"Where?" demanded Lucilla eagerly, starting up. "I'll go and hear them."

"In England," answered her brother; "from every bush and hedgerow."

"G-r-r-r-h!" Lucilla ejaculated, deep in her throat, turning upon him a face that was meant to convey at once a sense of outrage and a thirst for vengeance, and showing her pretty teeth. "Humbug is such a cheap substitute for wit. Why don't other birds sing? Why don't blackbirds, thrushes?"

"Because," Pontycroft obligingly explained, "birds are chock-full of feminine human nature. They're the artists of the air, and—you know the proverb—every artist is at heart a woman. June when they woo, December when they wed, they sing—just as women undulate their hair—to beguile the fancy of the male upon whom they have designs. But once he's safely married and made sure of, the feminine spirit of economy asserts itself, and they sing no longer. *A quoi bon?* They save their breath to cool their pottage."

"What perfect nonsense," said Lucilla, curling a scornful lip. "It's a well-known fact that only the male birds sing."

"Apropos of male and female," Ponty asked, "has it never occurred to you that some one ought to invent a third sex?"

"A third?" expostulated Ruth, wide-eyed. "Good heavens! Aren't there already two too many?"

"One is too many, if you like," Ponty distinguished, uncoiling his legs and getting upon his feet, "but two are not enough. There should be a third, for men to choose their sisters from. You women have always been too good for us, and nowadays, with your higher education, you're becoming far too clever. See how Lucilla caught me out on a point in natural history."

With which he retreated into the house.

II

But a week or so later, Bertram having found an almost daily occasion for coming to Villa Santa Cecilia, "It really does begin to look," Ponty said, in a tone that sounded tentatively exultant, "as if at last we were more or less by way of getting her off our hands. *Unberufen*," he made haste to add, zealously tapping the arm of his wicker chair.

"Oh—?" Lucilla doubted, her eyebrows going up. Then, on reflection, "It certainly looks," she admitted, "as if Prince Bertrandoni were very much taken with her. But so many men have been that, poor dears," she remembered, sighing, "and you know with what fortune."

"Ah, but in this case I'm thinking of *her*," Ponty eagerly discriminated. "It's she who seems taken with Prince Bertrandoni. I half believe she's actually in love with him—and, anyhow, I wouldn't mind betting she'd accept him. *Unberufen*."

Lucilla's soft face wondered. "In love with him?" she repeated. "Why should you think that?"

"Oh, reasons as plentiful as blackberries," Ponty answered. "The way in which she brightens up at his arrival, absorbs herself in him while he's here, wilts at his departure, and then, during his absence, mopes, pines, muses, falls pensive at all sorts of inappropriate moments, as one whose heart is hugging something secret and bitter-sweet. Of course, I'm only a man, and inexperienced, but I should call these the symptoms of a maid in love—and evidences that she loves her love with a B. However, in love or not, it's plain she likes him immensely, and I'll bet a sovereign she's made up her mind to marry him if he asks her."

"Oh, he'll ask her fast enough," Lucilla with confidence predicted. "It's only a question of her giving him a chance."

Ponty shook his wrinkled brow. "I wish I were cocksure of that," he said. "You see, after all, he's not as other men. On one side he's a semi-royalty, and there are dynastic considerations; on t'other side he's a Wohenhoffen, and, with every respect for the house of Adgate, I'm doubting whether the Wohenhoffs would quite regard them as even birthish. Of course, she has money, and money might go a long way towards rose-colouring their visions. Still, their vision is a thing he'd have to reckon with. No—I'm afraid he may continue to philander, and let 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would,' unless she gives him a good deal more than a mere chance—unless she gives him positive encouragement—unless, in fine, by showing the condition of her own heart she sweeps the poor fellow off his feet. You question whether she's in love with him. Dear child, why shouldn't she be? 'Tis Italy, 'tis springtime, and whither should a young girl's fancy turn? Besides, she has red hair."

"Springtime?" protested Lucilla. "I thought it was September."

"So it is," agreed her brother, flourishing his cigarette. "But September in Italy is proud-pied April under a pseudonym. The April winds are passional for bachelors and dames. Besides, she has red hair."

"Red hair?" protested Lucilla. "Her hair is brown."

"So it is," agreed her brother, with a second flourish. "But the larger includes the less. I did not say she was

a red-haired woman. A red-haired woman is red, a black-haired woman is black, and there's an end on't; expect no mystery, no semi-tones, no ambiguities. I said she had red hair, and so she has, since her hair is brown. A brown-haired woman is everything, is infinite variety, is as elusively multi-coloured as a dying dolphin. A brown-haired woman's hair is red, black, blue, green, purple, amber, with their thousand intermediates, according to mood and tense. Oh, give me a brown-haired woman, and surprises, improbabilities, perplexities, will never be to seek. A brown-haired woman has red hair, and red hair means a temperament and a temper. No, I honestly think our little brown-haired friend, in just so far as her hair is red, is feeling foolish about Bertram, and I look hopefully forward (*unberufen*) to the day when her temper or her temperament will get the better of her discretion, and let him see what's what. Then (*unberufen*) his native chivalry will compel him to offer her his hand. Thank goodness she has money."

"It's very handsome of you," said Ruth, for the first time coming into the conversation, though she had been present from its inception, "it's very handsome indeed of you to take so much interest in my affairs—and to discuss them so frankly before my face."

"It *is* handsome of us," agreed Pontycroft, chucking his cigarette away, "and I am glad you appreciate it. For we might be discussing the weather, a vastly more remunerative theme. Has it ever struck you how inept the duffers are who taboo the weather as a subject of conversation? There's nothing else in the physical universe so directly vital to man's welfare as the weather, nothing on which his comfort so immediately depends, and nothing (to take a higher ground) that speaks such an eloquent and varied language to his sense of beauty. The music of the wind, the colours of the sky, the palaces and pictures in the clouds! Yet duffers taboo it as a subject of conversation. The weather is the physiognomy of Heaven towards us, its smile or frown. What else should we discuss? Hello, here he comes."

Bertram came up the garden path and mounted the terrace.

"My mother," he announced, "is arriving this evening from Vienna. I was wondering whether you would lunch with us to-morrow, to make her acquaintance."

"Oho," whispered Ponty in Ruth's ear, "this really does look like business. Madame Mère is coming to look you over."

III

I don't know how it is that certain people, without doing or saying anything that can be taken hold of, yet manage to convey to us a very definite and constant sense that they think themselves our betters. Oh, of course, there are people who ostentatiously carry their heads in the air, who openly swagger, patronise, condescend, but those are not the people I mean. I mean the people who are outwardly all pleasantness and respectful courtesy, and inwardly very likely all goodwill, and yet—and yet—we are somehow never allowed for an instant to forget that never do they for an instant become unconscious of their divinely appointed superiority.

"La Duchesse d'Oltromare, née Comtesse de Wohenhoffen," to copy the legend from her visiting-card, was rather a fat, distinctly an amiable woman of fifty-something, very smartly turned out in the matter of costume by those who are surely the cleverest milliners and dressmakers in the world, the Viennese. She had a milk-white skin, with a little pink in the scarcely wrinkled cheeks, and plump, smooth, milk-white hands, with polished, rosy nails. For the rest, her smiling mouth, the gleam of her grey eyes, and something crisp in the quality of her voice, seemed to connote wit and a sense of humour. Her son had described her to himself as the best-natured and the most sociable being alive; certainly on the morrow, at luncheon, she was all pleasantness, all cordiality even, to her son's guests; yet never, for an instant, could one of them forget that she was perpetually conscious of herself as a great personage, and of them as relatively very small folk indeed. I wish I could tell, I wish I could understand, how the thing was done. Of patronage or condescension—of the sort, at any rate, that could be formulated and resented—there wasn't any trace either in her talk or in her manner; nor of stiffness, pomposity, selfimportance. All pleasantness, all cordiality, she seemed to take them at once into her friendship, almost into her affection—she seemed to conceive (as Bertram had promised himself she would) a particular liking for each of them. And her talk was easy, merry, vivacious, intimate. Yet—yet—yet—

"I'd give a thousand pounds," said Pontycroft, as they drove home, "for that woman's secret. She knows how to appear the joiiliest old soul unhung—and to make other people feel like her fiddlers three."

"She's insufferable," said Lucilla irritably. "I should think a Pontycroft and the wife of an English baronet is as good as six foreign duchesses. I should like to put her in her place."

"A Pontycroft, as much as you will," concurred her brother suavely, "but you're only the wife of an Irish baronet, dear girl. No, it's something subtle, unseizable. Every word, look, gesture, hailed you as her friend and equal, and all of them together delicately kept you reminded that she was deigning hugely to honour a nobody. It's sheer odyllic force."

"She ate like five," Lucilla went spitefully on. "She was helped twice to everything. And she emptied at least a whole bottle of wine."

"Ah, well, as for that," Ponty said, "a healthy appetite is a sign that its owner is human at the red-ripe of the heart. You didn't, by the by, do so badly yourself."

"And she consumed her food with an *air*," Lucilla persisted, "with a kind of devotional absorption, as if feeding herself was a religious sacrifice."

"And I suppose you noticed also that she called Ruth 'my dear'?" Ponty asked.

"Yes, as if she was a dairymaid," sniffed Lucilla. "I wonder you didn't turn and rend her."

"Oh, I liked her," Ruth replied. "You see, we mere Americans are so inured to being treated with affability and put at our ease by our English cousins that we scarcely notice such things in foreigners."

"Well, it's lucky you like her," said Ponty, wagging his head, "for you're in a fair way to see a good bit of her, if events move as they're moving. The crucial question, of course, is whether *she* liked *you*. If she did, I

should call the deal as good as done."

The "deal" seemed, at any rate, to advance a measurable step when, on the following afternoon, the Duchess called at the villa, for the purpose, as Pontycroft afterwards put it to Ruth, of "taking up your character."

"Dearest Lady Dor," she said, beaming upon every one, and I wish I could render the almost cooing loving-kindness of her intonation, "you will forgive me if I come like this *à l'improviste*? Yes? I was so anxious to see you again, and when people are mutually sympathetic, it is a pity to let time or etiquette delay the progress of their friendship, don't you think? Oh, kind Mr. Pontycroft," she purred, as Ponty handed her a cup of tea. "Dear little Miss Adgate," as Ruth passed the bread and butter.

They drank their tea in the great hall, and afterwards, linking her arm familiarly in Lucilla's, "Dearest Lady Dor," she pronounced, in the accents of one pleading for a grace, "I am so anxious to see your beautiful garden! You will show it to me? Yes? My son has told me so much about it."

And when she and Lucilla, under their sunshades, were alone in the garden-paths, "The outlook is magnificent," she vowed, with enthusiasm. "You have Florence at your feet. Superb. Oh, the lovely roses! I might pick one—a little one? Yes? Ah, so kind. I wanted to ask about your charming little friend, that nice Miss Adgate."

"Oh?" said Lucilla, in a tone of some remoteness.

But the Duchess did not appear to notice it. "Yes," she blithely pursued. "You don't mind? My son has told me so much about her. She is an American, I think?"

"Yes," said Lucilla.

The Duchess's eyes glowed with admiration.

"Your ilex trees are wonderful—I have never seen grander ones. I am really envious. She has nice manners, and is distinguished-looking as well as pretty. I believe she is also—how do you say in English—*très bien dotée*?"

"She has about thirty thousand a year, I believe," said Lucilla.

The Duchess stood still and all but gasped. "Thirty thousand pounds? Pounds sterling?" Then she resumed her walk. "But that is princely. That is nearly a million francs."

"It is a decent income," Lucilla admitted.

"And she is also, of course, what you call—well born?" the Duchess threw out, as if the question were superfluous and its answer foregone.

"She is what we call a gentlewoman," answered Lucilla.

"To be sure—of course," said the Duchess, "but—but without a title?"

"In England titles are not necessary to gentility—as I believe they are in Austria," Lucilla mentioned.

"To be sure—of course," said the Duchess. "Her parents, I think, are not living?"

"No—they are dead," Lucilla redundantly responded.

"Ah, so sad," murmured the Duchess, with a sympathetic movement of her bonnet. "But then she is quite absolute mistress of her fortune? What a responsibility for one so young. And to crown all, she is a good pious Catholic?"

"She is a Catholic," said Lucilla.

"The house, from here, is really imposing—really *signorile*," the Duchess declared, considering it through her silver-framed double eyeglass. "There are no houses like these old Florentine villas. Ah, they were a lovely race. You see, my son is very much interested in her. I have never known him to show so much interest in a girl before. It is natural I should wish to inform myself, is it not? If you will allow me, dear Lady Dor, to make you a confidence, I should be so glad to see him married."

"Yes," said Lucilla. "I suppose," she hesitated, "I suppose it is quite possible for him, in spite of his belonging to a reigning house, to marry a commoner?"

The Duchess looked vague. "A reigning house?" she repeated, politely uncomprehending.

"The Bertrandoni-Altronde," Lucilla disjointedly explained.

"Oh," said the Duchess, with a little toss of the head. "The Bertrandoni do not count. They have not reigned for three generations, and they will never reign again. They have no more chance of reigning than they have of growing wings. The Altrondesi would not have them if they came bringing paradise in their hands. My husband's pretensions are absurd, puerile. He keeps them up merely that he may a little flatter himself that he is not too flagrantly the inferior of his wife. No, the Bertrandoni do not count. It is the Wohenhoffs who count. The Wohenhoffs were great lords and feudal chiefs in Styria centuries before the first Bertrandoni won his coat of arms. It was already a vast waiving of rank, it was just not a *mésalliance*, when a Wohenhoffen gave his daughter to a Bertrandoni in marriage. If my son were a Wohenhoffen in the male line, then indeed he could not possibly marry a commoner. But he is, after all, only a Bertrandoni. Even so, he could not marry a commoner of any of the Continental states—he could not marry outside the Almanach de Gotha. But in England, as you say, it is different. There all are commoners except the House of Peers, and a title is not necessary to good *noblesse*. In any case, it would be for the Wohenhoffs, not for the Bertrandoni, to raise objections."

"I see," said Lucilla.

The Duchess, by a gesture, proposed a return to the house.

"Thank you so much," she said, "for receiving me so kindly, and for answering all my tiresome questions. You have set my mind quite at ease. Your garden is perfect—even more beautiful than my son had led me to expect. And the view of Florence! You have children of your own? Ah, daughters. No, boys? Ah, but you are young. The proper thing for him to do, of course, as she is without parents, would be to address himself to your good brother?"

"As it is not my brother whom he wishes to marry," said Lucilla, "I should think the proper thing might be for him to address the young lady herself."

The Duchess laughed. "Ah, you English are so unconventional," she said.

But after the Duchess had left them, and Lucilla had reported her cross-examination, "You see," said Ponty, with an odd effect of discontent in the circumstance, "it is as I told you—the deal is practically done. Now that mamma has taken up your character, and found it satisfactory, it only remains for—for Mr. Speaker to put the question. Well," his voice sounded curiously joyless, "I wish you joy."

"Thank you," said Ruth, who did not look especially joyful.

There was a silence for a few minutes; then Ponty got up and strolled off into the garden; whither, in a few minutes more, Lucilla followed him.

"What's the matter, Harry?" she asked. "You seem a bit hipped."

He gave her a rather forced smile. "I feel silly and grown old," he said. "Suppose it's all a ghastly mistake?"

"A mistake——?" Lucilla faltered.

"Oh," he broke out, with a kind of gloomy petulance, "it was all very well so long as it hung fire. One joked about it, chaffed her about it. Deep down in one's inside one didn't believe it would ever really come to anything. But now? Marriage, you see, when you examine the bare bones of it, is a damnably serious business. After all, it involves sanctities. Suppose she doesn't care for him?"

Lucilla looked bewildered. "Dear me," she said. "The other day you assured me that she did."

"Perhaps she does—but suppose she doesn't? I was talking in the air. Down deep one didn't believe. But this official visit from Mamma! We're suddenly at grip with an actuality. If she doesn't care for him—by Jove," he nodded portentously, "you and I will have something to answer for. It's a threadbare observation, but all at once it glitters with pristine truth, that a woman who marries a man without loving him sells her soul to the devil."

"If she doesn't love him, she won't accept him. Why should she?" said Lucilla.

"And the worst of selling your soul to the devil," Pontycroft went morosely on, "is that the sly old beggar gives you nothing for it. Legends like Faust, where he gives beauty, youth, wealth, unlimited command of the pleasures of the world and the flesh, are based upon entire misinformation as to his real way of doing business. Look here; the devil has been acquiring souls continuously for the past five thousand years. Practice has made him a perfect dab at the process—and he was born a perfect Jew. You may be sure he doesn't go about paying the first price asked—not he. He bides his time. He waits till he catches you in a scrape, or desperately hard up, or drunk, or out of your proper cool wits with anger, pride, lust, whichever of the seven deadly impulses you will, and then he grinds you like a money-lender, or chouses you like a sharper at a fair. Silver or gold gives he none, at most a handful of gilded farthings. And I know one man to whom he gave—well, guess. Nothing better than a headache the next morning. Oh, trust the devil. He knows his trade."

"Goodness gracious!" said Lucilla, and eyed her brother with perplexity. The wrinkles of his brow were black and deep. "You are in a state of mind. What has happened to you? Don't be a bird of evil omen. There's no question here of souls or devils—it's just a question of a very suitable match between young people who are fond of each other. Come! Don't be a croaker. I never knew you to croak like this before."

"Hang it all," answered Ponty, "I never had occasion. She's refused every one. Why does she suddenly make up her mind to accept this one? Well, I only hope it isn't because she thinks at last she has got her money's worth of titular dignity. Her Serene Highness the Princess!"

"Goodness gracious!" said Lucilla. "I don't understand you. Would you wish her to go on refusing people until she died an old maid?"

"I'll tell you one thing, anyhow—but under the rose," said Ponty.

"Yes?" said Lucilla, with curiosity.

"I'll bet you nine and elevenpence three-farthings that I can beat you at a game of tennis."

"Oh," said Lucilla, dashed. But after a moment, cheerfully, "Done," she assented. "I don't want to win your money—but anything to restore you to your normal self." They set off for the tennis court.

IV

And then, all at once, out of the blue came that revolution which, for nine days more or less, made obscure little Altronde the centre of the world's attention.

It happened, as will be remembered, when the Grand Duke was at luncheon, entertaining the officers of his guard; and it must have been a highly amusing scene. Towards the end of the refectory, Colonel Benedetti, contrary to all usage and etiquette, rose and said, "Gentlemen, I give you the Grand Duke." Whereupon twenty gallant uniforms sprang to their feet crying, "The Grand Duke! the Grand Duke!" with hands extended towards that monarch. Only each hand held, instead of a charged bumper of champagne, a charged revolver.

Massimiliano, according to his genial daily custom, was already comfortably intoxicated, but at this he fell abruptly sober. White, with chattering teeth, "What do you mean? What do you want?" he asked.

Colonel Benedetti succinctly explained, while the twenty revolvers continued to cover his listener. "Speaking for the army and people of Altronde, I beg to inform Your Highness that we are tired of you—tired of your rule and tired of your extravagant and disgusting habits. I hold in my hand an Act of Abdication, which Your Highness will be good enough to sign." He thrust an elaborately engrossed parchment under the Duke's nose, and offered him a fountain pen.

"This is treason," said Massimiliano. "It is also," was his happy anti-climax, "a gross abuse of hospitality."

"Sign—sign!" sang one-and-twenty martial voices.

"But I should read the document first. Do I abdicate in favour of my son?"

"Your Highness has no legitimate son," Benedetti politely reminded him, "and Altronde has no throne for a

bastard. You abdicate in favour of Civillo Bertrandoni, Duke of Oltramare, already our sovereign in the rightful line."

Massimiliano plucked up a little spirit. "Bertrandoni—the hereditary enemy of my house? That I will never do. You may shoot me if you will."

"It is not so much a question of shooting," said the urbane Colonel. "We cover Your Highness with our firearms merely to ensure his august attention. It is a question of perpetual imprisonment in a fortress—and deprivation of alcoholic stimulants." Massimiliano's jaw dropped.

"Whereas," the Colonel added, "in the event of peaceful abdication, Your Highness receives a pension of one hundred thousand francs, and can reside anywhere he likes outside the Italian peninsula—in Paris, for example, where alcohol in many agreeable forms is plentiful and cheap."

"Sign—sign!" sang twenty voices, with a lilt of gathering impatience.

Of course poor Massimiliano signed, Civillo forthwith was proclaimed from the palace steps, and at five o'clock that afternoon, amid much popular rejoicing, he entered his capital. He had happened, providentially, to be sojourning incognito in the nearest frontier town.

V

When next morning the news reached Villa Santa Cecilia, by the medium of a dispatch in the *Fieramosca*, we may believe it caused excitement.

"But it can't be true," said Lucilla. "Only two days ago the Duchess assured me—in all good faith, I'm certain—that her husband had no more chance of regaining his throne than he had of growing wings, and Bertram himself has always scoffed at the idea."

"Yes," said Ponty. "But perhaps Bertram and his mother were not entirely in the Pretender's confidence. This story, for a fake, is surprisingly apropos of nothing, and surprisingly circumstantial. No, I'm afraid it's true."

He reread the dispatch, frowning, seeking discrepancies.

"Oh, it's manifestly true," was his conclusion. "I suppose I ought to go down to the Lung 'Arno, and offer Bertram our congratulations. And as for you"—he bowed to Ruth,—"pray accept the expression of our respectful homage. Here, instead of an empty title, is the reversion of a real grand-ducal crown. And you a mere little American! What trifling results from mighty causes flow. A People rise in Revolution—that a mere little American girl may adorn her brown-red hair with a grand-ducal crown."

"The People don't appear to have had any voice in the matter," said Lucilla, poring over the paper. "It was just a handful of officers. It was what they call a Palace Revolution."

"It was what the judicious call a Comic Opera Revolution," said Ponty. "It was a Palace version of Box and Cox."

He went down to the Lung 'Arno, and found Bertram, pale, agitated, in the midst of packing.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, don't talk of congratulations," the troubled young man cried, walking up and down the floor, and all but wringing his hands, while his servant went methodically on folding trousers and waistcoats. "This may be altogether the worst thing that could possibly have happened, so far as I'm concerned."

"I see you're packing," Pontycroft remarked.

"Yes—we've had a telegram from my father ordering us to join him at once. We leave at twelve o'clock by a special train. My dear chap, I'm sick. I'm in a cold perspiration. Feel my hands." His hands were indeed cold and wet. He pressed one of them to his side. "And there's something here that weighs like a ton of ice. I can hardly breathe."

"The remedy indicated," said Ponty, "is a brandy-and-soda."

Bertram's gesture pushed the remedy from him.

"A single spoonful would make me drunk," he said. "I'm as nearly as possible off my head already. I feel as if I were going out to be hanged. If it weren't for my mother—some one's got to go with her—upon my word, I'd funk it, and take the consequences."

"*Allons donc*," Ponty remonstrated. "A certain emotion is what you must expect—it's part of the game. But think of your luck. Think of your grandeurs. Think of the experience, the adventure, that's before you. To be a real, actual, practising Royalty, a Royal Heir Apparent. Think of the new angle of view from which you'll be able to look at life."

"Luck? Don't speak of it," Bertram groaned. "If I had known, if I had dreamed. But we were kept in the dark absolutely. Oh, it was outrageous of the old man. We had a right at least to be warned, hadn't we? Since it involves our entire destinies? Since every one of our hopes, plans, intentions, great or small, is affected by it? We had a right to be warned, if not to be consulted. But never a word—until this morning—first the newspaper—and then his wire. Think of my mother being left to learn the thing from a newspaper. And then his wire: 'Come at once to Altronde.' I feel like a conscript. I feel like a man suddenly summoned from freedom to slavery."

"You'll find your chains bearable—you'll find them interesting," Ponty said. "You leave at noon by a special train. Is there any way, meanwhile, in which I can be useful to you?"

"Yes—no—no. Unless you can devise some way to get me out of the mess. The special train is for my mother. In her own fashion she's as much upset as I am. She could not travel *coram publico*, poor lady."

"No, of course not. I hope you will make her my compliments," said Ponty, rising.

"Thank you. And you will say good-bye to Lady Dor for us and—and to Miss Adgate," Bertram responded. But there was a catch in his voice, and he grew perceptibly paler. "I—I," he stumbled, hesitated, "I will write to you as soon as I know where I am."

Ponty went home thoughtful; thoughtful, but conscious of an elusive inward satisfaction. This rather puzzled him. "It's the sort of thing one feels when one has succeeded in evading an unpleasant duty—a sentiment of snugness, safety, safety and relief. But what unpleasant duty have I succeeded in evading?" he asked himself. Yet there it was—the comfortable sense of a duty shirked.

"I'm in doubt whether to hail you as the Queen Elect of Yvetot, or to offer you my condolences upon the queering of your pitch," he said to Ruth. "He loved and rode away. He certainly loved, and he's as certainly riding away—at twelve o'clock to-day, by a special train. I supposed he would charge me with a message for you—but no—none except a commonplace good-bye. No promise, nothing compromising, nothing that could be used as evidence against him. However, he said he'd write—as soon as he knew whether he was standing on his head or on his heels. One thing, though, you might do—there's still time. You might go to the railway station and cover his flight with mute reproaches. Perhaps the sight of your distraught young face would touch his conscience. You might get the necessary word from him before the train started."

"Be quiet, Harry," said Lucilla. "You shan't chaff her any longer. Prince Bertrandoni is a man of honour—and he's as good as pledged to her already. This is a merely momentary interruption. As soon as he's adjusted his affairs to the new conditions, he'll come back."

"Ay, we know these comings back," answered Ponty, ominously. "But a wise fisherman lands his fish while it's on the hook, and doesn't give it a chance of swimming away and coming back. I see a pale face at the window, watching, waiting; and I hear a sad voice murmuring, 'He cometh not.'"

"You're intolerable," Lucilla cried out, with an impatient gesture. "Ruth, don't pay him the least attention."

"Oh, don't mind me," said Ruth. "I'm vastly amused. Faithful are the wounds of a friend."

"There's just one element of hope," Ponty ended, "and that is that even to demi-semi Royalty a matter of thirty thousand a year must be a consideration."

A column from Altronde in the *Fieramosca* of the morrow gave a glowing description of Bertram's and his mother's arrival, which Pontycroft translated at the breakfast table: how the Grand Duke, in the uniform of a general, met and tenderly embraced them as they stepped from the train, and drove with them in a "lando di gala" through streets brilliant with flags and thronged by cheering subjects, to the Palace, escorted by the selfsame regiment of guards whose officers the other day had so summarily cooked the goose of Massimiliano. "That is pretty and touching," was Ponty's comment, "but listen to this—this is rich. The Grand Duke introduced them to his people, in a proclamation, as 'my most dear and ever dutiful son, and my beloved consort, the companion and consoler of my long exile!' What so false as truth is? Well, there's nothing either true or false but thinking makes it so. And the mayor and corporation, in a loyal address, welcomed Bertram as the 'heir to the virtues as well as to the throne of his august progenitor.' His august progenitor's virtues were jewels which, during his career in Paris, at any rate, he modestly concealed. However! Oh, but here—here's something that really *is* interesting. 'The festivities of the evening were terminated by a banquet, at which the Grand Duke graciously made a speech.' Listen to one of the things he said: 'It has been represented to me as the earnest aspiration of my people that my solemn coronation should be celebrated at the earliest possible date. But unhappily, the crown of my fathers has been sullied by contact with the brows of a usurping dynasty. That crown I will never wear. A new, a virgin crown must be placed upon the head of your restored legitimate sovereign. And I herewith commission my dear son, whom Heaven has endowed, among many noble gifts, with the eye and the hand of an artist, to design a crown which shall be worthy of his sire, himself, and his posterity.' Well, that will keep Bertram out of mischief. I see him from here—see and hear him—bending over his drawing-board, with busy pencil, and whistling 'The girl I left behind me.'"

And then a servant entered bearing a telegram.

"What will you give me," Ponty asked, when he had opened and glanced at it, "if I'll read this out?"

"Whom's it from?" asked Lucilla.

"The last person on earth that you'd expect," he answered. "Come, what will you give?"

"I believe it's from Prince Bertrandoni himself," cried Lucilla, agog. "If it is, we'll give you fits if you *don't* read it out—and at once." She showed him her clenched fist.

"Very good. Under that threat, I'll read it," remarked Ponty, and he read: "Arrived safely, but homesick for dear Villa Santa Cecilia. My mother joins her thanks to mine for your constant kindness. Will write as soon as an hour of tranquillity permits. Please give my affectionate greetings to Lady Dor and Miss Adgate, and beg them not to forget their and your devoted Bertram."

"There!" crowed Lucilla. "What did I tell you?"

Ponty looked up blankly. "What did you tell me?"

"That he would come back—that this was only a momentary interruption."

"Does he say anything about coming back?" Ponty asked, scrutinizing the straw-coloured paper. "That must have missed my eye."

"Boo," said Lucilla. "What does he mean by the hope of an early reunion?"

"A slip of the pen for blessed resurrection, I expect," said Ponty.

"Boo," said Lucilla. "It's the message of a man obviously, desperately, in love—yearning to communicate with his loved one—but to save appearances, or from lover-like timidity perhaps, addressing his communication to a third person. That telegram is meant exclusively for Ruth, and *you're* merely used as a gooseberry. Oh, Ruth, I *do* congratulate you." Ruth vaguely laughed.

PART FOURTH

I

FOR quite a week—wasn't it?—obscure little Altronde held the centre of the stage. The newspapers of France and England, as well as those of Italy, had daily paragraphs. Belated details, coming in like stragglers after a battle, gave vividness to the story. Massimiliano, at Paris, plaintively indignant, overflowed in interviews. In interviews also, in speeches, in proclamations, Civillo adumbrated, magniloquently, vaguely, his future policy. There were "Character Sketches," reminiscent, anecdotal, of Civillo, "By a lifelong Friend," of Massimiliano, "By a Former Member of his Household," etc. etc. There were even character sketches of poor Bertram, "By an Old Harrovian," "By One who knew him at Cambridge," which I hope he enjoyed reading. In the illustrated papers, of course, there were portraits. And in some of the weightier periodicals the past history of Altronde was recalled, a bleak, monotonous history, little more than a catalogue of murders....

With dagger thrusts and cups of poison, for something like three long sad hundred years, the rival houses of Bertrandoni and Ceresini had played the game of give and take. Finally, there were leading articles condemning the revolution as an act of brigandage, hailing it as a forward step towards liberty and light. And then, at the week's end, the theme was dropped.

We may believe that the newspapers were read with interest at Villa Santa Cecilia, and that to the mistress of that household, on the subject of Altronde, they never seemed to contain enough.

"It's almost as if we'd had a hand in the affair," she reflected; "but these scrappy newspaper accounts leave us with no more knowledge than as if we were complete outsiders. Why don't they give more particulars? Why aren't they more *intime*?"

"I'll tell you what," said Ponty, "let's go there. It's only half a day's journey. There we can study the question on the spot."

"Yes, and look as if we were running after him. No, thank you," sniffed Lucilla.

"I dare say we should look a little like accusing spirits, if he saw us," Ponty admitted.

"But let's go in disguise. We can shave our heads, stain our skins, wear elastic-sided boots and pass ourselves off as an Albanian currant merchant and his family travelling to improve our minds in foreign politics."

"I see Ruth and myself," Lucilla yawned, "swathed in embroideries and wearing elastic-sided boots, and presently we should be arrested as spies, and when our innocent curiosity had been well aired by the press, we should look to Bertram Bertrandoni more like accusing spirits than ever."

"You women," growled Pontycroft, extracting a cigarette from his cigarette case, "are so relentlessly cautious! You have no faith in the unexpected! That's why you'll never know the supreme content of throwing your bonnets over the mills, regardless of consequences."

"The Consequences!" Lucilla retorted, "they're too obvious. We should be left bareheaded, *et voilà tout!*"

"Ah, well—there you are," replied Ponty, and touched a match to his cigarette.

Yes, we may believe that the newspapers were read with interest at the Villa Santa Cecilia and that they gave the man there occasion for what his sister called "a prodigious deal of jawing."

"Well, my poor Ariadne," he commiserated, "ginger is still hot in the mouth, and Naxos is still a comfortable place of sojourn. Our star has been snatched from us and borne aloft to its high orbit in the heavens; we from our lowly coigne of earth can watch and unselfishly rejoice at its high destiny. Of course, the one thing to regret is that you didn't nail him when you had him. Nail the wild star to its track in the half-climbed Zodiac," he advised, sententious.

And in spirit ripe for mischief, Ponty bethought him of a long-forgotten poem, and he went all the way down to Vieusseux to procure a volume of the works of Wordsworth. Henceforth, dreamily, from time to time, he would fall to repeating favourite lines. For nearly a day Ruth bore, with equanimity tempered by repartee, a volley of verse:

"He was a lovely youth, I guess"

said Ponty,

"The panther in the wilderness
Was not so fair as he."

"I cannot dispute it. He was good-looking," Ruth suavely returned.

"But,"—this he let fall from the terrace an hour later, to Ruth engaged below in snipping dead leaves from Lucilla's clambering rose bushes,—

"But, when his father called, the youth
Deserted his poor bride, and Ruth
Could never find him more."

"Fathers make, like mothers, I imagine, a poor substitute for brides," said Ruth. She glanced at him with amusement. "Never, my nurse used to tell me, is a good while. Did that foolish youth find his bride?" she

added, absorbed apparently in her occupation, "when he came back to claim her? As he did at last, you may rest assured."

Pontycroft made no reply to this question, but he placed his book on the table and prepared to descend the steps:

"God help thee, Ruth,"

he exclaimed.

"Such pains she had
That she in half a year went mad."

"I'm sure she would have gone mad in twenty-four hours if you had been by to persecute the poor thing," answered Ruth. She beat a hasty retreat towards the Pergola, whither, she knew, Ponty's laziness would check pursuit of her.

"When Ruth was left half desolate," Ponty, casually, after luncheon, observed—

"Her lover took another state.
And Ruth not thirty years old."

"Ruth, it seems to me, was old enough to have known better," retorted his victim with asperity. "You haven't scanned that last line properly either. 'And Ruth not thirty years old' gives the correct lilt." Ruth sat down to write her letters. She turned her back with deliberation upon her tormentor, who answered: "Oh, yes, thanks," and went off murmuring and tattooing on his fingers,—

"And Ruth not thirty years old...."

II

Towards five o'clock of that day, Lucilla and Ruth, spurred and booted—hatted and gloved from their afternoon's drive, appeared for tea upon the terrace. Ponty without loss of time opened fire:

"A slighted child, at her own will,
Went wandering over dale and hill
In thoughtless freedom bold."

"Only that I can't wander, in thoughtless freedom bold, over dale and hill in this fair false land of Italy," cried Ruth, exasperated, "I should start at once for a fortnight's walking tour. I feel an excessive desire to remove myself from a deluge of poetic allusions which threatens to get on my nerves. Moreover," she added severely, "I quite fail to see their application."

She sat down, drew her gloves off with a little militant air, and prepared to pour the tea which the servant had placed upon a table at her elbow. In the fine October weather the terrace, provided with abundance of tables, chairs and rugs, made, with its superb view over Florence, the pleasantest of *al fresco* extensions to the drawing-room.

"There, there, there, Ruthie!" soothed Pontycroft, "don't resent a little natural avuncular chaff. *I must play the fool or play the devil*. You wouldn't wish to suppress my devouring curiosity, would you? Here's a situation brimful of captivating possibilities. You wouldn't have me sit in unremunerative silence, in sterile torpor before this case of a little American girl, who, on any day of the week, may be called to assume the exalted rôle of Crown Princess of Altronde?"

"Yes," frowned Ruth, "I should very much like to suppress your devouring curiosity; I should like extremely to reduce you to a state of unremunerative silence, torpor, on that verily sterile topic. And, moreover, so far as I can see, the Royal Incident may now be billeted closed, for weal or for woe."

"One can never be quite sure about these Royal Incidents," her tormentor persisted, "that's the lark about 'em—they're never closed. For sheer pig-headed obstinacy give me a Crown Prince. Our friend Bertram is capable of letting his Queen Mamma in for a deal of trouble in view of present circumstances, if she should, as she's likely to do—want now to marry him off to some Semi-Royalty or German Grand Duchess or another."

"*Si puo*," riposted Ruth with hauteur, "I withdraw myself in advance from the competition. And I should like, please, to be spared any more allusions to the subject."

But here Lucilla, who had been sipping her tea and worshipping the view, interrupted them:

"Do *please* cease from wrangling," she implored. "Hold your breaths both of you—and behold!"

A haze all golden,—an impalpable dust of gold,—filled the entire watch-tower of the Heavens. Florence, twice glorified, lay bathed in yellow light that filtered benignantly upon roofs and gardens, played, glanced, upon Duomo, Campanile, and Baptistery. The Arno had become a way of gold. Webs of yellow gauze, spun across the streets and reflected by a thousand windows, made, among the many gardens, a burnished background for the twigs and branches of dark aspiring cypresses, glossy leaved ilexes.

Ruth and Pontycroft held their breaths, and, for a moment, there was a silence.

"I wonder," Lucilla said at length,—she gave a little soft sigh of satisfaction,—“I wonder what Prince Bertrandoni has done with Balzatore.... Taken him, do you suppose, to reign over the dogs of Altronde? I miss that dog sadly.”

“Balzatore?—Oh,” said Ponty, “Balzatore is throning it at the Palazzo Reale.... He has a special attendant who waits on him, sees to his bodily comforts; prepares his food, takes him for his walks,—for of course Bertram is far too involved in Court functions, too tied by etiquette and the fear of Anarchists to go for long solitary rambles; and Balzatore bullies the servants, one and all, you may be sure. Dogs, even the best of 'em, are shocking snobs. In a measure Balzatore is enjoying himself. It hardly requires a pen'orth of imagination to be positive of it. And,” Pontycroft continued, “I hear that the Palazzo Bertrandoni has been leased for a number of years to an American painter. By the way, it seems that Bertram's bookcases, which, saving your presences, I grieve to state, were filled with very light literature—the writings of decadent poets, people who begin with a cynicism”—Pontycroft paused, hesitated for the just word.

“A cynicism with which nobody ends!” Ruth interjected.

“Invaluable young thing! Thanks awfully. Who begin, as you say, with a cynicism with which nobody ends, as you quite aptly infer. Filled, too, I regret to state, with rare editions, a trifle, well—perhaps a bit eighteenth century—and with yellow paper-covered French novels. These bookcases are expiating a life of frivolity within the four walls of a Convent. They were offered by Bertram's mother to some Sisters of Charity whose temporal welfare she looks after. The good nuns were glad to have the shelves for their poor schools and have packed them with edifying books.... So it happens that to-day they ornament both sides of the Convent-Parloir, and thus it is that Bertram's bookshelves are atoning for the gay, wild, extravagant, old days within convent walls.”

Lucilla tittered. “Shall our end be as exemplary?” Ruth asked, pensive, “or will it fade away into chill and nothingness—like the glory of this,” she smiled at Pontycroft, “April afternoon? B-r-r-r——” She gave a little shiver.

Pontycroft pulled himself to his feet.

“Tut, tut!” said he. He proffered two white garments which lay over the back of a chair to Ruth and to his sister. “What are these melancholy sentiments? Aren't you contented? Aren't you satisfied, aren't you pleased here?” he asked, and he eyed Ruth inquisitorially.

“Oh yes,—oh yes, I am,” Ruth quickly assured him. “But I do get, now and then, tiresome conscientious scruples. In these halcyon hours I wonder if it isn't my duty to go and have a look at my dear old uncle, all alone there, in America.”

“Ruth—my dear Ruth!” cried Lucilla.

“Why doesn't your 'dear old uncle' come and have a look at you? I think it's *his* duty to do so; I've thought so for many a day.”

“Oh, he's bound to his fireside, I suppose,” Ruth answered, a touch of melancholy in her voice. “He's wedded to his chimney corner, his books. At seventy-two it's a bore, perhaps, to go wandering into foreign parts.”

“Foreign parts!” Lucilla cried with some scorn. “Are we Ogres? Barbarians? Do we live in the Wilds of America?”

“My dear infant, beware,” cautioned Pontycroft, “beware of the rudiments in your nature of that terrible New England instrument of torture, the Nonconformist Conscience. Despite your Catholic upbringing it will, if you indulge it, I fear, lead you to your ruin. The Nonconformist conscience, I beg you to believe, makes cowards of us all. Now I should suggest a much better plan, and one I have always approved of. Let's *pack up our duds*, as the saying goes, in your country; let's return to sane and merry England; let us for the future and since the pinch of Winter is at our heels, Summer in the South and Winter in the North.”

“England?” gasped Lucilla and Ruth in one breath.

“Why not?” enquired the man of the family. “You are, after all, never so comfortable anywhere, in Winter, as in an English Country House. Roaring fires, invisible hot-water pipes; cozy dark days, libraries full of books, Mudie by post two hours away. Wassailing and Christmas waits; holly and mistletoe, hey for an English winter, sing I! Plum pudding, mince pies, tenants to tip, neighbours, hospitalities.”

“Ugh,” Lucilla wailed, “Perish the awful thought! Neighbours 'calling in sensible, slightly muddy boots' (as your favourite author too truthfully has it), in tweeds and short skirts;—and for conversation—Heaven defend us! The turnip crops, the Pytchley, penny readings, and the latest gossip anent a next-door neighbour. Night all the day—night again at night—and whisky-and-soda at eleven, day or night,—eternally variegated by that boring, semper-eternal Bridge. You'll have to go without me,” declared Lucilla flatly.

“Have you generally Wintered in the North, Summered in the South?” Ruth queried with a gleam.

“No—No,—” replied Pontycroft reflectively, “no,—but if one hasn't really tried it since one's callow days the idea does speak to one. It isn't all beautiful prattle,” he assured her, “but the idea does appeal to one. As one grows old one prefers to be comfortable. A pabulum of beauty is all very well for young things like yourself here and Lucilla who still hug the precious foolish delusion that Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty.”

Pontycroft's indolent glance encompassed Florence,—that fair spectacle she presents, in the aura of twilight,—the exquisite hour, *l'heure exquise*. Her amphitheatre of hills,—her white villas, even now charged with rose by the evening glow,—aglow her churches, her gardens and black cypresses. “Yet this is all too like,” he commented, “the enchanter's dream,—at a puff!... No! Fact, Fact, solid Fact is the desideratum! Fact's your miracle in a nutshell. What you and Lucilla call Truth alters with every fresh discovery of man, his climate, education, point of view. Man carries your Beauty in his eye, ears, senses. But Fact, humanly speaking, Fact doesn't give you the least trouble. There it is. Did it never occur to you how splendidly reposeful a fact it is that a turnip field's a turnip field, until you sow beans to rejuvenate it? And here's another, equally comforting: The spider spins its web from its own vitals. Ah, Facts spare one such a deal of thinking, such a lot of enthusiasm!... In your country, my dear young thing,” Pontycroft turned to Ruth, “in your strange, weird, singular, incomprehensible country they sow buckwheat cakes when the turf on the

lawn's been killed by frosts; and when the buckwheat cakes have grown, and blossomed—they plough them back into the earth, and sow their grass—and in a month you have your velvet robe again. In similar manner the fact that a cozy English Winter's a cozy English Winter is one agreeably worthy your attention."

"This flummery of rose bushes," went on Pontycroft, while his arm described a semicircle,—“this romance of nodding trees laden with oranges ornamental to the landscape; this volubility of heliotrope, mimosa, violets in January, all, all—in a conspiracy to lure one to sit out o' doors and catch an internal, infernal chill,” he sneezed; “all this taken together is not worth that one fine solid indisputable British Fact, a comfortable English Winter! Uncompromising cold without, cheer within.”

“But it's not Winter yet,” Lucilla argued plaintively, “it's only October. Hadn't you better apply the fact of an overcoat to what you've been telling us? You've plunged *me* into anything but a state of cheer with your sophistries—this absurd juggling with the doleful joys of an English Winter!”

“*Apropos* of the joys of an English Winter, I wonder whether the post has come?” said Ruth, jumping up. “Pietro's delicacy about disturbing us at tea Lucilla won't call mere laziness. I'll send him for your overcoat,” she added, with a laughing nod, and vanished through the French windows.

III

“Ah,—you see!”

Pontycroft after Ruth's departure ponderated thus on the tone of significance, to his sister. “Ah, ha! You see.... She's eager for news. She's expecting something.... She's on the watch for every post.”

“You're quite off the scent, Harry,” returned his sister languidly. Lucilla, it was plain, was still disturbed by her brother's chaff.

“It's her uncle's semi-annual missive she's so eagerly on the lookout for. The child nourishes a perfect hero-worship for the old man; she writes to him six times to his one. His letters come with military precision, once in a six month. They're invariably brief, and they invariably wind up with this hospitable apophthegm, 'Remember the string's on the latchet of the door whenever you choose to pull it. Whenever you care to look upon your home in Oldbridge you will find a hearty welcome from your affectionate uncle,' then a sabre thrust, his name,—presumably.”

Lucilla rose, with that languid grace she was so famous for. She went to the edge of the terrace and leaned upon the balustrade, where she remained, silently taking in her fill of the peaceful landscape.

IV

Ten minutes elapsed.

Pontycroft, in silence, smoked and wafted the rings of his cigarette towards Florence. And then Ruth reappeared.

She looked pale in the dusk, agitated. In her hands were a couple of letters, she held out one to Lucilla.

“Read it,”—her voice trembled,—“Tell me what I have done to be so insulted,” she commanded; and then she turned away her face, and suddenly she began to weep. Pontycroft watched her in consternation. He had never, in all the years he had known her, he had never seen Ruth in tears.

Lucilla took the letter, blazoned with a gold crown. She read down the page, she turned over to the next, she read on to the end.

“May I see it?—May I see it, Ruth?” Pontycroft asked gently.

Ruth bowed her head. As Pontycroft read she looked at him, her hands lying idly in her lap; and she saw his face cloud as he read. But he, having finished the communication, fell silent for a moment.

“Poor Bertram!” he let fall at last, dropping the letter upon the table.

“*Poor* Bertram!” cried Ruth. She dabbed her eyes, she made an immense, unsuccessful effort to control herself, quell the ire in her heart.

“*Poor* Bertram!” she broke forth scornfully. “What have I done, *what can I have done*, to be subjected to such an indignity? Did I lead him on? If I had encouraged him! Lucilla, speak, speak the truth. You both know I did nothing of the sort!” And Ruth stamped her foot. “Has the Heir Apparent to that obscure little Principality called Altronde had any encouragement from me of any kind?... Notwithstanding his visits here, notwithstanding the amusement you've had at my expense!” Ruth looked wrathfully at Pontycroft. “And this, this deliberate, this detestable, this cold-blooded proposition. And you can say '*Poor* Bertram!’” But then she fell to sobbing violently.

Lucilla flew to her, folded protecting arms about her.

“Ruth, dear, don't feel so.... Darling! I don't wonder, I do not wonder!... But after all, for him, it is an impossible predicament. He is to be pitied. You can do nothing better than to feel sorry for him. He's madly in love with you,—that's too evident. Presently you'll be able to laugh at it,—at him.”

“*Laugh* at it?” Ruth cried. “Ah, how lightly it hits you! Laugh at it?... I shall never laugh at it, I shall never laugh at it. I can shudder and wonder at the monstrous pride it reveals, the arrogance of a little Princeling called to reign over his obscure little Principality.” She drew herself up.

“Here is that dear old uncle of mine,” said she, tightening her clasp upon the letter she still held in her hand,—“My uncle, who writes to me for the ninetieth time: 'The string is on the latchet of the door, why not come and pay a visit to your old home, have a look at your ancestral acres?’”

“Oh,” exclaimed Ruth rather hysterically, “I *will* go and have a look at my ancestral acres! And these Wohenhoffens, these Bertrandoni, who are they to fancy themselves privileged to offer me a morganatic marriage with their son? But I execrate them! I execrate everything they represent! I, Ruth Adgate, to have been exposed to it!” And now, again, she began to sob.

Pontycroft looked exceedingly distressed.

"Child, child," he said, "you may believe that Lucilla and I never remotely dreamed of this dénouement. I'm not in the least surprised at your indignation,—your horror,—but I am not in the least surprised, either, that poor Bertram, in the tangle of his environment, with his tradition, and impelled by a hopeless passion (oh, my prophetic eye), did what he could, has written offering you the only honourable thing he could offer you, a morganatic marriage. Absurd, outrageous though this sounds to you, it is a legal marriage, and remember that the poor chap's in a hole, a dreadful box. Shed rather a pitying tear upon his blighted young affections.... He can't hope to have you, knew probably how you'd take his offer, but he gritted his teeth and made it like the wholly decent chap he is.

"And I would even wax pathetic," continued Pontycroft, "when I think of him. Could any fate be more depressing than his? *You'll* never speak to him again! While he, poor fellow, is doomed to marry some sallow Grand Duchess for the sake of the Dynasty. Farewell love, farewell comradry, farewell all the nice, easy-going businesses of life. Buck up and be a Crown Prince! Become a puppet, a puppet on exhibition to your subjects. Whatever you like to do that's gay, that's human, debonair,—you'll have to do it on the sly as though it were a sin, or overcome mountains of public censure. In fact, whether you please yourself or whether you don't—the majority will always find fault with you. Poor Bertram, I say, poor old Bertram.... His proud Wohenhoffen of a mother is the only member of that Royal trio, I fancy, who is thoroughly pleased with the new order of affairs, for Civillo will soon be making matters hot for himself if he doesn't turn over a new leaf."

V

Ruth dried her eyes.

"You were quite right when you talked of wintering in the North, Harry," she said at length, still somewhat tremulous. "It doesn't seem as though in the North this could possibly have happened. I think you know," she took Lucilla's hand, "I think I shall try wintering in the North—I'll accept my uncle's invitation; I'll pull the string on the latchet, I'll go and have a look at the old man and at my bleak New England acres. After all," added Ruth, with rather a wan smile, "I suppose it's something to have acres, though one has never realised the fact or thought of it before. I haven't an idea what mine are like, but it will be good to walk on them, to feel I've got them. Here I'm always made to feel such a plebeian.—Yes, I'm *made* to feel such a plebeian. Oh no, not by you," Ruth clasped Lucilla's hand and looked affectionately, a trifle, too, defiantly towards Pontycroft, "but they all seem to think, even the rather ordinary ones, like Mrs. Wilberton and Stuart Seton, an American exists to be patronised. No pedigree. An American! Well, who knows, perhaps I have a pedigree. I'll go at least where I can't be patronised, where they know about me."

Pontycroft gave a laugh, which rang not altogether gaily.

"In other words, Miss Adgate must have her experience," he said.

"Miss Adgate's had all she wants of the old world.—She must be on with the new. Besides, her pride's been wounded.... A prince has offered her matrimony, morganatic but honourable marriage. That won't do for her. She's wounded in her feelings, outraged by the suggestion, and she includes the whole of Europe in her resentment. *Oh, my dear young lady*" said Pontycroft after another moment's silence, "don't talk to me of pride! You Americans are the devil for pride. Ruth, you've been toadied to and you fancy you've been patronised.... Well, well, have your experience. What great results from little causes flow! Prove to us that you're not only as good but a great deal better than any of us. We poor humble folk, we'll submit to anything, if when you've had your experience and are satisfied, you'll come back to us. But you don't mean it, you don't mean it! Or, if you go you'll return, you'll not forsake your adopted country, your father's friends, your's."

Ruth's eyes darkened.

"Haven't you always, both of you, been too good to me?" she cried, reproachfully. "Ever since I was a little child, you and Lucilla, you know that you two have been, ever shall be, in my heart of hearts. But I must get away from all this; I must do something!... I must find myself!" she cried. "Say what you will, think what you like, this proposition is too loathsome. It has opened my eyes to so many things I had only felt, before! It may be all a question of wounded pride, as you say, but I know it's the proper sort of pride. I've seen it now, the whole, whole, unfriendly situation, in a flash. Lucilla," she pleaded, "you'll sympathise with me; you won't condemn me if I go, you'll never think I love you an ounce the less?"

Lucilla stroked Ruth's hand.

"My dear," said she, "the thing's a sheer incredible bolt out of the blue, incredible! I believe," she said, rounding upon her brother, "I believe it's the outcome of Pontycroft's foolish talk,—the result of his passion for being paradoxical or perish. Here we were—having our teas quite innocently in the garden, like the dear nice people we are,—perfectly happy, absolutely content,—as why shouldn't we be in this paradise?" Lucilla opened her blue eyes wide upon the landscape and glanced accusingly at Pontycroft. "But you've precipitated us into a mess," she said to him, "with your ribald talk about wintering in our water-soaked British Islands. Then comes this ridiculous letter,—and, of course, Ruth can't sit still under it. Yes, it is perhaps after all, a wholesome notion of yours, Ruth, a visit to your own country. It's the best bath you can take to wash out the taste left by Bertram's well-meant but preposterous letter. Besides," she laughed, "you'll come back to us! America can't gobble you up for ever. But what shall we do without you!—And as for Harry, I feel sorry for him. He'll find no one to give him the change when he's in the mood for teasing, no one to keep him in his proper place. He'll become unbearable."

"Oh," fleared Pontycroft, "if Ruth forsakes us I will go back to *my* native land! I'll go where I can toast my shins before my fireside and experience the solid comforts of a British Winter.... I'll go home to my duties, go where I can worry my tenants, read Mudie the livelong day; feel that I, too, am somebody!"

Ruth smiled, rather forlornly.

"I want you to observe," Pontycroft with mock contrition enlarged, "how one evil deed begets a quantity of others—a congeries of miseries out of which, at last, good springeth like the flowering beanstalk. In idle hour (mark the magic potency of words), I speak of wintering in the North. Now as you've been told more than once,—idleness is the parent of wickedness. Lucilla assures me that in my paradoxical idleness I am a parent

to a quite unexpected degree. Now observe,—the offer of a morganatic marriage follows speedily on the heels of my sin, the sin of an idle paradox. Then Ruth becomes guilty of the sin of anger—tossing her pretty head and stamping her pretty foot, she declares she won't play in our yard any longer. She stamps her pretty foot and announces she's going back to her own New England apple orchard. The rudiments of her Nonconformist, New England conscience, thoroughly roused,—her thoughts fly towards home and her aged uncle. In my remorse, I, in virtue not to be undone, decide to go back to my duties. Lucilla, conventionalised British matron that *au fond* she is, spite of her protests, already, because she must, assembles to her soul her list of social obligations at Dublin, the frocks to plan, and the dinner parties to give prior to the coming out and Presentation at Court of her eldest child. Home, home, home," murmured Pontycroft, "sweet home is the tune we'll all be whistling within a month. Lucilla will carol it from her bog because it isn't considered polite to whistle in Ireland; but I, from my Saxon heath and Ruth from God's country will imitate the blackbirds. Could any tune be more acceptable to the Nonconformist conscience? Ruth, you perceive, already begins to dominate! Columbia, Ruler of the sea and wave—see how she sends us about our neglected and obvious affairs. High-ho for Winter in the North," said Ponty. "But meantime I'm going to array myself for dinner and here comes Pietro."

"Thank Heaven for the trivialities of life," Lucilla put in with fervour. "Ruth, shall we don our best gowns in honour of the unexpected? Harry may dub this the call to duty; I know it's never anything so dull. I know that the spirit of adventure he's hailed has seized upon both of you, is lifting us all, will-he nill-he, out of our beautiful *dolce far niente* into something restless, violent, and tiresome. As for me—there's nothing, naught left for me, poor me! to do but to follow your lead."

"Yes, by all means," Ruth lightly acquiesced.

"We'll put our best frocks on; and let us hope the call to duty decked in purple and fine linen, masquerading as the spirit of adventure, may lead us up to consummations...." She broke off. "Devoutly to be wished for," she whispered to herself under her breath.

VI

"If I'm to be made the arbiter of other destinies when my own are more than I can manage" (they were dallying over figs and apricots at breakfast)—"pray, you two good people tell me, kindly, when shall we begin to throw our bonnets over the mill? In other words, on what day and in what month do we start in search of Winter in the North?" Ruth enquired, to a feint of cheerfulness and little dreaming.

"Oh, to-morrow—To-morrow, if you like," jerked Pontycroft. "Wait not upon the order of your going, but start at once."

"Start to-morrow!" Lucilla cried, "start to-morrow? Impossible."

"Why impossible? Nothing is impossible. Ruth wants to go. She said so last night, she more than hints it, to-day. What woman wants, God wants." Oblivious to the truth that a woman, his sister, panted to remain, Pontycroft glanced at the newspaper at his elbow. "A steamer sails from Genoa tomorrow afternoon, the *Princess Irene*. I'll go down to Humbert's this moment as ever is," he added, "and have them wire for a deck cabin."

"No, no," protested Lucilla. "Why leave all this loveliness at once? Impossible! Besides, we have people coming to dinner tomorrow," she remembered hopefully. "Thursday. The Newburys and young Worthington. We can't put them off."

"We can, and we shall," asseverated Ponty. "There's nothing so dreadful, Lucilla, as these long superfluous drawn-out farewells, these impending good-byes. Send Pietro, if you like, to say we've all responded to a call of duty. Tell your friends in all charity, that when duty calls the wise youth replies: 'I *won't*.' Why?... Because he knows that nine times out of ten duty is only what somebody else thinks he ought to be doing. But tell them duty's only skin deep, by way of advice. Tell them one's response to duty is generally the mere weak living up to somebody else's good opinion of one. Say to them: 'Vanity, vanity, all is vanity.' But say that in this case it's otherwise—we're not wise, and we've answered with one accord: 'I *will*.' Say to them that therein lies our folly.—We're exceedingly sorry—sorry, but we must be off. It shall be a seven days' wonder, Florence shall have something to talk about. She needs brisking up. Ruth, I'm off to engage your passage. The sooner you go, the sooner you'll come back to tell us all about it,—tell us whether the play was worth the candle."

Ponty rang for his stick and his hat, lighted the inevitable cigarette.

"Paolina will pack you up, Ruth, if she has to keep busy until midnight," he directed, between two puffs. "Lucilla, Pietro can help Maria with your paraphernalia; when I'm back here with our tickets he'll be half through the packing. Lazy duffer though he be, once he begins, he's rapid as radium." Ponty was gone before either Lucilla or Ruth could protest.

They looked at one another.... What ludicrous extravagance of sudden breaking up! This high-handed method of bringing matters summarily to a climax struck them both. Lucilla and Ruth broke into peals of laughter.

The irresponsible sun glared—into their eyes—played, flamboyant among the glass and silverware of the breakfast table; it winked in prismatic rays from crystal angles of honey pots and threw its splashes of blinding light over the damask table cloth, borrowing rosy tints from a mass of pink geranium in a bowl of Nagasaki ware. It glanced at all the polished surfaces of the old carved oak furniture; the room was one flagrant and joyous outburst of morning sunlight, the garden an invitation to come out, come out and play, and enjoy life from its inception! Elusive, dewy, odorous lovelinesses rested upon it, mounted from it, entreated you to step under the trees, wander among growing tender things, bathed all in a dew and glisten. And called to you to come and loiter,—and mark the passage of Aurora and her maidens, hours ago.

"It's just a trifle odd to be swept off one's feet in this whoop-and-begone-with-you manner," Ruth, with half a laugh, half a sob, commented. "Maugre the thing's to be sooner rather than later, Lucilla, I can't see though why *my* going should mean yours, too!"

"Dear infant," Lucilla answered, tenderly, "don't worry.... Whatever should Ponty and myself do here alone? We'd get on one another's nerves in a week and part in a temper. Since things have happened as they have, things are better as they are; leave them to hammer out their own salvation. Things, I find, are very like the little sheep in Mother Goose. You let them alone and they come home, wagging their tails behind them.... But oh, oh, oh," sighed Lucilla, "how I adore this! How I would stay here forever! It is a blow," her voice was vibrant of regret.... "But, of course, Harry's right, he's always right. Shall we obey orders?"

"Y—es," said Ruth. She felt a tightening at her heart, a sudden lump in her throat. The glory of the October morning had all at once departed.... A decided glamour enveloped the project of a visit to her uncle. Moreover, her heart drew her to him. The fine sense of an affront she must fly from had, too, gathered strength in the night; the indignity put upon her by Bertram's letter she must resent. Her pride protested fiercely, she must retaliate even though Ponty should express to Bertram her thanks with refusal of the honour conferred upon her. But now these emotions were quelled by an unspeakable depression, a loneliness, a sense of isolation, of dread, a dread of the Unknown.... The dread swept her off her feet. Dread of something more, too.... How was she,—how was she, Ruth Adgate,—to live away from these two people? To-morrow would mark the beginning of an ocean rolled up between her old life and the new one she would be journeying towards. To-morrow! to-morrow! To-morrow would see the end, for how many, many dreary months, of this beauty laden, gracious existence; the camaraderie of these two people whom she had reason to love best in the world, at whose side she had grown up,—Lucilla and Henry Pontycroft, whom she understood, who understood her! Instinctively, she felt she was electing for herself a grimmer fate, a sterner life and land, than any she had known, could dimly divine....

Yes, the glory of the April morning had departed into chill and nothingness. It might have already been December though it was only October, and Pontycroft had gone to buy her ticket. The first, the irremediable step was taken. She must put the best face she could upon this adventure of her choice.

Lucilla, to whom Ruth and her thoughts were transparent as flies in amber, put her arms about her neck.

"Ruth," she whispered, "it's because he can't bear the parting, the thought of it. It's going to be a horrible break for him. What we'll either of us do when you're no longer within reach, when you are no longer part of our daily life, I can't imagine. I can't imagine any of it without you, and neither of us will want this, without you."

Ruth's eyes glowed. Bending forward she kissed Lucilla, and they marched away, arm-inarm, to do their packing.

VII

"Parting is such sweet sorrow," sighed Juliet.

But the girl of fourteen saw in the act an excuse for endless impassioned kisses. The world-worn poet Haraucourt better understood the disastrous effect of saying good-bye.

"*Partir*" he cries, "*c'est mourir un feu!*"

"To leave, to part, is to die a little." Unless, indeed, death be a more desirable state than life,—as who in this world can possibly affirm, or deny,—except our Holy Mother Church?—It were safer then, never to leave, never to part. This is perhaps the true course of wisdom, to live in the same spot, content with the same people. They, after all, are sure to be exceedingly like the people one will find elsewhere; and, ten to one, prove to be verily rather nicer, as experience is apt to show. Yet Juliet and Haraucourt are agreed upon one point; parting, whether to the accompaniment of kisses or of death, a little,—parting is a sorrow.

The parting of their ways, to the three occupants of Villa Santa Cecilia, was poignant. To each, after his kind the next twenty-four hours were inexpressibly distressing. Ponty got through them stoically and worked off some of his feelings in an unconscionable and conscienceless number of cigarettes. Lucilla wept and prayed. Ruth said very little and directed her packing in a suffocation of heartache.

As the train passed out from the station at Florence, bearing her with Pontycroft towards Genoa, Ruth's tears gushed like fountains of water. Nor did she in the least try to conceal her distress from Ponty who sat quietly regarding the landscape from the other side of the compartment. It had been arranged that he should return for Lucilla, thus giving to that lady a welcome day's grace, when Ruth had been safely handed over to the Bolingbrokes, friends of Lucilla, a young Secretary from the British Embassy in Rome and his bride, on their way out, to Washington. Their names Ponty had, with relief, discovered among the list, at Humbert's of the ship's passengers.

The varied, finished, complex Tuscan landscape passed all leisurely before their eyes; the olive groves, the orange-pink willows; the white streams romping under grey arches; the villages, the mediaeval cytties, scattered by the way, the rose-coloured or white monasteries and villas on the sun-decked hillsides. From the little old churches and campaniles of the plain, from the convents perched far above them, innumerable silvery peals of chimes came floating, in tune, out of tune, it mattered not. As a matter of fact, they were shockingly out of tune; the quality of the Tuscan air is, however, so extraordinary an embellisher of sound as well as of scene, that all sounds become harmonious, even as every scene arranges itself into a primitive picture, thanks to this most beautifying of mediums.

"How can I leave it, how *can* I leave it?" Ruth was saying to herself.

"You know, I think I'm a goose," she let fall at last, smiling at Pontycroft through her tears.

"My sweet child," said Pontycroft, "we must aye live and learn! And you're so young that living and learning may still be supposed to hold elements of interest. There's a lot ahead of you that's new and strange, so dry your pretty eyes, and *Sursum Corda.*"

"My soul misgives me that the new and strange will contain nothing approaching to this," Ruth said, nodding her head towards the window. "And I don't think I shall like doing without it," she added plaintively.

"God's country," said Pontycroft, "won't look like this, to be sure, nor give you a single blessed one of these fine emotions, these raptures. But after all, it's the first wrench that costs, says the prophet, and since we're

not here entirely, he assures us, to amuse ourselves, a visit to God's country may prove a salutary if bitter pill to a young lady surfeited with the sweets of Europe."

"Dio mio," Ruth cried, "since when has Pontycroft turned moralist?"

"From the hour he was made to realise the fatal effects of reckless paradox," Ponty answered, with mock solemnity.

They fell to chaffing one another as naturally as possible and the time flew.

"*Genoa la Suferba, Genoa la Suferba!* How perfectly, how radiantly the word describes her fits her," murmured Ruth when, after a succession of tunnels, in the early afternoon, the sumptuous town burst upon them. The dazzling town, her flashing panoply of palaces, villas, gardens, churches, mounting up, and up—her hill, leaning firmly against the background of blue skies, blue as the Virgin Mary's robe.

"The imagination, the purpose, in those lines of architecture, those formal gardens!" cried Ruth. "How daring, uncompromising, beauty is in this land of Italy. And see, the Mediterranean, all sparkle and laughter there at her feet!" She leaned forward; then fell back against the cushions, savouring with heart as well as eyes the brilliant vision.

The train hammered heavily into the station.

"Ge—no—a! Ge—no—a!" The nasal cry reverberated through the glass-covered dome. There was noisy confusion of opening carriage doors, of passengers descending, calling, embracing, greeting; of porters running hither and yon; of trucks of luggage blocking the way amid a commotion of officialdom.

Ruth stood quietly in the uproar, and gazed upon it, and at Ponty's lank figure, while he dealt with the business of the occasion. Her heart was beating tumultuously. She felt a violent impulse to run away and hide herself.

"The beginning of the end," she cried. "It is the beginning of the end. Why have I done this?"

A moment later she had shaken hands with the Bolingbrokes; she was saying good-bye to Pontycroft from the window of the carriage which was to take her, with her new acquaintances, to the ship.

Ruth's sympathetic Italian maid, waiting and watching in the background, in a hack laden with luggage, murmured to herself: "*Pover a, Poverella!*"

VIII

Ruth, in a misery of wild light-headedness, responded as well as she could to the civilities of her two travelling companions, while they drove through narrow, animated streets. They reached the docks. There lay the massive ship, its relentless black hulk resting aboardside, in ominous expectation of some mysterious coming change. Ruth walked up the white gangway. The turmoil, the excited crowd, the stolid stewards,—lolling,—indifferent yet curious sentinels,—the ragged throng of emigrants passing endlessly into the forecabin, the noise of clanking wains and girders hoisting trunks and freight into mid air, all, gave to her a sense of doom, of the finality of things in chaos.... Half an hour passed before she was able to go to her room. Telegrams were handed to her, even flowers, fruit; thus rapidly does news spread; she had to talk with friends of the Bolingbrokes come to bid them God-speed, to look pleasant and pleased as everybody else did.

But when at last Ruth closed the door of her cabin behind her, she took a little step forward and with a cry threw herself upon the couch. Regardless of Paolina, who was already opening bags and unfolding dresses, she permitted herself the luxury of a passionate outburst of grief. A tornado of pent misery racked her; she pressed her face into the linen pillow to deaden the sound of her sobbing, her hands against her breast.

"Signorina, Signorina, do not feel so badly," cried the good Italian maid, dropping Ruth's lace and beribboned morning gown and running towards her. "Oh, do not weep. It is very sad to have to leave our lovely Italian land, so beautiful, so *carina*. But do not weep so! What will the Signora Dor say if I allow you to make yourself ill? Think! It is I who should be weeping. It is I who am leaving all behind me, my country, my sister, my mother, and yet I do not weep." But the tears belied her words and welled from her eyes.

Ruth clasped the girl's hand affectionately. She felt grateful for the warm Italian heart. Paolina at least was there, to keep her recollected in the exquisite life she was forsaking. Why she was forsaking it, now seemed to her an absolutely incomprehensible riddle. For the nonce she could remember not one of her substantial reasons for doing so.

Paolina withdrew the pins from Ruth's hat, removed it from her hair and put it away.

"You have crushed your pretty hat, Signorina," she said, reproachfully. Then, very much in the tone a mother would use to distract a child:

"You did not see how pale the Signor Pontycroft looked when he said good-bye," she added, "and Maria told me the Signora had not slept the whole night, but kept going constantly to your door and listening to know whether you were asleep. They love you very much. It must be good to be loved so much," the girl continued wistfully. "That must comfort you. And you will soon come back to them, to Italy, when you have seen your Signor uncle and your American home—for I am very sure they cannot live without you."

"Oh, Paolina, I am so unhappy," Ruth said, simply. "But leave me," she smiled to the girl through her tears, "I will call you when I feel better."

Paolina turned to go, then came back, lifted Ruth's hand, kissed it. "I hope you will pardon me, Signorina," she added shyly, "*Scusi*, if I say, we must always smile, it pleases God better."

And Paolina left the room.

For a long while, Ruth, quite still, battled with her feelings. A fresh passion of grief overtook her.... When at last it had spent itself, she drew her Rosary, which she carried in the gold bag in her hand, from its sheath. Slowly, the sweetness of the five decades passed into her spirit, she felt comforted. Peace filled her heart. There was only, now and then, the ache, where before there had been uncontrollable despair. She stood up, bathed her face, rang for Paolina, and began removing the tortoise-shell pins from her hair.

"Paolina," she cried, as the maid entered the room. "Paolina," she twisted her hair again into its thick coil,

"we are going to enjoy ourselves now! No more tears, no more regrets. You are quite right. We must smile to the good God if we wish Him to smile on us! Make haste and give me a short skirt and a warm coat, and my cap and veil. I long to get out and breathe the air and fill my eyes with a sight of the shores of Italy."

At dinner and during the rest of the evening, as they steamed down the coast towards Naples, Ruth was an irresistible *precis* of smiles and vivacity. The Bolingbrokes were captivated.

"Richard," the young Mrs. Bolingbroke told her lord when they were alone together, "that Miss Adgate is a most charmin' girl. What was that nonsense Mrs. Wilberton retailed about her runnin' away from Henry Pontycroft whom she's hopelessly in love with? She is in love with no man! You can't deceive me!" Mrs. Bolingbroke cried gaily. "It's easy to see from the fun she's positively bubblin' over with that her heart isn't weighted by any hopeless passion. She's never been in America before she says, and it's the great adventure of her life.... She's goin' to visit an old uncle, whom she's never seen but adores. Her childlike enjoyment of doin' it quite alone (she has her maid with her) and her eagerness about it, is quite fascinatin'. Although she is so rich, she's evidently seen very little of the world," said Mrs. Bolingbroke, who happened to be a year Ruth's junior, but had the feeling of knowing the world thoroughly from within and from without.

"Yes," her husband answered guardedly; he remembered that a First Secretary must show diplomatic reticence in his judgments, even to his wife. "Yes, Miss Adgate does seem rather a decent sort. I dare say the story is all a fabrication. She does seem a nice sort of unsophisticated young creature and I dare say the story's all a fabrication. Just the pretty charitable way people have of talking. I can see no objection to your enjoying as much of her society as you like, Isabel."

Thus it happened that safe in her husband's blessing upon the friendship, Mrs. Bolingbroke, all unsuspected by Ruth, became her champion.

PART FIFTH

I

AN Indian summer day, idle and tender, lay over hills and woods, meadows, river. The quaint little Old Town of Oldbridge, set among apple orchards and gardens and avenues of elms, received this last Benediction of Nature with an agreeable *ouf!* of respite from imminent grim winter approaches.

It is difficult to account, by any utilitarian motive on the part of our "brown and green old Mother Earth," for her November caprice of a New England Indian summer, though I make no doubt the scientists will have some prosaic reason to give which we are asked to take upon faith. But since fruit, in New England, is garnered in September, and the toughest plants are burned to a crimson glory by October frosts, no ripened fruit or renewal of leaves defend the vagary. And so—will-he nill-he, we praise Heaven which made our "bounteous mother" feminine forsooth; we gratefully credit the enchanted fortnight to her bountiful illogical womanhood.

The Old Town of Oldbridge, then, basking under the Indian summer's morning blandishment while it sipped its mocha and partook of grape-fruit towards eight of the clock, pushed an agreeable *ouf!*—awake to agreeable titillations of excitement. General Adgate's niece, lovely and rich, admirable combination—Miss Adgate (Ruth Adgate, they already called her, didn't she belong to them?) had arrived. The event, discreetly mentioned in the Oldbridge *Morning Herald*, stared them in the face. Some boasted a glimpse of her, the day before, seated in the brougham beside her uncle; a pretty girl with reddish brown hair. Others had seen of her nothing but her outward manifestations on the luggage cart—two big brass-bound cork trunks, a cabin trunk, precisely similar, a square hat-box, a dressing case and a dark-eyed Italian maid.

The man of all work, Jo, brought this luggage into the house, with the gardener's assistance, and up to Ruth's rooms. Now he wiped the perspiration from his face. Arms akimbo, brows warped in puzzled frown, he glared at the encumbrances.

"Well, I be durned!" he burst forth. "Glad I ain't got any of them things to carry round when I go a travelling. One carpet bag's big enough for me, when I visit my folks, to Falls Junction."

"Lucky you're glad," Martha, the efficient, the tart, the very tart housemaiden snapped, and put him instantly in his place. "Not likely soon, we'll catch you towering it with a valet and trunks."

II

As to the unconscious subject of comment and curiosity, Miss Ruth Adgate,—Miss Adgate was ecstatic. Her heart in its rapture wanted to, did, engulf the house, and the land and the hill, and the inmates of the Old Adgate place, and the entire town of Oldbridge. Something new, something strange had indeed happened for her joy had begun to bubble and ferment from the moment her foot passed the threshold of the house. No—from the hour the train, on its sideline to Oldbridge, had begun to move beside the river, bearing her for thirty minutes from one little way-station to another.

The sentiment of an autumnal New England landscape spread beneath clean thoughtless blue skies,—vistas of grey rocks and sedges by the river at the one hand,—where the dark green savins, reminding her of cypresses in Italy, sprang through the grey clefts;—and across the river, hills, low, wooded, interspersed with green and brown and orange pastures, through which cropped the same venerable grey New England rock,—harmonious and austere,—this perspective, enchanting in its tonic beauty, was grievously, alas! debased and

disfigured.

Ignoble little wooden packing cases liberally dotted by the way screamed with the crudest colours, 'the crudest rainbow scale disgorges on the palate.' Gigantic hoardings, flaunting ridiculous local remedies and foods for every prevalent disease or dyspeptic stomach insolently stared at one;—the very backs and sides of barns and packing cases were decorated with their insignia!

"They need a Thames Conservancy, a County Council, something," Ruth protested to her outraged sense of beauty, "to save this splendid river, control such unpuritanical abandonments to colour and commerce."

Miss Adgate, you perceive, was naïvely confident—oh, serene British confidence! that taste governs the world, that the world rays and rules so soon as the world discovers it is acting in bad taste.

But these blemishes were, after all, insignificant affairs—details incidental to an untutored modern public. What Miss Adgate's inward vision vividly perceived through the windows of the shabby long car with its soiled velvet cushions, and air of unworldliness,—which pleased her,—its smell of stale apples and anthracite coal smoke which didn't please her,—was the *land*. The land without a flaw of commerce! Hidden lives that took her blood back three hundred years, led her imagination.

Undeniably, the effect of this country was not one of abundance.... It was not varied and enhanced by a thousand fair human touches; the neglected land was uncouthly rough.... Nor was it in the least suggestive of the poetry, art, emotion,—the loves, the hates—of nineteen hundred vanished sumptuous years. (One might have likened it rather to the starved and simple beggar-maid waiting for the King.) But it was hers, it was *hers!*... She was *of it!*... Miss Adgate was deliciously cognisant that this fact filled her heart to overflowing with sweet content.

"This land saw my forbears!... This land for three hundred years gave them all they asked of life.... It opened its heart to them, therefore I love it, therefore I love it!" she repeated softly to herself. "And if this elation is patriotism—the mere patriotism dubbed Reflex Egotism by the cynics,—well—poor dears! What dear poor dears the cynics be!"

Miss Ruth Adgate gave a pleased sigh and turned her eyes again upon the view. They fell upon a bit of grey rock, a group of savins and scarlet barberry bushes loitering beside a piece of water... a composition Diaz would have thankfully imprinted, for reproduction, on his retina. The little pool, from brink to brink, coyly reflected these and the clear blue sky, and in the foreground twenty feet of hoarding bore the legend: "Try Grandpa Luther's Syrup of Winter-green for your Baby's Tantrums."

Ruth fell back with rather a rueful laugh.

III

"Next station?—O—Oldbridge," sang out the cherubic faced conductor and Ruth's heart began to palpitate.

"I *will* smile," she said, "I won't be absurd." And she fixed her gaze resolutely on the landscape, arrested, at once, by some subtle change in it.

Perceptibly, the meadows displayed a softer, more velvety grass; the trees grew, more finely luxuriant, the cliffs rose boldly. A hint of human intention, the touch of elegance, a something thoroughbred, spoke aloud.... The few last miles through which Miss Adgate jolted gave symptoms of civilisation.

"O—O—ldbridge!"

The guard intoned it nasally, with complete resignation,—a twenty years' fatiguing habit; and an intimation too, in his voice, that the goal of human travel had been reached. The train slackened.... One saw, spanning the river, a black bridge latticing the green and the blue; one caught glimpses of a town, white houses scattered up the slopes of wooded hills.

Several trim white yachts rested on the water; small sailboats glided, hither and yon, and little skiffs and slim rowboats floated by to a leisurely motion, manned by a single young oarsman, a girl seated hatless, in the bow. The gay scene under the yellow sunlight, the rippling, the smiling river, the warm waning afternoon—alive, sparkling, seemed an invitation to her full of promise.

"Come, Paolina," said Ruth, with inward trepidation. "Come, Paolina."

Miss Adgate summoned her courage as the train stopped with a jerk.

She passed—heroic effort—through the car to the platform, while Paolina took the dressing-case and followed, moved like her mistress and as tremulous.

Ruth scanned the faces in the friendly brick station. The white head, the features, familiar from photograph presentment, were—not there! But a hand, extended at the last step to help her descend, caused her to turn. Her arms in an instant had flung themselves impulsively about a figure which stood at her side.

"Uncle!" cried Ruth. Her heart ceased to pound, her nervousness gave way to an immense inward satisfaction. Tears sprang to her eyes—but, what did it matter? My heroine would be less charming were she less impressionable and one does not gather upon every bush, an uncle *in loco parentis*.

"Well, well, my dear!—we've got you here at last, Ruth," said the tall, thin, old man. He looked down at her fondly, a good face full of kindly scrutiny.

"You've brought belongings of sorts?" General Adgate enquired as he conducted Ruth towards the carriage whilst the young girl felt half a dozen pairs of curious eyes fixed upon her.

"If that's your maid tell her there's a seat for her in the luggage cart near Jobias," said General Adgate. He handed his niece into the brougham, Paolina received her instructions, they drove off.

IV

And for a moment they sped in silence, up a side street, into an open square of shops and brick buildings, for all the world like the High Street of any English Provincial town.

"But how English it looks!" Ruth exclaimed.

"Does it? Why not?" said General Adgate. "However," he added, "we pride ourselves, further on, that we're distinctively American."

The brick buildings surely enough dissolved into avenues set with superb elms. Big comfortable houses encircled by verandas,—many adorned with those fluted Corinthian columns, mark in Oldbridge of the early nineteenth century,—all snugly set back among flower gardens and lawns, emanated peace, prosperity, good will.

"This place must be Arcady in summer.... How charming it is," Ruth cried, delighted. "These gardens in flower, these trees in leaf——"

"It's not so bad," said General Adgate, dryly. "Longfellow christened it the Rose of New England."

"But——," he added, "we call this the City of Oldbridge, a modern matter. You, Ruth, belong to the Court End of the town—you are of what we call the Old Town."

Vastly amused at the distinction, a Yankee Faubourg Saint Germain, Ruth plied him with questions. In five minutes the agreeable news that she,—the last of the house of Adgate in America, Ruth Adgate verily the salt of the earth, tracing a clean English ancestry back to the crusades, to mistier periods beyond, here held her Yankee acres in grant first from an English Sovereign, and, without a drop of blood-shed from Indian Sachems,—gave to her humourous sense of proportion somewhat to smile over.

On they went,—under endless prospects of arching elm trees, whose branches threw oblique attenuated shadows among the rays of the descending sun. A few soft clouds at the horizon were tinted rosy and red. Then the very blue, blue sky, suffused with violet and rose, suddenly flared. Far and wide, from earth to zenith, far and wide the sky burst into a glorious scarlet conflagration.

The city lay behind, meadows stretched broadly at either side, and to the right a pretty line of hill and wood etched itself against the blushing clouds.

"The beginning of your acres, my dear," said the old man, bowing his head. "There they lie, untouched, just as James the First ceded them to your forefathers, just as the Indian Sachems of the Mohegan Tribe confirming the gift, withdrew from 'em. The bit of wood there is known to this day as the Wigwam and the last Indian hut in this State disappeared when it was destroyed by fire a hundred years ago."

They had passed a road that wandered into the woodland, they were rolling smartly by stone walls that shut in a goodly reach of close-cut lawn all seamed and scarred by grey jutments of rock, which rising, mounting, reached a hill through terraced gardens trimly laid and skirting the summit. The carriage took a sharp sweep upward into a gravelled drive, rolled on a few paces, stopped abruptly before a brown, rambling house,—Miss Adgate had reached the end of her journey.

"Welcome home," said General Adgate, as he helped Ruth to alight. He bent down, kissed her, and led her up the steps into the house.

V

It was morning. It was nine of the clock. Miss Adgate walked, alone, through a path that penetrated to the Wigwam. Almost hidden by a thicket of sweet fern, juniper, barberry and briar which grew at either side, which clung too affectionately to her skirts and from which she had difficulty in disengaging herself, the path, she thought, might have led her to the Palace of The Sleeping Beauty.

It was morning, as I have said, and it was the morning of her first day, and early abroad, Miss Adgate strolled in a pleasant sort of reverie,—thinking of nothing, perhaps, or thinking of a number of things. The Indian summer sunshine filtered upon her through half-bare branches not quite denuded of their yellow and purple and scarlet leafage; and every now and then a leaf came fluttering down in the light breeze. A squirrel, now and then, darted out along a branch, paused—and like an Italian lizard, all a-gleam and a-whisk, gleamed, whisked, and disappeared. But Ruth knew two little black beadlike eyes still watched her, as she went, from behind the lattice-screen of twigs.

Every now and then she passed a formidable, a monumental boulder; moss-grown; covered with grey lichen; dropped there by some glacier, æons since, unless Heaven, it occurred to her, had placed it where it stood, and why not? for picturesque intent?... Every now and then a tardy bluejay flitted by, lighted upon a branch and sent forth his imperious *cha, cha, cha!*... Or a woodpecker, in the distance, made his tapping noise as he sounded the trees for his meal. A dry twig would break, suddenly,—come tumbling head foremost down, down through a rustle of leaves, and all these sounds struck upon Miss Adgate's ears in her reverie, gave her exquisite pleasure. She enjoyed the romance and the solitude of this wild wood; she delighted in the knowledge that she was walking safely through her own preserves; and *treve de compliments*, her uncle had left her upon a brief good-bye after an early breakfast. Ruth burned to discover alone, he knew, her domain—General Adgate had divined it without a hint.

"You'll want to take a walk this morning through your woods, Ruth," said he. "Cross the hill,—you'll find a road to the right leading by a brook,—follow the road,—it takes you over the brook by a bridge and soon becomes a path. No one will molest you, it's yours."

"What, the brook as well?" queried she, feeling, somehow, like a very little girl in his presence.

"Yes, and the brook as well. You can't get away from your preserves,—they stretch on for miles."

So it was that Miss Adgate, abroad at nine o'clock, happened to be off for a matutinal stroll through paths wet and dewy, glad of her freedom, glad to be alone in a new world, surrender herself to the romance of a new train of thought.

She came, presently, to a clearing in the wood. The path ended, abruptly, at a flat bed of rock which descended for some hundred feet to another opening in the wood. There were bayberry and barberry and fern along the way, slashed scarlet by the frosts; there were fifty plants she promised to herself to learn the names of, which gave forth strong, sweet scents in the hot sun. Ruth sat down. A swish, through the dry leaves, a stir of the brown grass, told of the frightened escape of some little living thing, and set her heart to palpitating unaccountably with love for it.

Her mood had become a trifle exalted, her perceptions quickened by her promenade. Each insect, bird, bush she came upon began to assume a personality; claimed the privilege to live upon her land. She was the suzerain of their little lives; she could have held a court of justice; she could have dispensed favours, played their games, ruled them, thrown herself into their griefs and joys, with heart and soul. Seated here, in the warm sun, on the warm stone checked with patches of green and brown club-moss, she inhaled the crisp fragrance of the bushes under the sun's kisses; she looked afar, on to the trees below and over their heads at the vivid sky, and upon faraway violet hills, and upon green and orange, brown and guileless meadows. The world seemed good and wonderful, and she felt exceedingly content.

"The Ruth Adgate who spent twenty years of her life in Europe is no more," she thought, lightly. "The young person who has tasted most of the sweets of European civilisation, walked in marble halls, refused a Duke, run away from the outrage offered her dignity by the offer of a morganatic marriage with a Crown Prince,—the lovesick girl who wandered through the moonlight at the Lido, floated upon the silent lagoons of Venice, discoursed with wits in lovely gardens in Florence, and herself the cause of wit in others, hung upon their discourse—that was quite another person! That was but an early incarnation, never the real Miss Adgate. *This* is the real Miss Adgate! In spite of every influence to the contrary,—the product of her native land."

Lucilla, Pontycroft—Pontycroft, Lucilla! How far away they seemed.... Their names stirred her heart as she pronounced them. But even so—was not this best? The present Miss Adgate in a short skirt, a blue, soft felt hat, tip-tilted over her eyes, a stick in her hand, her thoughts for all society; Miss Adgate with this hardy New England nature for background,—Ruth Adgate taking a solitary walk upon her own land, with the feeling that good will and satisfaction smiled at her because of her presence there, was not this the Real person who had found her true niche in the world?

"How singular," she reflected. "The transformation has taken place overnight. It is almost as though I had been here forever! And to-day I feel as though I had a destiny—as though Fate had something up her sleeve here for me. I've begun like one of Henry Harland's heroines and I'm convinced that whatever the Powers are preparing for me—I shall accept it here,—just as I accept all this—gratefully, gaily, without demur."

Ruth glanced at the violet hills and the guileless meadows and a thrill passed through her. She jumped up, a white hand held to shade her face.

"*Basta!* I've rested long enough, the sun here is too hot," said Miss Adgate. "I think I'll discover what lies beyond, in the heart of that wood there," and off she started, blushing at her emotion.

A company of crows in a distant field caw-cawed, querulously, at her. Their raucous voices fitted the rough woodland, the vigorous autumn smells, the haze of the mellow golden morning. She came again to the little brown brook gurgling quietly over its bed of brown stones and leaves and the fancy took her to follow its course. Wet feet were of no consequence, determined to see all of her possessions Ruth skirted its purling side and discovered presently that here the brook, lifted from the earth by hand of artifice, was confined to a long, shallow, wooden aqueduct, an aqueduct open to the air and to the tracery of boughs above and to blue skies reflected in the water. Through this conduit the little brook bubbled and bounded, clear as crystal; icy cold to the touch as she dipped her hand in and let the water run along her wrist.

"Ah," thought the young lady, "this must be our famous spring!—I've reached the headquarters of the Nile or I'm very near them." And through the trees in truth, she perceived, further on, a rough hut, built to protect the stream's source from inroads of man and beasts.

She sat herself on a fallen tree trunk, leaned back and gazed with half-closed eyelids into the network of branches—oaks, larches, birch, hazel, maple,—nearly bare of foliage. Here again, the ground, checkered with green moss-patches was interspersed with little plants, "which must be all a-flower in the spring," thought Ruth and she vowed that when spring came she would return to pluck them.

Then—presto!... Without a note of warning—the agreeable independence of her mood vanished. Lucilla, Pontycroft!... Her mind, her heart, her very soul yearned for them. And a homesick longing for the finished, for the humanly beautiful, the artistically beautiful,—an intense craving and desire for a familiar European face—smote her.

"But,——" she puzzled, "would they, those I want most to see, *could they endure this wilderness?* No—not Lucilla! Not Lucilla with her love of luxury and her disdain of short skirts." She laughed. "Pontycroft? Perhaps," her heart fluttered. She knew he doted upon old, formal gardens, well-clipped lawns; had delight in the glorious army of letters and of art,—that he found in the society too, of princes, entertainment. Still, it might be possible.... He would, at all events, have some whimsical thing to say about it all. She began to fancy that she heard his voice.

"If he were here," Ruth told herself, "I should ask him to interpret the horrid vision I had last night." Ruth shivered as she recalled it; rapidly she began an imaginary conversation.

"I was lying in the big, carved, four-post family bedstead in my bedroom," Ruth informed him. "I was half asleep and half awake and I saw myself coming up the steps into the house just as I did when I arrived. As I came, the house door opened, quickly, from within, and four people rushed towards me, with open arms. One was my father.—He clasped me tenderly and said: 'Welcome, welcome home!'... Behind him, a tall, large, old man clasped me in his arms and he cried: 'Welcome, welcome home!' Then came another and with the same words bade me welcome; I felt very happy, and so glad that I had come! But running down the stairs of the house arrived a tiny, meagre, old lady, whose corkscrew curls bobbed at either side her face. She cried: 'Welcome, welcome!' in a shrill, high voice, seizing me in her embrace. 'Welcome!' she cried again, 'but *look out!*—*We can bite!*' And as she said it her two sharp white teeth went through my lips till I screamed with pain and started up—all a-tremble—and then I fell back onto the bed and shook for an hour."

"My sweet child!" the sane amused voice of Pontycroft made reply. "These old four-post family bedsteads are dangerous affairs to sleep in. *Quant-à-moi*, I've always avoided 'em.... I'll have nothing whatever to do with them. If my great-aunt, from whom I inherited Pontycroft, had not been of my way o' thinking I should have sold those at Pontycroft to the old furniture dealer in the village. Fortunately, that fearless lady lifted the obloquy of the act from my shoulders by disposing of them herself. One day, while my uncle, her husband,

scoured the high seas under Nelson, she got rid of all the old family four-posters. When he returned from the war and asked what had become of 'em she acknowledged she'd discovered a preference for bronze beds and had sent to France for a dozen. But he was far too thankful to be at home again. 'Peace now, at any price,' said he. And he never mentioned four-posters to his lady-wife again, but slept and snored contentedly, for forty odd years, in a red-gold, steel enamelled affair, free of family traditions. You'd better follow my aunt's example, Ruth. Send to Boston for a nice new white enamelled bedstead with a nice new wire mattress and let no more family ghosts worry your ingenuous small head."

"But, what did it mean? After all, it happened, or I'm mad," Ruth laughing, heard herself insist.

"Oh," said Pontycroft,—he gave her one of his droll glances—"if you want your midnight vision interpreted you must ask some older sage, even, than I, to do it. I should say, were it not too obvious to be true, that apple pie with an under crust...."

"Nonsense," interrupted Ruth.

"The sort invented by your French ancestress, Priscilla Mulline Alden (I've heard she was a rare *cordon bleu*)" went on Pontycroft, unperturbed, "together with New England brown bread—but—that's all too obvious to be true... what are you laughing at?" he queried, artlessly.

"I'm laughing at the Brown Bread," retorted Ruth, and she laughed aloud, "there wasn't any."

"There should have been," said Ponty, with a deprecating lift of the eyebrows. "It's *de rigueur* with baked beans."

"But your little story," he continued, lighting his cigarette, "belongs probably to those mysterious reflex actions of ancestry acting on a sensitive nervous organisation. You can't expect me to explain them. See, though, that you do look out. Don't, manifestly, offend your ancestors and they won't offend you, and there's my interpretation."

Again Ruth laughed aloud, gleefully, at the tones of Ponty's voice and again a little thrill of pain and hope pierced her breast. She looked at her watch. It was almost noon and she turned towards home through the glade, by the path along the brook.

VI

But the adventure of her walk had not come to an end yet.

The path widened into a grass-grown road. The day was so hot she regretted she hadn't brought her sunshade, but she walked with light buoyant steps, unreflecting,—amused by the antics of two blue, belated butterflies who, not perished with the summer, convinced it had come back a little, danced ahead of her chasing the shadows; they fluttered to the right and to the left, and came at last to rest upon a withered mullen stalk a few yards in advance of her. Ruth watched them while they sought greedily, making a rapid tour of the dried stem, for some lone flower upon which to replenish their hungry attenuated little stomachs. She almost held her breath, as she paused to watch the quest and she wished she might, by a wave of her stick, restore fresh succulence to the weeds, when—

"Halt, stop!" cried a voice.

Instinctively, Ruth shrank back.

"There's a snake ahead of you—there—just across the path. Don't move!" cried the voice.

Miss Adgate stood perfectly still. She saw a man run by her; she heard the sharp report of a gun. The smell of gunpowder filled her nostrils and the terror of the sudden cry made her feel sick.

"There he is!" cried the owner of the voice.

An excited young man presented upon the muzzle of his gun a viscous two feet of snake, an object that limply resembled the straight, flat limb of a tree. "A copperhead. 'Tis the only deadly dangerous beast in these harmless woods. As I'm alive, if you had put your foot on him you would, indeed, have found him deadly."

He extended the flabby thing for Ruth's inspection, but the young lady looked away—her arm instinctively went out to clutch at something.

"No cause for fright, Miss Adgate," said the young chap. He proffered a hand to steady her. "I'm afraid I gave you a terrible scare," he added, apologetic, and he looked at her with concern, "but that was better than the bite. You're quite white; sit down a moment. You'll soon feel better."

Ruth covered her face with her hands.

"Thank God!" she said, with an involuntary shudder, but she did not sit down.

"Are there many of those creatures in the woods?" she asked, but she felt ashamed of her weakness.

"No, especially not at this time of year. The warm sun brought this one out. You should never walk about here in low shoes, though, Miss Adgate."

"You know my name," Ruth said, surprised.

"I take it for granted you're General Adgate's niece, having a walk through your woods. The whole town knows you arrived last night," answered the young man, with a bow, smiling at her.

His smile was pleasant, he looked at her with friendly interest. In shabby tweeds and a pair of leggings, a game-bag slung over his shoulder, he was evidently out for a day's shooting.

"Don't think I'm a trespasser, though I can't show you my permit. But your uncle and I are old friends," he vouchsafed. "I'm privileged, I must tell you, to shoot here when I like. In fact, I rather fancy the quail you sat down to at supper last night was the product of my game-bag."

It occurred to Ruth that this remark came somehow with bad taste—the speaker's eyes shone, however, with so kindly a light she hadn't the heart to resent it.

"You are a marvellous shot," was all she said.

"I served under your uncle in the Cuban War," the young man told her. "We had sharp fighting then, Miss Adgate. But we're well drilled, here in Oldbridge—not a man jack of us but can pick an ace on a playing card at fifty paces. That's all due to your uncle who supervises the rifle-practice at the Armoury, to say nothing of coaching us in military tactics, which he's past master in."

"Ah!" said Ruth, interested. "I supposed he was the most peaceable of retired military men."

"Peaceable and retired if you like. But in times of peace, prepare for war.... The way we are made to answer up to call on drill nights would cause your blood to freeze, Miss Adgate."

"*Ma ché!* I thought I'd come to a quiet, sleepy New England town where all was love and peace! The day after I arrive I learn I am in a hotbed of militarism," laughed Ruth.

"You're right," the young man replied seriously, striding beside her. "General Adgate, you see, has been through two wars. He received his brevet of General in the war between the North and the South. He realises the importance of preparing for emergencies, now that we've taken our place among the nations. He's a splendid chap. Not one of us but would walk or fight our way to death for him.... And it's always been so. Why, they tell this story when he was just a Captain, in the War of Secession. The enemy was pouring bomb and shell into his entrenchments. He ordered his soldiers on their bellies, and in the midst of the cannonading up he got, stood,—coolly lighting a cigarette: 'Now, my men,' said he, 'rush for them!' The men rose in a body, leapt the entrenchments, fell upon the enemy. Of course the enemy was routed! we captured and brought back guns and ammunition with cheers to camp. Then it was, I believe, he was breveted General Adgate."

Ruth had a shiver of pride as she listened. "But now," continued her informant, "worse luck, in these cowardly moneyed times, there's no fun to be got out of war! You stand up, of course, to be slaughtered wholesale. Now—the best shot has little hope of bringing down his man—there's nothing to practise on but quail and partridge in the old General's woods."

"And snakes," put in Ruth, laughing.

"Snakes," repeated the young fellow, with a merry laugh. "Thrice blessed copperheads!" went his mental reservation,—so quickly is youth inflamed in America. "But a bounty's on every one of these wretches, Miss Adgate," he said aloud (and Ruth, fortunately, perhaps, was not a mind reader.) "They've almost disappeared. Truth is, like the rest of us, this one came out to welcome you, poor devil, and he's met with a sad end! Since the new law a snake may not look at a lady."

They had reached, as they strolled, the foot of the Adgate hill. As they neared the gate the young man paused.

"I must bid you good-bye," said he, lifting his hat, "it's long past noon,—almost your luncheon hour."

"Oh," Ruth suggested, "since you and my uncle are friends won't you come in to us for lunch? You shall go back to your shooting, your rescuing of damsels, when we've refreshed you. I dare say there's some of that quail left," she added, with an occult smile.

"Miss Adgate,"—the young man visibly struggled with temptation.... "Miss Adgate," he looked into the pretty flushed face and he felt himself smitten to the heart's core. "That's very good of you; I'm afraid, though, you don't know our New England customs. You've a hospitable, beautiful English habit, but you've not been here long enough to know that we don't ask folk unexpected-like to lunch; not unless they're blood relatives or bosom friends. Tradition, ceremony, convention forbid it and a gorgon more awful still. Her name is—Maria-Jane!"

"Oh!..." Ruth laughed. "But she's paid for that! It is part of her duty...."

"Ah, *dear* Miss Adgate, you won't find it easy. Love won't buy them, money won't purchase them, though I dare say,—you'll have a way with you will make them see black white. But if you risk asking me, I won't, and for your sake—accept—though I'm horribly tempted to. Besides, think of it, tradition, ceremony, convention."

Ruth felt herself getting angry. Here was a youth she didn't care twopence for, who had done her more than a civility, but who presumed to instruct her in a provincial code of manners. She would show him she was mistress of her household—then be done with him.

"What ceremony, what convention?" she demanded coldly.

"Oh," the young man replied undaunted, "no one wants his neighbour to know he sits down to a joint, a couple of vegetables and apple pie for his midday meal. We make such a lot of fuss here when we ask people to eat with us."

"But that's precisely the staple of every one's luncheon in England, from Commoner to Lord," cried Ruth. "No one makes a secret of it—it's called the children's dinner. Whatever frills may be added, there or here, the joint, the vegetables and the pudding, which amounts to the pie, are invariably present and the most patronised. I assure you it's the luncheon every one ought to eat. And now," she commanded, "open the gate and shut it behind you, and be satisfied to partake of our vegetables, our joint and our pudding without further ado."

"I accept," said the delighted young fellow. "But if General Adgate turns me out-o'-doors, I shall bend to the New England custom I was brought up in and not hold you responsible for my discomfiture."

They ascended the hill, over the softest, greenest turf; they went under the apple trees despoiled of apples,—passed through the rustic gate, and entered the garden. To the youth, the garden was all fragrant of blossoms which must have burst into flower over night. Such delusive things have a trick of happening, in New England, to an old garden, to welcome the desired person, and Ruth, though she didn't suspect it, had already become the desired person in the eyes of her victim. The syringa tree under which they went spread for them a miraculous white canopy; the white pinks threw forth aromatic scents which penetrated by the door into the house as Ruth brought her companion to General Adgate, seated before a rousing wood fire reading his newspapers in the drawing-room.

Miss Adgate preceded her companion.

"Uncle," she boldly proclaimed, "I've brought a friend of yours to luncheon." General Adgate looked up from his book. "Why—Rutherford! glad to see you," he said, shaking hands none too cordially. "So," he smiled as he pushed a chair forward for Ruth, "my niece waylaid you, did she?"

"No," Ruth told him. "I was waylaid by a serpent in our woods. Mr. Rutherford happened by at the right moment to rescue me." Then Ruth went to the ancient gilt mirror above the fireplace and withdrew the pins from her hat and rang for Paolina.

"So you saved the lady's life," General Adgate chuckled. "Well done, Rutherford, my son—a plausible opening to the story to please the matter-of-fact public. As though the public were matter-of-fact!—Nothing is really improbable enough for the public, provided life's in the telling. We're ready to swallow the most unconscionable lies! But though you've lost no time in making the opening ordinary, Rutherford, we shall see what may be done to reward you."

"Oh," objected Rutherford, with happy laughter,—“you of all men should know it—the service of Beauty brings its own reward to those lucky enough to serve it?”

"Lunch is served, Miss," announced Martha patly, putting her head in at the door.

"Oh, a plate, please, Martha, for this gentleman," said Ruth.

A shade (was it a look of displeasure?) crept into Martha's face; the reply came meekly. "Yes, Miss," she answered—and disappeared.

Miss Adgate threw a gay glance at Rutherford, he returned it with one he meant to make eloquent of his admiration. But Ruth was saying, in that ravishing voice of hers: "Shall we go in?" She swept by him into the low-ceilinged, white-panelled dining-room with an air of dignity in her slim, young figure which Rutherford thought suited it to perfection.

VIII

Poor old Rutherford is fond of recalling that memorable luncheon to this day. Ruth's joyous soul frothed into fun which sounded at times so exactly like Pontycroft that he seemed to be at her elbow. For a reason not hard to seek, to sophisticated minds, General Adgate, too, seemed in high spirits. Rutherford—well—we know what infatuated young men are—excellent company because they laugh at a word, could applaud the dullest saw. Neither Ruth nor General Adgate spoke in saws; by a saw we mean the easy pert phrase, *la phrase toute faite* which passes so readily for wit in any land. General Adgate was an accomplished raconteur. He could tell a story with an economy of language, a grace worthy the subtlest story-writers; the point, unexpected when it came, brought the house down. Ruth listened—astonished, and led him on. Rutherford's haww-hawws, more appreciative than musical, provided the essential base to the trio.

When lunch was over Ruth ordered coffee to be served in the drawing-room. "You're a daring creature! I've never had the courage to ask Martha to do that," objected General Adgate.

"But don't you always have coffee after luncheon?" she asked.

"Yes, but I must e'en drink it where it's brought to me, at table."

"Poor dear! You see the advantage of having a woman by who fears nothing."

"I see the advantage of having a fair niece to minister to my poor human wants," gallantly responded the General. "And to make life extremely worth while, hey Rutherford?"

"Miss Adgate is an adorable hostess. If I don't envy you as her uncle, General, it is because I find her perfect as Lady of Barracks Hill," said Rutherford. He said it with a flush and with the fear upon him that he had said too much.

But Martha just then had entered bearing the coffee; Ruth, indicating the Japanese tea-table, took no notice of his speech. The table, the shining silver Georgian service on its silver tray were placed before her.

"Where did you get this old service, Uncle?" Ruth asked as she lifted the elongated, graceful coffee-pot by its ebony handle and began to pour the coffee.

"Martha must have unearthed that from the cupboard upstairs," answered her uncle. "The salver has been put away for years. It belonged to your great-grandmother. But how did they manage to give it such a polish?"

"Miss Adgate's maid helped me, sir," Martha vouchsafed in her primmest voice. "We tried that new powder. It took no time at all."

She left the room with her chin up as who should say: "We know the proper thing to do, when there's someone at hand who knows we ought to know it."

"Well!" exclaimed Rutherford, confounded.

"Ruth's a mistress as gives satisfaction," General Adgate laughed softly while Martha's footsteps receded towards the kitchen. "I believe, Rutherford, we'll be having our afternoon tea here yet, in the British fashion."

"*Ma, da vero! come si fa?*" cried Ruth, lapsing into Italian in her surprise, "don't you *always* have afternoon tea?"

"We have *tea*, Miss Adgate," Rutherford answered merrily, "tea with cold meat, stewed fruit and cake at six o'clock. Not a minute later, mind you. Martha and Bridget have something better to do than to be serving even you all day. By seven of the clock one is off with one's young man or running over to mother's.... You need not inquire at what hour we get back, we have the latch-key, and your breakfast's generally served on time." Ruth cast a wild look at General Adgate.

He bowed his diminished head: "I'm afraid it's true," he murmured.

"Is it—a—universal habit,—in Oldbridge?" asked Ruth, her eyes dancing.

"It has to be the universal habit," answered Rutherford. "We simply can't help ourselves. We could get no one at all to wait upon us if we didn't conform to it. The—the—and the—are the only people in town who are

known to have late dinners and that's because, hopelessly Europeanised, they don't care what they pay their girls, and keep a butler. Even they are obliged to dine at seven,—besides," laughed Rutherford, "late dinners *ain't 'ealthy!*"

"After all," said Ruth, thoughtfully, "the custom is primitive, not to say Puritan; I think it suits Oldbridge. Our forefathers had to do with less service I suppose. And as you say, late dinners *ain't 'ealthy*. But Paolina shall give us our afternoon tea, at four, Uncle. It will make her feel at home to serve it to us. But aren't you famished for some music? I want to try the Steinway. This morning when I came down I raised the lid and saw the name."

She rose from her corner of the sofa and seated herself at the piano. *Oft have I travelled in those Realms of Gold...* Presently she had started her two companions, travelling, journeying *in those Realms of Gold* which Chopin opens to the least of musicians. Chopin's austerity of perfect beauty wrought in a sad sincerity,—entered the New England drawing-room. To General Adgate's ears the music seemed to lend voice at last,—give expression, at last,—to holy, self-repressed, patient lives,—lives of the dead and the gone—particles of whose spirit still clung, perhaps, to the panelled walls, pervaded, perhaps, the air of the old room. To Ruth, this incomplete New England world, which something more than herself and less than herself was, for the nonce, infatuated with, possessed by,—which yet, to certain of her perceptions,—revealed itself as a milieu approaching to semi-barbarism, Oldbridge, melted away. At her own magic touch, Italian landscapes, rich in dreams, rich in love, abundant; decked forth in fair realities, intellectual joys,—complete and vibrant of absolute beauty, harmonious, suggestive,—rose, took shape before her.

"*I dreamt I dwelt in marble halls*, among pink fragrant oleanders," she repeated, smiling to her thoughts as she played and forgot the present.

Rutherford, Rutherford,—oh,—of course—Rutherford found in those heavenly chords and melodies what every lover finds in Chopin.

Ruth turned around upon her piano stool.

"Have you had enough?" she asked, smiling.

"Enough?" exclaimed the lovesick youth. "I, for one could never have enough."

"*Toujours perdrix!*" said Ruth and lifted up a warning finger.

"Play us something else, child," said her uncle in a matter-of-fact tone intended to disperse sentimentality. "Let us hear your Russians and a little Schubert."

And so Ruth played the Valse Lente from the Fifth Tchaikowsky Symphony and the famous Rachmaninoff which, I believe, everybody plays, and finished at last with the Fourth Fugue of the immortal Bach.

"There!" she exclaimed, "I'm tired."

"And so am I," said the transcriber, laying down the pen.

IX

Young Rutherford bounded from his chair. The tall clock in the hall, as though loth to mark the passage of Time,—Time,—who had been its friend for something more than a hundred and fifty years,—the steadfast old clock began to mark three very slow, slow notes.

"Miss Adgate, forgive me! I suppose I ought to go, you should be left to rest!" he held out his hand. "I've never known any pleasure comparable to this afternoon's. May I come again? The whole of Oldbridge shall envy me to-day,—I'm too vain not to tell them where I've lunched. Good-bye, goodbye," he repeated. He gave Ruth a furtive glance and flushed, very red.

"Good-bye, Rutherford," said General Adgate. He smiled indulgence to the young man who still malingered. "We'll see you to-night," he reassured him, with a nod. "Ruth, you're to make yourself splendid tonight. I'm to take you to dine at the Wetherbys. They are giving a dinner party in your honour, for knowing you were not ridden yet with engagements I accepted for you. There will be some sort of a reception afterwards—you'd call it *At Home* wouldn't you? Everyone's coming. Everybody wants to meet Miss Adgate." He laughed, as though well pleased.

"I believe he's proud of me," thought Miss Adgate, gratefully.

The door at last closed on Rutherford. Niece and uncle stood together in the hall, where the voice of the family time-piece, its brass face marking the phases of the sun and moon, underlined the pervading stillness of the house with an austere, admonitive, solemn "tick-tack!"

"Ruth," said her uncle abruptly, "why did you come to America?"

"Why?—To see you, of course," Ruth said, her tone one of innocent surprise, but she felt a little guilty catch at her heart.

"Oh,—me!" her uncle said. "You young witch, you never crossed the seas to look at an old man. It was as much my business to cross them to look after you. Come," said he, with a look of raillery, "there was some precipitating cause. You came in a hurry. Something happened—for you might have put your journey off for another year. Something occurred, to induce you—to come—in a hurry."

Ruth hesitated. She gave a light laugh—then she looked away. "Shall I really tell you?" she asked.

"The sooner you tell me," said the old General, "the better,—for then we'll understand one another."

"I left Europe,"—Ruth said, embarrassed, "because—because—I wanted to see—my uncle—and have a look at my ancestral acres!" she still prevaricated, yet dimpling with amusement.

"Your ancestral acres!"—repeated her uncle, sceptically. "Well?" he encouraged.

"Oh—well—because,—if you must have another reason still, well—because—well—I felt sore."

"Why?" said General Adgate.

"Why?" said Ruth with a persistent and feminine reluctance to reveal her real self, speak her true reasons: "Uncle,—I wish—you wouldn't ask me!"

"Out with it," said her uncle.

"Bertram, Crown Prince of Altronde, wanted me to marry him morganatically. I felt outraged, though they told me it would be a legal marriage. Harry Pontycroft and Lucilla sympathised with my disgust and packed me off. And—that is why."

The old man looked grave. "Damned European whelps," he muttered. "No wonder your Puritan ancestors shook that dust from their souls. You did well," he said, patting Ruth on the back.

X

Ruth went upstairs without another word. The upper hall was lined with bookshelves reaching to the ceiling. "I must add a library to this dear place," she said to herself while she sought for a book. She was tired,—she wanted to lie down, she wanted to wash from her mind the impressions of the day; she felt completely fagged.

General Adgate came upstairs behind her while she was peering along the shelves of calf-bound books. The shelves seemed to hold only a monotonous row on row of histories and works of philosophy.

"Take this," he said as he passed her, and, pausing, he removed a book from an upper shelf and handed it to her.

This was a volume of Governor Bradford's History of New England.

"But," Ruth weakly objected, "I wanted a novel!"

"You'll find that more interesting than any novel," General Adgate threw over his shoulder as he proceeded on to his own apartments.

O Reflex Egotism! Ruth found the book more interesting than any novel.

PART SIXTH

I

THE Old Town of Oldbridge is rich of one pleasant winding highway along whose route are scattered its prettiest demesnes. Time was, once, when this sun-spattered, tree-bordered thoroughfare enjoyed its dream of peace in drowsy quietude, under spreading lindens and over-arching elms. To-day, however, it stirs in its dream.

Yet its ancient houses stand placidly enough. Comfortable and serene among park-like meadows, life in them goes on with a simple dignity and ease; and if they are the sometime innocent cause of the sin of pride to the families who inherit them, they are sources of arcadian joys to the stranger within their gates. For they are all spotless and restful—and fragrant of the breaths of several hundred years of new-mown hay, rose-arbours, and aromatic pinks, blown through the windows. These old Colonial homes speak eloquently of good life past, of still better life present—to come.

The trolley-track and the pretty road keep company a bit, together; they both turn to the left and passing in all say twenty houses, reach the Common and the Post Office, where a dozen or so more hipped roofs, set among quiet flower gardens and apple orchards lend tradition and a quaint distinction to the really lovely old Green.

The boys of Oldbridge have pre-empted this Green, the most popular of Sports Clubs, and here, after school, as their forbears did, as their fathers and grandfathers did, here they play and tumble and wrestle and fight. From here they cross the road to enter the Public School House, a red brick building which, thirty years ago, supplanted the Dames School, and which balances the old brick Meeting House at the further end.

The haunt, trysting-place, council chamber—where every mischievous plot is hatched, such is the Common. Whence the eternal Boy, lured by near-flowing waters of the Mantic joins his pals upstream for a swim, plays uproarious pranks there, ties a chap's clothes into a hard knot on the bank and when he comes dripping out in search of them chants, in raucous chorus: "*Chaw raw beef—the beef is tough!*"

In Winter, the frozen River Mantic makes an unrivalled skating ground; and the Oldbridge Boy still builds his ice-fortress on the Common, stocks it (ammunition of snow-balls)—and leads his regiment to victory. Here he coasts or hitches his sledge to a huge one fleetly passing, gets a glorious ride—comes home, nose and fingers frost-bitten, exceeding argumentative; talking in loud imperious voice; in truth a very dog of wintry joys.

Too often, after supper, the Boy of Oldbridge takes delectable but stolen interest in the conversation of the village Post Master and his cronies. By the door in Summer—round the stove in Winter, he and they discuss the politics of the hour to many hoary anecdotes between. Pastime sternly prohibited by parents requiring infinite discretion! Thus one steals with muffled tread down by back stairs, one issues forth by back windows, one whistles to one's *fides achates*—and off.

Miss Adgate, who to her regret had never been a small boy, never would be, was none the less of opinion that boys are the most amusing imps and she soon exercised her opportunity for making the acquaintance of a New England lad, Master Jack Enderfield, the twelve-year-old son of Mrs. Enderfield, who lived in the Enderfield House on the Common. Mr. Enderfield, after preaching to his world for fifteen years, had left it, with, he feared on his death-bed, little advantage to its soul. He had gone leaving a library full of theological

tracts and treatises, of philosophic books and pamphlets, a comfortable fortune inherited from collateral great-aunts,—and a son, Jack. Jack was blond, blue-eyed, curly haired, of an enquiring expansive nature towards those in whom he felt confidence, and a diverting person. Having met Miss Adgate at his mother's, when she returned the lady's call he considered himself entitled to drop in when he liked at Barracks Hill.

"She's got such stunning hair, mother, and such white hands.... And when she talks it makes a fellow feel good. She uses such pretty words and her voice is low and round. And she listens to a man and draws him out."

"But, my dear, it may not be convenient for Miss Adgate to receive you so often," said Mrs. Enderfield. "Miss Adgate has other people to see, other things to do."

"Oh, she has always time to see me," replied Jack, with a wave of the hand. "She told Martha to say she was out the other day when the Wetherbys called. She took me up to her sitting room and showed me a lot of jolly European things and gave me this paper knife." Jack drew from an inside pocket, offering it for inspection, a Venetian filagree paper knife wrapped in soiled and crumpled tissue paper.

The maternal heart could not withstand such obvious proof of favouritism towards her idol. Though warned not to wear his welcome out, Jackie descended frequently upon Barracks Hill, but this, though it concerns, runs ahead, of the story.

II

Miss Adgate received calls for a month; paid them—was dined—was less wined than vastly cocktailed,—in simple or elaborate New England fashion. She returned these hospitalities and she discovered that Oldbridge New and Oldbridge Old held agreeable people. If they treated her a little as an Egeria she accepted the rôle without fuss and gave to modesty its due.

Some of these new acquaintances, of a pretty taste in letters, on far more than nodding terms with art, had, after years spent abroad—fallen like herself alack, upon a day! Alack the day on which we come to the disputably sage conclusion that East,—West.... We know, we learn—too late, sometimes alas, the fatal rest! And they had cast behind them the dust of the East, and they had turned Westward with a very lively sense of the superior enchantments of Europe. But once at home a devout appreciation of the sweet repose ('tis the just phrase), an imperceptible abandonment to that soothing peace which hovers insidious over a New England homestead, ah, ye rewards of Virtue! these had quietly engulfed in sodden well-being, the finer European impressions.

Miss Adgate a little later, perceived that these wise people—settled ere long unblushingly to New Englandism, never again intended to budge. They had accepted, deliberately, the prose of life. And Miss Adgate, enamoured of New England, still kept her head enough to wonder, with some dismay, whether she, too, if she stayed here, she, too, would end by looking upon Oldbridge New and Oldbridge Old as the be-all and end-all of existence! So many things spoke here to her heart. Her tender spirit basked here, all day, in good will. But wasn't Oldbridge just a trifle lacking in effervescence? And yes—didn't Oldbridge take itself a bit solemnly? Ah, yes! And—yes—it had a distressing tendency to be very serious about everything. To none of these states of mind had Ruth been initiated, and every good Catholic knows that mirth is from God, dullness from the Devil.

Miss Adgate, who had hitherto lived on the plane of an impersonal, if somewhat facetious consideration of public matters,—of wit, persiflage; Miss Adgate found when it came to small gossip that she was an irritated listener. Carping criticism made her yawn, she became dumb, had nothing to say. It is indeed a stupid trade! Moreover her soul had ever disported in innocent folly, in gaiety and witty conversation. She soon attracted those who cared for the same light stuff and Barracks Hill became, ere long, the centre of a coterie of frolic, music, and laughter, where personalities except in the ways of honest chaff were tabooed—and no one's affairs, wonder of wonders! were commented upon behind his back.

III

But, after all, Barracks Hill it was, "poetic, historic Barracks Hill," which spoke to her fancy,—held her heart!

This house and the hill of this house were suggestive; packed full of romance. Ruth, whose temper was a charming compound of mirth love and poesy,—Ruth who had the soul of a poet in the body of a fair woman,—Ruth now fell deep in love with reverie.—She spent long days in a singular sort of trance. Lingering in a room she pondered its messages—wandering upon the hill, she dreamed and mused. The room mysteriously unburdened itself of long pent emotions,—joys and woes; the hill unfolded its soul, opened wide its heart to her; and lonely desolate ghosts—the ghosts of monotonous, innocent, happy, sorry lives confided in her—told her their tales of pain; disclosed to her their rapture of hope, their mysteries of birth and love and aspiration—their tragedy of denial—and of death.

Ruth darkened to invisible messengers. As she came and went in the still house, they floated towards her light as down,—intangible, so perceptible,—in the quiet house, and through the corridors. But Love's very breath greeted her on the hill.... Love met her there, with exuberance by day; Love wept there, in her heart—bitter tears—by night. Yes, a secret sadness brooded at the core of those ghostly souls. But a musical refrain, a simple entreaty seemed ever in the air and its contrapuntal burden: "*Love, love and laughter! Give us love and laughter!*" they implored—conquered her heart.

"They hope in me!" Ruth thought, wondering and wide-eyed.... "They have confidence in me! The old place believes in me; it trusts me, it knows that I love it; it knows I reverence *them*.... It knows, *they* know, how my spirit would wish to cull those unfulfilled desires, every one they long to lighten themselves of, and bring each one to its fruition if I can. Yes, each of you dear ghosts, you who have been lonely so long and friendless—you know I'll execute your bidding if I can."

And, every day, at the little Catholic Parish Church, Ruth said a Rosary for the house and for the souls that

had passed through it. And she visited the house, from attic to cellar. She was convinced that on one occasion she saw a veritable ghost who, smiling at her, passed across the attic. She discovered there, at all events, some fine old pieces of furniture, white with dust; and she caused these to be cleansed and polished and placed in the rooms.

IV

One fine December morning Ruth walked with Miranda on the hill. She was beginning to have projects.

"Miranda!" said she,—*"Heaven knows where you picked the name up,"* mused Ruth. *"Dear kitten, I believe I'll invite my European friends here! The fashion is in Europe to come and have a look at America. I'll keep open house, and you and I and General Adgate shall receive the most famous people in Europe at Barracks Hill. And we'll show them what they ought to be curious about, what they've seen only in books,—we'll show them a beautiful old New England town enriched from all sources yet keeping its distinct New England flavour. And I'll give to Oldbridge the enlivening experience,"* she said with a gleam, *"of hobbing and of nobbing with every light-minded modern who doesn't take life's trivialities solemnly; with every human of talent who cultivates the sweet tonic spirit of levity."*

Miranda listened, his chrysope eyes widened—contracted—blazed with intelligent sympathy.

"I'm with you, if it's anything that has to do with fun," he loudly purred.

Miranda was not a kitten—Miranda was a sleek, a superb tortoise-shell cat. A cat of the masculine persuasion who could have counted six or seven summers if a day. General Adgate had, in *"a tonic spirit of levity,"* christened him at his birth Miranda—it may be because the Master of Barracks Hill had likened himself that day to Prospero. Be this as may be, Miranda had kept his youth; his idea of beer and skittles was still to play at any game he could find a playmate for; he, at least, was all for sociability.

And it was his friendly habit to follow Ruth, running along the wall of the terrace at her left as she paced the hill. Now, when she addressed him, he drew himself lazily, along the warm stones, stretched himself infinitely, clawed the rough stones deluged in December sunshine, and assuming an irresistible attitude as she spoke, pricked his ears. Then, with a bound made across the turf to an apple-tree, mad for a frolic. He ran up its grey side, lichen-covered, paused, looked down, and jeered at her over his shoulder.

"Why don't you follow me?" he taunted. Took, the next moment, his leap over her head, landed at her feet, was scuttling deliriously through wheel ruts, grass-grown, passage of last year's cartwheels. Burrowing under accumulations of brown crackling leaves, flattening himself lengthwise, poking out a pink nose at her, he showed a pair of questioning, mischievous eyes.

"Send out your invitations," counselled he, *"but first, catch me!"*

Ruth plunged to a great rustle of dry leaves, and light and irresponsible as they Miranda darted to a sheltering juniper. Ruth tried to seize him—useless vanity, for he was quicksilver. Up another tree ere she could lay hands on him, he, perhaps not disdainful of a little petting, and at all events Bon Prince, finally relented; he allowed her at last to have her way, come close and take him in her arms.

"You're a duck," said Ruth, laughing, scratching his ears, laying her cheek against his fur all glossy and fragrant of wood odours. *"Such a mercurial duck! You make me feel thrice welcome here. I believe you are the spirit of the place. Yes—the little friendly spirit of the house who attracts and keeps those who love it for its good—who uses every wile, too, and coquetry to do so."*

Miranda at her words slipped struggling through Ruth's arms to earth, arched his back, rubbed himself against her skirts, purred loud and long—circling round her, tail in air and as who should say: *"Yes, yes, no doubt. But let us waste no time in sentiment,"* and away he bounded to a remoter corner of the hill.

"Of course! he's showing me the place," she cried. In genuine enjoyment of the sport she ran, eyes brimming with laughter, after the clever fellow as he trotted on; he beguiled her here and he beguiled her there; he discovered nooks to her full of interest and variety. And as she abandoned herself to the game, played and romped with him, it occurred to her once again that this, all this—was not all this verily part of a sort of terrestrial Paradise?

Here,—the chimneys of the house just visible below, here, aloof in a beautiful world,—she stood on the brow of her hill among gnarled fine old apple trees. She went up to one, she laid her cheek against it.

"Yes, I can understand what a sight you were in the Garden of Eden," she whispered. *"In Spring, when your rosy blossoms are out,—in Autumn when you are hung with ripe red and golden fruit! And, yes—Henry Pontycroft's prophecy is fulfilled.... Here is Eve, sulking in her native apple orchard!"*

*"Derrière' chez mon père,
Vole, vole mon cour, vole—
Derrière' chez mon père
Y a un pommier doux—
Tout doux et you!"*

"If Adam, or if Pontycroft were here..." she sighed, *"I should be vastly tempted—tout doux et you,—to tempt either of them. Oh, see how the rosy horizon is caught in its net woven of grey leafless branches! The sky is a sumptuous Prussian blue and how it fades at the zenith to palest azure! All the Royal colour is broken up by bold white clouds, and—this—ah, this is far too fair a sight for one pair of eyes to revel in alone. This cries, aloud, for Adam!"*

Ruth looked about her. At her feet, oddly enough, curiously enough, a red firm apple, forgotten there,—untouched by frosts,—at her feet lay a fine red pippin. She picked it up, she smiled, she wondered....

"But—but—there's only you—old Puss! Here, catch it," she cried to Miranda, who came running towards her, scenting the game he loved. With a gentle toss Ruth threw the apple along the turf and left Miranda to

the ecstatic enjoyment of patting it, pushing it and rolling over it for quite eleven minutes.

V

Miss Adgate had Miranda's approbation for inoculating Oldbridge with levity. She consulted General Adgate:

"Anything you like, Ruth. Anything you like to keep you here contented." And he was not in the least fired by her schemes and had nothing further to say. But Miss Adgate sat down at this and scribbled fifty notes, selecting her first guests from all the worlds held in the one London World—the men, the women she liked, whose work she liked; the people who could be irrelevant at a pinch, amused, amusing. She invited them to visit her at Barracks Hill during the coming Summer, and in time she received effusive acceptances to her invitations.

VI

"The Oldbridge Industrial Exhibits opens to-morrow night," General Adgate, tentatively, said one day. "Do you care to go? You'll find all your friends. The Light Infantry Band will play to us. It's rather jolly."

If New England days in old New England houses are fruitful (to young women of "high faculties quiescent"), if they are fecund in long, poetic dreams,—if life in Oldbridge does offer limitless advantage for the building of castles in the air—none can deny that it has, too, its own artless way of playing up to the leading lady.

"I wouldn't be left out for all the planets," protested Ruth. "I'm curious to know what the Oldbridge Industries are."

"In that case——" answered her uncle.

He went off smiling, she could not conceive why.

"Miss Adgate was a sight for the gods," vowed Rutherford. "Brown velvet, sables, to suit her brown hair with a red glint in it, and eyes!"

Miss Adgate doubtless was a sight for the gods, when (conducted by her uncle) she went the following evening to the Oldbridge Industrial Exhibits. As she was led first by young Rutherford, then by young Milman, then by young Massington, then by young Leffingwell, and then by young Wetherby—through a crowd of friends, to every stall and counter of the big illuminated hall,—as each of these young men explained, volubly, minutely, each exhibit—little was left, we may believe, of Oldbridge Industry which Ruth had not at the end fathomed, become well acquainted with. Pausing at one stall and at another, she ordered with reckless discrimination, rugs, lawnmowers, carpenter's tools, muslins, silks, furniture; and a surfeit of glass blown by a little glass-blower who had quite a local reputation for his designs; linens, too, and rugs of delicate colour dyed and woven in the neighbourhood upon a hand-loom a hundred years of age. The tools might do for Jobias. He had confided to Paolina that his stock was getting rusty; the mowers, asked the piratical salesman, are not lawnmowers forever getting out of order?

These, Ruth's purchases, she destined for the new wing. She was furnishing the old Morris House, too. The Morris House General Adgate had, to her joy, just presented her with. This had been the home of a maternal greatgrandmother. From its portals, that lady with the patient eyes (whose portrait, painted by one Jarvis, hung in the drawing-room) having taken Admiral Richard Adgate for better or for worse under the Puritan marriage service read by Parson Ebenezer Allsworthy,—that lady had tripped across the hill to come and reign at Barracks Hill.

The Morris House! Miss Adgate destined it for her Summer overflow of guests. It is a quaint and picturesque spot, all nooks and cupboards, within; of panelled walls and broad brick fireplaces. As its gardens overlook the purling brook and the Wigwam, it was, thought she, well suited to the purpose she intended—and it is in fact deserving of far more attention than this passing word can say for it.

VII

On New Year's Day, Miss Adgate woke to a blizzard.

The New Year in Oldbridge is feasted in that old-time pleasant fashion which has long ago *passé de mode* in New York, which is regarded with disfavour at Boston and in other New England towns. But Oldbridge perseveres in welcoming the New Year, for this smacks of ancients, and, in sooth, the custom is a genial one. 'Tis well known that in Paris, every hostess, mistress of a salon, is deluged with cards and flowers and bonbons from Boissier on the New Year. At Rome, too, on the New Year, and in Vienna and Berlin, is it not considered courteous for a young man, not alone to leave his card, but to call wherever he has received a welcome? The servants of the houses he frequents, a hint to the wise, never allow him to forget his obligations; they pass at his lodgings betimes on the New Year and receive for their *Buon' Anno* a substantial *Buono Mano*. Oldbridge is, therefore, wholly in touch with the most modern capitals when it hospitably celebrates the New Year.

As Ruth, accompanied by Paolina, passed, by meadows all sparkling and white with hoar-frost, from the New Year's Midnight Mass at the Parish Church, the stars in a clear sky scintillated with suspicious brilliancy. The usual eager nipping air of a New England Autumn had until then condensed into just an occasional flurry of snow—or it had subdued its edge; the days were often warm enough to sit beside open windows. The American Winter had not begun to show its teeth. But from her bed to-day Ruth saw the flakes descend—small, dry,—to the rumour of low complaints, murmurs in the chimney. The flakes had a stealthy, a persistent look. Ruth, though, was very, sure the storm would prove the hitherto pretty diversion of a whitened landscape and trees, of a rapid thaw under warm sun, and Miss Adgate adored these snow falls! She had never, she thought, seen anything comparable to the white still beauty of the country and the wood, the gentian blueness of the sky when the snow had ceased, the clouds had emptied sack and the sun burst forth. When this happened she would put on a pair of high rubber boots, take a stick and start for a walk. And

when, in her walk, she came across the marks of little feet along the snow,—squirrel tracks, mole tracks, the tracks of birds, quail, the larger ones of woodchucks, of foxes,—little existences living to themselves—which she could never know, never fathom—her mind would travel off into endless reveries and speculations.

But her rôle to-day was that of hostess and there would be no going out to-day after the snowfall. Miss Adgate shortly after breakfast sauntered into the kitchen to see how matters there were progressing.

Before her, on the kitchen table, an array of angel cake, nut cake, pound cake, orange cake, maple-sugar cake lacked the supreme touch, and waited to be frosted. Spread upon a crackled Coalport dish a quantity of thin, brown, crisp, sugar wafers invited appetite. These wafers were from a recipe handed down in the Adgate family. Ruth knew the original, had seen it in Priscilla Mulline Alden's neat cramped little Huguenot handwriting; it was carefully preserved among the most curious of the Adgate relics.

Martha, Ellen,—busy preparing endless edible New England subtleties in the buttery,—Margaret stirring an icing for the cake, General Adgate expected,—he had promised to come in an hour to brew his famous punch, the ingredients for which were mellowing and combining in the dining-room. Everything was, then, well under way, each aide-de-camp was at his post; the commander-in-chief felt she might safely mount to her dressing-room to let Paolina put on the robes of state.

Now it must be known that Paolina had taken to her new life with unexpected cheerfulness; and the reason was shortly to be disclosed.

"Signorina," Paolina began timidly, while she dressed her mistress's hair in a high French twist, placed a bow of pale blue ribbon fetchingly to the left of the coil, poised it there like a butterfly with wings outspread,—*"Signorina—would—you be very angry if I confided to you, something?"*

"It depends upon what the something is, Paolina," said Ruth absently, giving her attention to the becoming effect of the bow.

"Oh, Signorina!" sighed Paolina. Suddenly she clasped her hands; she held them out before her, dropped to her knees. "Oh! Signorina! Jobias has asked me to marry him!"

"Jobias—has—asked you—to—marry him?" repeated Ruth in astonishment. Then she began to laugh—laughed in merry peals of musical laughter, her head thrown back, her face a ripple of mirth.

But Paolina was quite offended.

"Signorina," she said, and she rose with dignity, "why should it make you laugh to learn that Tobias has asked me to marry him?"

"Forgive me, Paolina," Ruth said; "it is not that Jobias has asked you to marry him that makes me laugh—it is the tone in which you break the news to me." Then, gravely: "And what did you say to him, Paolina, when he asked you to marry him?"

"Signorina, I said I would have to ask you. I said that you were a mother to me, and that I would have to get your consent."

"So,—" said Ruth, "you really think of accepting him?"

"I esteem him," said Paolina, "I think he is a good man. He has saved up two thousand dollars. He has a nice house across the river which he lets out, and of which he reserves for himself one room. I think my own mother would be pleased with the match, if you approve, Signorina."

"But do you realise," said Ruth, "that if you marry Jobias you cannot see your mother again? It costs a deal of money to cross the ocean. Jobias could not take you—he would have his work to do."

"Oh, Signorina, but *you* would take us! I would not leave you, Jobias said I need not. But when you marry (Jobias says you will surely marry, before long)"—Paolina nodded her head several times sagaciously—"then your husband will want a valet, and Jobias says he will be glad to put himself at your excellencies' services. And then, you will go abroad for the wedding tour, and you will want to take us. I can then go to my mother and receive her blessing."

Ruth caught her breath. "Thus are our lives arranged for us," she thought, smiling, "and by whom?" For half an instant she was silent. Somewhere, among the recesses of memory, Ruth tried to recall such a conversation. She remembered—she had read it,—why,—it was in one of Corvo's witty tales.... So does history repeat itself. What the romancer invents women and men enact.

But just then, crisis of Paolina's life, the knocker at the front door went rat-tat.

"Good gracious, and I'm not dressed yet. Put my dress on quickly, Paolina,—we'll finish our talk at some other time," Ruth exclaimed.

Paolina ran to the bed, lifted the pale blue chiffon gown inlaid with yellow lace—passed it dexterously, delicately, over Ruth's head, and began with her adroit, rapid fingers to lace the bodice. Martha knocked at the door: "Master Jack Enderfield is in the drawing-room, Miss," she said in her precise voice. Ruth glanced at the clock—the hands pointed to ten.

"Tell Master Jack Enderfield I'll be down directly," she said. Ruth, standing before the cheval glass, gave a light pat here to her gown, a touch there to her coiffure—Martha lingered a minute to take the vision in.

"Yes, Miss," she said, closed the door, and was gone.

Then Ruth descended the stairs in a froufrou of skirts, wafting an odour of violets as she went along; and she greeted Master Jack Enderfield at the drawing-room door with that radiant grace the young man seemed so well able to appreciate.

VIII

"I thought I'd come early," Jack explained, as he stood before the wood-fire in a man-of-the-world attitude: "I knew that when the crowd began there'd be no chance for me."

"I'm delighted you came early," said Ruth. "Won't you sit down?"

Jack sat down. He plunged at once into the subject which was on his mind.

"It's all nonsense, this talk about a Republic," he began. "We'd have been much better off if we'd stuck to England. Oh, we mightn't have been so rich," he made a large gesture, "but we'd have been nicer."

"Jack, these sentiments on the New Year for a child of Liberty, a son of the Revolution!" Ruth reproved.

"It's not my fault, Miss Adgate, if I'm a son of the Revolution, and I don't believe in Liberty. I wish my double great-grandfather hadn't come over here and married my double great-grandmother." Master Jack stuck his hands doggedly in his pockets and glowered at the fire.

"Oh, cheer up," laughed his young hostess. "Accept the inevitable, Jack, make the best of it! But what can have happened to-day to make you think ill of Liberty and the Revolution?"

"It's very well for you to sit there, Miss Adgate, sit and poke fun at me in your soft voice and your beautiful gown," Jack said, flushing. "But you know as I do, that this—this country—is rotten—it's going to the dogs, nothing'll save it!"

"My dear Jack," accused Ruth, "you've been reading the newspapers!" Miss Adgate never would, for her part, so much as look at an American newspaper; she got all her news by way of England, in the *Morning Post*.

"The demoralisation's in the air, Miss Adgate, the newspapers only tell what's happening. But our nation has the impertinence to go on, like a rooster on a wall, flapping its wings in the world's face and screeching, 'Admire me! Don't I behave pretty?' No," continued Jack impressively, with a look of uncanny wisdom in his blue eyes, "No—I'm going to skip this country as soon as I can get out of it. Here in quiet old Oldbridge, we're not so bad, though we do like to play a game among ourselves; proud of being old and aristocratic and so forth, and we expect if we're good we'll get to Heaven; some of us, though, don't remember Charity's the only way to get to Heaven! But the whole country's talking Choctaw,—with a hare lip—and only a few of us, like your uncle and old Mrs. Leffingwell and Mr. Massington, know what a good Anglo-Saxon Ancestry implies. The rest of us cackle like the aforesaid barnyard fowl.

"Miss Adgate," went on Jack, briskly, "no wonder! See how we mix affably with the riff-raff who haven't a language. People who are told by the blooming Constitution of this land that they're as good as you and me and make uncouth noises according. This I'm-as-good-as-you idea is all rot. They're not as good as you and they're not as good as me. I am better than the Butcher's boy, who hasn't brains enough to know his own foolish business and forgets to bring my meat. I am better than Ezekiel, who won't black my boots. Damn him," said the boy wildly, "why shouldn't he black my boots? Let him do his honest work, like a man; become a useful member of society if he wants to get to be my equal! Not spend his days shirking and complaining through his nose."

"Dear, *dear* Jackie!—Have a glass of lemonade, have a cake! America's not so bad if you can rise above it," soothed Miss Adgate with, perhaps, a grain of malice. She rang for refreshments.

"She's the sweetest, prettiest, dearest thing in Oldbridge," the boy thought as he followed Ruth's movements with adoring eyes.

"Miss Adgate, am I accountable for what my double great-grandfather did?" Jack asked suddenly. "I think he played me a low trick. He was one of these Cavalier people who stuck to Charles the Second. The King, after he'd come to the throne, offered him the Chancellorship of the Duchy of Lancaster. But the idiot refused it! He'd tasted blood, he said. He knew Court life, found it dull!—He wanted one of adventure, something like the dance he'd been leading with Charles. 'Give me land, Sire, in Virginia,' he said. 'I'll go out there and extend your Majesty's importance.'

"Miss Adgate, *he should have stuck to Merry England*. And pray, what did his great-grandson do? Married a Northerner, became wife-ridden, dropped his title, sold his lands, went to New England, settled right here in Oldbridge, his wife's town; and equipped a regiment and fought. I'm glad to say he got killed, at Lexington. But not without leaving posterity, of which you see before you the last indignant remnant."

"And you, you find you're reverted to the state of mind of the Cavalier before he forsook England," Ruth said thoughtfully. "Jack, you've a homesick hankering to go back there?"

"Yes, Miss Adgate," cried the boy. "And, I'll tell you a still greater secret——"

Jack paused.

"*C'est une journée de confidences*," thought Ruth, "well?" she encouraged.

"Miss Adgate, we're not aristocratic," Jack declared in a low voice. "We've just become low-down Provincials. But when I'm a man I mean to go and claim our lands and titles and our position in Devon. I'm the rightful heir! My father kept the Enderfield Tree in an old desk in the drawing-room. It's there, at this moment, in a tin tube, on parchment. I've often brought it out when my mother's at church and had a good look at it."

"Try a chocolate," interposed Ruth soothingly; but the image of the Enderfield tree in a tube made her laugh as she offered the lacquered box, inlaid with mother of pearl, which she kept filled for these occasions.

"You're a Catholic, Miss Adgate," presently observed the youthful aristocrat when he had permitted Ruth's sweets to be thrust upon him.

"Yes," said Ruth urbanely. And—"I wonder whether Jack is preparing to rend the Faith," she thought.

"Well," Jack announced with deliberation,

"I mean to be a Catholic when I'm done with all this." He swept the present away with his hand.

"Ah?" said Ruth, surprised. "Why?"

"Oh, it's the only Faith for a Gentleman," the boy answered. "For a gentleman and a scholar," he emended. "You see we're all compounded too much of human nature and we're all too much given to thinking. Yet our thinking leads nowhere,—in the end the flesh and the devil do what they like with us. We may sit with our heads between our hands, we may try to reconcile our human nature with idealism until we're ready for the madhouse, and we'll get to the madhouse, but we won't have solved the problem. Now a man wants to be decent, and the Catholic Faith (I got Mary to tell me a lot about it, and I've read about it in some of my father's books), while it makes allowances for human nature and treats it in the most sympathetic

way, does know how to keep it within bounds. Why, it's a regular school of Saints! And it honestly recognises that we're mortal; inheritors of original sin as the spark flies upward. Yet if we go and confess our sins and try to feel sorry for 'em, we receive the grace of the Sacrament of Penance and Absolution,—and we can then receive the Blessed Sacrament. And when we receive the Blessed Sacrament our souls are developed and fed from God Himself and enabled to dominate our bodies."

"I see you've been well instructed," said Ruth, astonished at this boy's clear exposition.

"I got Mary to tell me a lot about the Catholic Faith, and I've read Bellarmine and Saint Augustine and a lot of my father's books," repeated the boy, a little wearily. "But what I like best," he said brightening again, "is that the Church is down on divorce."

"What hasn't this singular boy reflected upon," thought Ruth.

"In a few years I'm going to take the money my father left me, marry, and go abroad and be a writer, Miss Adgate," declared Jack.

"Ah,—that might not be a bad idea. Have you selected the young lady?" Ruth enquired.

"I've been looking about, among the girls here," Jack answered, "but I don't find any I can fall in love with," he added plaintively. "They're all rather silly and superficial. I should like to find someone like you," he declared with abrupt enthusiasm. "Someone who's pretty, someone who's a soft sweet voice, thinks about things,—likes to read, that sort of thing. Yes," he said, gazing at her, "if you were younger or I older, I should like you to marry me, I should ask you to marry me."

"But no divorce," Ruth threatened merrily.

"No divorce? No—of course not!" said Jack in sober disgust. "When once we're married it's for better for worse. I shall say that from the first. Don't we always have to live with people we quarrel with at first? Look at my mother and Mary. She was for flouncing that girl from the house the first week, and Mary gave notice, day after she got in. Then they shook down and my mother thinks Mary's a treasure and Mary'd cut her hand off for my mother. She would for me, told me so. Gives me all the cream and pie I want, never tells when I come in late from the Post Office. No, the sooner you find out you're tied to the person you love by a hard knot for life,—the sooner you realise that marriage is a Sacrament, the sooner—if you've got an ounce of sense and the Catholic Faith to help you—you learn to shake down and be happy. Besides, my wife shall be in love with me and she'll do exactly as I like," declared Master Jack Enderfield.

IX

A gay jingle-jangle, the concord of sleigh-bells, the muffled piaffering of horses' hoofs and the door-knocker went again rat-tat.... Voices sounded in the hall, Rutherford and Robert Leffingwell entered the room, Jack's tête-à-tête was interrupted.

"Good-bye, Miss Adgate," said Jack, abruptly. He cast a scowl of dislike at the jovial face of Rutherford. Before Ruth could make reply Jack was out the front door, and his friend had a glimpse of a pair of boyish legs leaping the offset.

"Splendid way of getting rid of obstacles," Rutherford said as he followed Miss Adgate's eyes, "but what an odd boy it is! We're in for a blizzard, Miss Adgate," added he, and he approached the fire and cheerfully rubbed his hands.

"A Blizzard!" cried Ruth. She ran to the window, followed by her two guests.

For a moment Ruth and the two young men watched the flakes descend.... They seemed to fall, fall, from limitless Niagaras of snow, from regions without the world, whose fountain-heads, beyond the skies, might be situate in those wastes of storm and cloud, where a Teutonic Mythology places its gods. The trees swayed gently, but even as Ruth watched them they had begun to bend in torture under a furious gale. Clouds of snow rose and fell like the billows of the sea....

The temperature capriciously dropped to far below zero. Had not Jobias been prepared for this by previous knowledge, the house might have become uninhabitable. But Jobias knew his business and stood by the furnace. All that day and evening he watched it, fed it;—and left his post from time to time only to replenish with fresh baskets of logs the voracious fireplaces in the drawing-rooms, casting above the baskets of wood a paternal smile, an indulgent glance upon those idle ones gathered round the flames.

Sledges, meantime, drove up. Guests departed, guests arrived, unruffled by stress of weather. All, rather, were most obviously exhilarated by it. Ruth's friends were in the maddest spirits. Punch flowed, quips, cranks, peals of laughter made the house resound. The Blizzard adding, at it always does, a fresh elixir, more oxygen to the already supercharged New England atmosphere, Ruth, too, felt unaccountably elated. Her eyes sparkled while the winds howled and hooted, and bullied and tore; the unassuaged tempers of five thousand demons seemed about to take their fill of hate upon an innocent, well-meaning world, but a rosy colour bloomed in Miss Adgate's usually pale cheeks. She had never appeared to such advantage; she had never looked so lovely, appeared so brilliant, nor been so amusing. Rutherford, as though the storm had gone to his head, Rutherford watching her covertly, vowed he could throw himself at her feet before the roomful, and Ruth's intuitions warned her; she had a feminine inkling of danger. She chatted and she laughed from her corner by the table laden with excellent things to eat; but she kept Rutherford at arm's length the while her fancy began to draw a picture of Pontycroft, standing it beside Rutherford. For the first time, she perceived that General Adgate recalled Pontycroft in a measure. Tall, thin, spare, his aquiline features were like Pontycroft's, his bearing was that of a distinguished man. "He has Harry Pontycroft's air of knowing that he knows," reflected Ruth softly; tenderly to her soul she quoted a line Pontycroft long ago had ironically applied to himself:

"He who Knows that he Knows, follow him."

Pontycroft loved to discourse for the pleasure of holding forth. General Adgate was reticent. His voice was low, well modulated; one could not have helped listening to it, or to what he said; even though this had not been wise or witty if often touched with irony.

Rutherford, of medium stature, had the neck of a bull. His skin, originally clear, was yet ensanguined by exposure to wind and weather; he liked an out-of-door life and since he was heir to a fortune and detested the counting house, his life went in hunting, shooting, and fishing. He had a shock of black hair, clear black eyes, rather an attractive habit of darting a keen glance at his interlocutor as he spoke—a glance that seemed to grasp all there was to see, hidden or upon the surface, in a flash. But his voice was nasal, his words rushed, spluttered to be free; they issued chopped in two and left the idea unformulated. It required some familiarity with the American vernacular to understand him.

“And he, a college man!” scoffed Miss Adgate.

But at that instant—while Ruth indulged, I grieve to acknowledge it, the spirit of mockery—a thunderous crash broke the unison of lively voices. The score of people in the rooms flew to the windows. There, tossed to earth, abased from glory, prone upon the ground—imploring boughs lifted to heaven, a wreck—there lay the monster Adgate elm, one of the hoary elms in the carriage sweep. It lay there as neatly cut as with a scimitar. The splendid tree was literally slashed in twain by the Blizzard's invisible weapon, the prostrate thing loomed, portentous, to twenty pairs of eyes.

With the rest, Ruth stared at the fallen King. There was a lump in her throat.... No one spoke.... Every man and woman in the room had waxed intimate with that old tree, had come to man's or woman's estate beside it; they had played under it, insensibly had come to love it, as a part of themselves, as a piece of their pleasant, happy lives. This comrade and landmark was, too, one of the pardonable vanities of Oldbridge.

“Praise Heaven it wasn't the roof,” said, at length, the Master of Barracks Hill. He knew, though, he would have preferred to have it the roof. A roof may be replaced. His niece even, did not suspect the passion of attachment any plant or tree upon his land could stir in him upon occasion.

X

Perseveringly the snowflakes descended. They continued to fall, fall, fall, for another thirty-six hours. The wind next morning, though, had stopped, and debris of yesterday's storm had been removed. A trackless white garment of snow spread to the furthest reaches of Barracks Hill.

“This is all very weird,” said Ruth to Miranda, as, side by side, they sat and gazed on leagues and leagues of the white silence. “Miranda, this is all very well—Blizzards are very stirring; simple homely pleasures are very pleasing, this landscape is *very beautiful*, but,——” Ruth suppressed a yawn.

“Besides, why will young men make geese of themselves? One can't get away from him, Miranda; a Blizzard even, does not keep him away! Miranda! If there's an object, my dear kitten, I detest, it's a sentimental young man.”

“Uncle,” said Ruth, nonchalantly, to General Adgate that evening after supper, as, with Miranda purring snugly beside her, the three sat together in the drawing-room, “I have an invitation from the Bolingbrokes, in Washington. They want me to come to them for a visit. Would you—would you miss me very much?” she coaxed, and she went to him and laid a caressing hand on the old man's cheek—“would you mind, very much, if I were to accept?”

“Mind, my dear?” General Adgate looked at her. “Who am I to say mind? You are your own mistress. Miss you? That's another pair of sleeves.”

“But suppose I bring them back with me,—I mean the Bolingbrokes,” laughed she. “They're such dears.... You'd fall in love with her, the sauciest sprite in Christendom. And he'll welcome the occasion to talk international Politics with you! I believe,” Ruth teased,—she drew up the Empire settle before the fire, she took Miranda to her knees and sat down again; “I believe that it's my Duty—to go—to go fetch them—to play with you.” With a final nod of decision Miss Adgate placed two small, elaborately shod feet, in a pair of high-heeled, steel-embroidered Florentine shoes, upon the fender; she began, with equal decision, to remove the wrappers from *The Athenoum*, *The Saturday Review* and a couple of *Morning Posts*.

“Go—my dear,” said the old man gently.

“Dear me! I feel like a brute,” thought Miss Adgate. “What will he do if I return to England? Oh, why will people get fond of people!”

Miranda purred.... The fire responded; a crisp, little musical crepitation; the flames licked the wood, the logs consumed themselves, in a cadenced song of happy Death and blessed Eternity. Punctured by this music silence entered, cozily, warmly descended upon the New England drawing-room.

PART SEVENTH

I

MISS ADGATE accepted the Bolingbrokes' invitation. She spent six weeks of gaiety in Washington. Indeed it was refreshing to live in the world again, to mix with people of the world; to have cogent reasons for dressing exquisitely every night for dinner, to be taken in to dinner by a facetious attaché, by, even, a complacent, redundant railway magnate; or, happy compromise, by a Member of the Cabinet, for it is well known that a Cabinet Minister may be amusing. Through the interchange of frivolities and banter one could rise, not to more important matters,—is anything much more important to the world than the light touch and a witty conversation? But Miss Adgate found refreshment in living again among

people whose thoughts were sometimes occupied by questions impersonal, of more or less consequence to the world's history.

Someone possessed of a grain of humour has assured us that the "World is a good old Chum."

Miss Adgate found the world at Washington a very good old chum during those six weeks. "In all but the aesthetic sense," she reflected, "America is an interesting land to live in." Plentiful wherever she went, tittle-tattle, supplemented by her own observations, helped her to form an idea of how this unwieldy bulk of a nation calling itself The United States of America was being rescued from fatuous chaos, a mass of political corruption and a superfluity of wealth, and lifted into an arrogant, resolute Power. But a Power whose outlook was as far removed from the simple hardy traditions of Puritan America as Earth is from Heaven.

An oligarchy of able men,—a handful,—chosen, directed, inspired by a man yet abler, more audacious than they,—these were moulding, had already changed the destiny, the policy of the United States.

Miss Adgate recognised the efforts of the Man at the Helm. He had followed a fixed idea, and the idea was the Greater Glory of his Country; he had secured with his henchmen indisputable prestige to the Nation, and, thanks to his star, his tenacity, his temerity, America,—feared to-day if not honoured, was powerful. But not alas approved of! "Damn approval!" (the worm will turn,—the watchword passed through the land). "We are ourselves."

The "ourselves" went very far. This at least was the modest, unexpressed opinion of Miss Adgate,—it was shared, apparently, by the Man at the Helm. He lectured the Nation like a father. The Nation knowing itself to be unwholesome, inchoate, something ruthless, listened meekly.

"But," Ruth reflected from the vantage of a calm and sympathetic observation: "So many religions, no Faith! Where every man, in disobedience to Christ, chooses to be his own Pope. Yet the Holy Father has dedicated America to Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception.... But the very elements in America, so violent and so ferocious,—the burning Summers, the cruel Winters, the appalling cataclysms of Nature, if these are reproduced in the violent characters of the people, inclined to rape and rapine on a big or a little scale—at what end, *left to its own devices*, will the American character issue? Will it," she wondered, "become, inflated with power, the great Master Robber of the World? Or will it perish utterly, hoist by its own petard?"

"*Jerusalem! Jerusalem! Convertere ad Dominum Deum.*"... Mournful and tender, in the melodious, yearning, touching accents of *Tenebrae*, the phrase filled her ears.

"No man at the Helm," she sorrowfully said to herself, "shall save us for more than his few years of tenure. The race cries for direction, a sane outlet to its emotions. The sole influence which holds anarchy at bay is Holy Mother Church, wise men tell us. Yes, the Divine Authority!.. The sweet miracle of the Catholic Faith may save our people from ending as a nation of brutes; may open to us the gates of Humility and show to us the road to the 'Greater Glory of God.'"

And then, Miss Adgate woke with a start from her musings. She shook her pretty head. She returned to the practice of light banter and witty causerie, the only efficacious methods within reach, she reflected, of furthering the millennium her fancy painted for her native land.

II

"My little dear Ruth," Lucilla wrote, "we're coming on the most important mission to America. Namely, to see you. Yes, and haven't I a bagful of news for your Royal Highness!

"We sail by the *Cedric* on the fifteenth of April, Harry can't leave until then. To confess the truth, he is in Altronde. Civillo,—of course you've seen it by the papers,—Civillo is gone to a greater Principality, Bertram is King.

"I want to see you—oh! And Ruth, I burn with curiosity to look on that New England of yours. Harry, I'm convinced, is prepared to settle there. He says, so pathetically, that at his time of life he feels the need of planting cabbages and that the Upper Gardener at Pontycroft gives notice when he tries to. He's heard that in New England gardeners are kind, don't mind a bit; they just let you plant, right down; are affable; make you settle right down and become one of 'em. But Harry says, too, he pines at first hand to solve the inwardness of a land destined to dominate us all.

"Ruth, between you and me, in confidence, if America is to be the future of Europe—well—then I'm glad I shall be dead.

"But between you and me, my dear, what Henry Pontycroft wants is not so much to plant cabbages neither is it to study politics... What he truly-truly wants is a glimpse of the Young Person. He's missed you! Ah! I have news. Your devoted, Lucilla."

Over this flippant missive Ruth grew hot, then cold, then faint. And she sat, for a long moment in a state of emotional upheaval, of senseless vacuity—the while her head whirled and her heart went thump, thump, thump! It was an entire quarter of an hour before this commotion subsided, and left her with soft flutterings at her throat.

"They're coming, they're coming, they're coming! He's coming... I shall hear his voice, I shall see him. Oh, what has happened? Is it possible that he's free? Oh, my God, my God, help me to wait," she cried. She began to cry and to sob like a little child. She craved, wanted, longed for, unendurably, overwhelmingly, that he should take her in his arms, caress and fondle her, and, like a veritable little girl pat her cheek and soothe her, let her unburden her woes, let her lie, her head in his breast, while he said to her, "There, little child, there, don't cry." And it was in Pontycroft's voice that the words fell upon her ears, and it was on Harry Pontycroft's breast that she dried her eyes. And they were Pontycroft's eyes into which her eyes smiled, when, presently, mocking him through her tears, but in oh, such heaven of bliss! she repeated the trite refrain of the tritest, the most foolish of Ballads.

"In God's hands!" said Ruth; she dried her eyes. "Like everything else...."

She put her hat and jacket on and went for a walk. When she reached the house an hour later, she had found her peace, and though her eyes were singularly bright and her manner curiously vivacious, this

contributed the more to her success of the evening at the Bolingbrokes'.

"Ruth—" Mrs. Bolingbroke rushed at her, enfolded her in an impetuous hug, "you're delicious! Stay in Washington. Stay in Washington for ever—"

"Come to Barracks Hill with me," answered the young lady. "I must be flitting almost at once."

"No, no, no...." protested Mrs. Bolingbroke. But it was peaceably arranged at last that the Bolingbrokes, having a *cong e* at Easter, should come, then, to Barracks Hill.

And so, on the fifteenth day of March, Ruth bade farewell to Washington and travelled back to Oldbridge.

III

One long month and one entire week to wait. If Time was interminable, Miss Adgate resolved to make Time bear fruit. She took herself in hand. She tried to quell the little tremors of joy which kept welling up in her throat when she thought of the end of those five weeks.

"They'll probably not come. They'll change their minds. If they do come—it's more than likely some nonsense of Lucilla's!... Well.... Besides I've other businesses to attend to," the lady said with a most determined air.

As the least profitless way of passing those interminable days, Ruth set herself to the task of enhancing the natural beauties of Barracks Hill. She caused paths to be cut through the woods; she enlarged the flower gardens; she prepared the Morris House for her June visitors. As to the library and the music-room they had long since been ready for occupation. And in the interim of labour Miss Adgate gave a series of children's parties, calling Jackie Enderfield to her assistance. Her invitations vested in that young gentleman's hands, he became cock-of-the-walk among the girls and boys of Oldbridge and Rutherford was thus kept at bay. Yet notwithstanding these spartan derivatives, Ruth walked on clouds, smiling at love.

"She breathes roses and lilies," Miss Deborah Massington declared with enthusiasm.

Eighty, thereabout, Miss Deborah was sister to Mrs. Leffingwell and her junior by ten years.

"She has charm," Mrs. Leffingwell answered, discreetly, while they watched Ruth's erect young buoyant figure disappear beyond the lindens. "She makes one feel that everything's all right—better to come. I wonder..."

Ruth liked an hour spent in these ladies' bow-window; gay and fragrant window, all vivid of sunshine, filled with blossoming geranium and heliotrope. While she entertained them with tales of Italy, which they could never hear enough about, Ruth Adgate reflected that the lives of her grandmothers must have been just such quiet, such repressed, contented lives as these.

Mrs. Leffingwell and Miss Massington, types of New England's most exquisite product—the old lady. The old lady who, with all her gentle unworldliness, is a patrician to her finger tips. As the perfume of rose-leaves is preserved in a fine porcelain jar—so the hushed fragrance of these temperate lives emanates, yet stays, to the end. White, ethereal, peaceful—and pictorially the replicas of Whistler's mother, these two ladies were waited upon by a black servant, whose gorgeous head-gear was the red, blue, and yellow bandanna. Each lady had her window in the low-ceilinged, white-panelled drawing-room; each was clad in good black silk; on each white head a cap reposed of fine Honiton lace—and their gowns were finished with a transparent lace collar and cuffs. Both ladies were slightly deaf; both were omnivorous readers, both were eager listeners; both had the sense of humour; and both were indulgent amused lookers-on at the small games of life which they were no longer privileged to take part in; and if gracious patience be a virtue these ladies may well be considered beautiful products of a fast vanishing Puritan tradition.

Easter fell on the twenty-third of April. The Bolingbrokes arrived at Barracks Hill the day before Easter, but on the morning of their arrival came a disastrous piece of news. Almost the whole of Ruth's fortune had been swept out of existence overnight in one of those cataclysmic melodramas which melodramatic Nature loves to enact in the United States. On Good Friday, the twenty-first of April, nineteen hundred and eight, the town of Wyoming was annihilated by a tornado. The merry monster chose the small hours before midnight, when, giving rein to his pranksome cubfulness, he swept men, women, children into Eternity with hardly a warning.... The mines—they formed the *raison d' tre* of the town—caved in, flooded by a water spout. The entire district was reduced to desolation.

Seated at breakfast, in the crispest of white morning confections, Ruth became informed of this and of her losses through the medium of the Oldbridge *Morning Herald*, whose items she was reading aloud, a concession, to her uncle.

General Adgate, far more than his lovely niece, was affected by the news. Had he not enjoyed vicariously the sense of her wealth? It had tickled his fancy as well as his family pride to see her squander with a lavish hand, without so much as a thought of the value of money. It had pleased his sense of the incongruous that notwithstanding the obvious joy she took in opening her fingers, in letting the gold slide through them, she had acquiesced in, nay adopted, many of the Spartan habits of New England; New England—which has never been purse-proud because she has never, until lately, had very much money in her purse. Ruth, indeed, had all she could do to cheer General Adgate.

"If all is lost, save honour," she consoled, "I have still some investments in England by the mercy of which I shall not be poverty stricken. I've as much as three thousand safe pounds a year coming from there, you old darling," she cooed. "Harry Pontycroft invested it for me long ago. That ought to be enough for any woman with economical tastes," she assured him. "And I've a lot in the bank,—Heaven knows how much! I've never spent anything like my income for I had nothing which seemed worth spending it upon,—since, ugh!—I detest automobiles, and you know it. We can still keep open house this summer and never trouble."

Of a truth, Miss Adgate experienced relief,—why?—she did not try to fathom—at the thought of her diminished fortunes. She might, possibly, this blithe adventuress, or had she not been expecting guests, she might, even, have tried to persuade General Adgate to lead her to the scene of the disaster. I doubt, though, if she would have succeeded.

A fat cheque went instead by the Red Cross Society to the relief of the sufferers. And lo! the diminishing days were dwindled to a pinpoint.

IV

When Mrs. Bolingbroke heard that Henry Pontycroft and Lucilla Dor were on the sea, bound for America, she could not contain herself.

"Good gracious, Ruth, what are they comin' for?" she exclaimed, wide-eyed, gazing at Ruth.

"Don't know," said Ruth, putting her nose into a bowlful of fresh roses from Rutherford's hot-houses. "Oddly enough, to see me, perhaps?" she added, laughing, and she made an effort to look her friend squarely and jocosely in the face.

"Richard," said Mrs. Bolingbroke penetratedly to her husband, "Ruth Adgate is either the most consummate actress or the most innocent dove the good God has ever, in His ability, wrought from the dust of which we are made. If the Pontycrofts are on the sea it's for some extraordinary reason. Ruth either suspects that reason, or she doesn't. But she looked at me with those clear guileless eyes of hers, when she mentioned their coming, and I, for one, can imagine any man telling her he'd burn Troy Town for such a glance. Yet there's that Mr. Rutherford—crazily in love with her, I'm told,—a splendid match as Americans go. She could marry him and his money to-morrow if she liked. And since she's so daft about New England, she could send him into politics and have quite a life. It will be interesting to see how the Pontycrofts will act when they find the sources of her income are swept away."

"That's not a proper remark for you to make, my dear," replied the Honourable Richard Bolingbroke, in a tone of unexpected severity. "Henry Pontycroft's a sensitive, quixotic, high-minded, honourable English gentleman. He's rich, moreover. Money plays no part in his coming. Lady Dor I've known since I was a boy. She was a delightful girl, just as now she's a charming woman. They'll be admirable additions to the house party, and that's all that concerns you or me. Pontycroft will keep us in roars of laughter and I'm curious to meet him in New England. You may be sure he'll like this wonderful old place. He'll feel all the arid romance of this aristocratic passionate bleak land. Who knows? He may be the Prince come to wake it, humanise it, with a kiss. Oldbridge will not have looked upon his like—it won't have heard anything to compare with him, either, in its three hundred years of existence; never will again; I hope it may make the best of its opportunity to give him a royal welcome."

"I feel crushed," pouted Mrs. Bolingbroke. "How should I, who've never met Henry Pontycroft—know he's the paragon of wit and chivalry?"

"That's precisely what Henry Pontycroft is," her husband answered gravely, "He *is* the paragon of wit and chivalry!"

These young folk were pacing side by side in the moonlit garden after the excellent New England repast, called supper; while Miss Adgate and her uncle were busy with callers, upon the veranda. The night was the first of a long series of warm May nights, the moon hung, majestic and round, over the fringes of wood termed the Wigwam. A rustic bench stood invitingly under the big syringa, now a perfumed canopy of white. As they stood on the upper terrace it was easy to distinguish descending terraces marked by rows of silvery budding irises swollen or in bloom.... The magic smells of white and purple lilac were touched with a whiff of apple blossoms from the hill and beyond—below—the Mantic gleamed in the moonlight amid trees all a feathery, spring incrustation of minute green foliage.

"This is a divine spot," said Bolingbroke, suddenly kissing his wife, "but we must rejoin the others."

Lucilla Dor and Harry Pontycroft arrived the following day and were installed in the Morris House at the other side of the hill, where two neat Irish girls waited upon them under the enlightening, tempered instruction of Pontycroft's man and of Lucilla's maid.

V

Spring was abroad in her witchery. She had come with a rush, with a good will, with an—abundance, 'and all of a sudden-like'—as she has, after many days of dallying, a way of doing in New England. She had been coy; she had flirted; she had tantalised—a day here, a day there—with dewy warmth of soft blue skies, her robes diaphanous April cloud. Then she had veiled her face, vexed for one knew not what offences,—had turned her coldest shoulder, shed her most frigid tears. She had looked forth, wreathed again in smiles, while she put wonder-working fingers to shrubs and branches... and again she had withdrawn herself in deepest greyest dudgeon.

But now, she was come, come. The birds were building and calling and fluttering, in all the emotion, the refreshing joy of an ever-renewed bridalhood. A young male wren who had discovered a bird-house, fixed on the off-chance of so happy an event as to entice him there—by Jobias, to the top of a rustic pole in the rose garden—tore his throat open in the rapture of telling the world what a place for a nest he had found, and how sweet she was.

"Shameless uxorious creature," Ponty said, as he came over the hill and paused to listen to him.

Unaccountably enough, Ruth, as he came into the garden, Ruth issued from the house dressed in white; dressed in white, without a hat, a watteau sunshade in her hand.

"Good morning, my pretty maid," said Pontycroft, "you're not going a-milking in that costume, are you?" He eyed her sharply with the quizzical glint she knew well.

"Good morning," Ruth answered, in perfect composure. Yet at the anticipation of seeing Pontycroft alone, she had many times felt the earth quake under her,—*"I'm going to call upon Lucilla,"* she vouchsafed.

"Oh, Lucilla's knocked up. I came with a message from her. She wants me to say she's had her breakfast in bed and won't rise until luncheon. Lucilla's tired from the journey. You two women must have talked yourselves weary, if a mere man may judge of such matter. Oh, the hour at which I caught sight of Paolina

conducting you over the hill last night!" said Ponty.

"It was a beautiful moonlit night," said Ruth, inhaling the morning air with delight, "and so,—why not?"

"Why not, indeed," he agreed. "What a surprise it was, though, to find the Bolingbrokes here. He's a decent chap."

"Yes, I like them very much," Ruth said, absently.

"And your uncle," Ponty proceeded, "I like *him* very much," he paraphrased. "We held an uproarious pow-wow in the library, the three of us, last night, while you women discussed chiffons in the music-room. By-the-bye, that was rather a nice thing that somebody played," and Ponty hummed the first bars of the Valse Lente. "You were the musician, I suspect."

"I suppose so," Ruth said, negligently. They were standing beside the flight of stone steps which leads from the rose-garden to the hill.

"Where are the Bolingbrokes?" enquired Pontycroft.

"Gone for the day, with the Wetherbys, on their yacht. It's a party of twelve and they expect to come back by moonlight."

"And why, pray, were not the rest of us included?" he asked.

Ruth began to laugh. "They did include the rest of us," she answered. "What *is* the use of beating about the bush in this fashion? You've something to tell me, I hear. Say it." And leaving Pontycroft to consider her suggestion Ruth ran up the steps and fled lightly over the carpet woven of white saxifrage and violets thickly strewn among the turf, to the bench under the big oak at the summit of the hill. Here she sat herself, opened her blush-rose sunshade and defiantly watched Pontycroft stroll towards her.

He followed. He stood, deliberating before her for a moment. Then, bending a knee:

"Your Royal Highness, will your Royal Highness accept the Crown of Altronde from the hands of the King's unworthy Ambassador?" he asked.

Ruth caught her breath.

"What do you mean?" she queried, in a most violent disappointment of surprise.

"Your gracious Majesty," answered Pontycroft, "I mean,—that I am come all the way from Europe and from a certain small but not-to-be-sneezed-at Principality called Altronde in order to ask you to wear with King Bertram, the ermine and the purple.... If we must put it bluntly, the King implores you to share his throne, his heart and his crown."

"Oh," Ruth said, "how very absurd."

"Not at all absurd," said Pontycroft; he still knelt, one knee to earth.

"And he looks every inch Ambassador and not in the least ridiculous," Ruth thought smiling to herself, "in this superlatively ridiculous posture."

"The Queen Mama is more than anxious to welcome you with wide-open arms," continued Pontycroft.

"Ah?" Ruth slightly raised her eyebrows.

"Yes. It's true she kicked a bit," said Ponty. He got to his feet and with his handkerchief flapped a straw or two from his knee. "But Bertram made a devil of a row; there was no standing it she explained to me with tears in her eyes. The Queen Mama has had to capitulate, and Bertram's counting these very moments as ever are, pining to hear you have accepted him. I'm to go *de ce pas* to the telegraph office and wire 'yes'—so soon as you've made your haughty little mind up that you'll have him."

"Ah," Ruth said. "It is very interesting——"

But suddenly she felt her heart leap into her throat. She trembled, yet she spoke resolutely. "Harry," she said, "Harry—you've told me something startling and—not very important. But why don't you tell me that the woman who wrote the letter—is dead?"

An unaccountable stillness fell for an instant over the landscape. Ruth left her bench under the oak and walked off, walked away to where the rocks come cropping up along the brow of the hill. The panorama spread before her was one of fresh, palely verdant meadows and woods; the Mantic, turbulent from spring freshets, was bordered with trees in the early paleness of their green leaves; the green frail rondures of the Wigwam foliage in delicate and varied shades,—these were dappled with sunlight and blue sky. A far panoply of purple hills, marking the borderland, shutting away the boisterous outer world as by a charmed circle, enclosed the small, the joyous world of the little inland town, the valley and the seven hills of Oldbridge.

Pontycroft approached mechanically, slowly. He stood by Ruth's side, he looked off with her at this exquisite efflorescence of spring in the new world.

"It's a beautiful view," he said, in a matter-of-fact tone, "Europe could scarcely do better.... And so Lucilla told you?" he queried, carelessly. "Put not thy trust in woman. She vowed by her most sacred vows she'd never say a word until I told her to."

"I dare say I wormed it out of her," Ruth replied, laughing, and,—it was too apparent,—she was laughing at him.

"I don't quite gather what it is that makes you so merry this morning," said Pontycroft; "unless it is this heavenly Spring day, and that's enough for twenty hopes and fears to rap and knock and enter in our souls.... But please do recollect that while you loiter, considering the indisputably lovely landscape, there's a chap in Altronde waiting—impatient's no word for it—for a wire. Kindly give your attention to the Royal Incident, the real question of actuality, for a moment, and let me be off as soon as possible to the Post Office."

"Long ago, I seem to remember," Ruth said, slowly, "long ago, I seem to hear myself saying in a garden in Florence, that the Royal Incident was closed. It is closed. I haven't changed my mind, on the contrary. If you must of your will leave my hill at this perfect hour and—and be sending messages to the other side of the world—then, you needs must! But—pray remember your own favourite saw, that 'opportunity comes once in a lifetime.' Jobias goes home at noon, can't he take your message? If Prince, I beg his pardon, King,—if Bertram has to live in suspense for a few hours, let that be my little revenge. 'If it feed nothing else, it will feed my

revenge," laughed Ruth.

Having given expression to this heartless sentiment, she began to tread, cautiously, among the flowers—the saxifrage, the violets, the little green-golden buttercups between,—her light steps responding with love to what she was pleased to think was their caress. From the plain and from the woods mounted gentle homely sounds, the hautbois of the New England Spring—the blows of a distant axe, the felling of trees, a carpenter's hammer taptapping,—and children's cries resounding as they romped at play; all mounted together, in a joyous choring, with birds' songs and twitterings which fell about them from every tree far and near; the earth, the sky—musical, alive with carols and thanksgiving.

"I bring a garland for your head of flowers fresh and fair," Ruth hummed, pacing a little ahead of Pontycroft, and her foot rhythmically touched ground at each stress of the song.

"I had, once, a double double grandmother,' my friend Jack Enderfield is fond of saying," said Ruth, as she continued her walk to the measure of the verse. "A great, great, so great *Meregrand!* She was French. Her name was Priscilla. Priscilla Mulline. She's rather a person in New England History—you'll forgive my mentioning her. When the man she cared for came, as emissary from the man she didn't care for, to ask her to marry him—do you remember what she answered?" Ruth kept her eyes fixed upon the tips of her toes, and they, like little mice, little white mice, went in and out, below the flounces of her gown.

Pontycroft gasped,—took a step towards her. But his lean and bony face, which for a moment had betrayed him, assumed again the look of disillusion.

"Oh," he rejoined, "the foolish girl made hash of her future, perpetrated a *mot* which, no doubt, she lived to repent. A *mot* which one of your American poets has quite suitably recorded. By it, Miss Priscilla Mulline lost her chance of making a very good match. She lost her golden opportunity. She cut off her chances of having a jolly good time in a big, jolly world."

"You're abominable," Ruth said, and permitted herself two actions very much at variance,—she stamped her foot and she smiled obliquely at the object of her wrath. "You're abominable. I want you to tell me what she answered."

"Oh, you've forgotten it?" said he. "I've well-nigh forgotten it myself.... I believe, though, she did ask the chap Alden why the deuce (pardon the expletive) he didn't speak for himself. Am I right?"

"Well, why didn't he?" enquired Ruth, impatiently.

"Because he was a duffer, I suppose," said Ponty, with a fine effect of ending the discussion. "But now, my dear young one, be serious. Here's your chance...." Pontycroft's voice became argumentative. "I've crossed the ocean to lay a crown at your feet. A crown from which you may get considerable fun and splendour. Bertram's rich, you're rich. You are, both of you, handsome, virtuous, clever, and at the mating age. You can make of your little Principality, your Kingdom, the centre of the enlightenment and art of Europe. Find me a philosopher, an artist, or a man of wit who doesn't appreciate a King! Under your wise encouragement Art, at last, will come into her own.... Oh, think of the poor devils of hangers-on of Genius you'll be able to lift from Purgatories of obscurity into the light!"

"You've made one trifling mistake," interrupted Ruth; "there's something I have not told you, an element you must omit from the equation of that Castle in Altronde you are building for me. I'm not rich.... The Town of Wyoming, let me tell you, is no more. My millions, and a good thing too—have collapsed. They've shrunken to the few thousands you invested, ages ago, do you remember? in British Consols? On them I shall run this dear old place,—I shall dress, modestly—"

"Ruth, Ruth, Ruth!" interrupted Pontycroft, aghast.

"Yes, it all occurred about a week ago while you were at sea, and that, I suppose, is why you didn't hear of it. These accidents, here in America, happen so often. Marconi didn't find the item of sufficient importance, I dare say, to give it a place."

"Well.... Here's a kettle of fish! Whew!" whistled Pontycroft. "You young limb of mischief, why didn't you tell me? *Ouf!*" cried he, with a great pant of relief. "*Ouf!*—poor Bertram! He has no luck." They had been sauntering, backwards and forward, over a grassy road which runs up hill and down dale through the green-sward planted with apple trees. Pontycroft leaned, now, against a tree. He gazed at Ruth without a word. A rosy-tipped cluster of apple blossoms nodded just above his head. He reached up, plucked it; and offered it to the lady with the crimson sunshade who stood in the sunlight before him.

"Oh, Fairy Godmother! Feel my heart," Ruth whispered, under her breath. "I should like to show you my Riviera," she said hastily, reddening under his gaze, and she stuck the apple blossoms into her belt.

Ruth skirted the grey rocks which crop above the brow of the hill to the left. She led Pontycroft down a green bank to a patch of brighter green nestling for quite a distance under the shelter of the overhanging cliffs. Here were eglantine, here were violets in profusion; Solomon's seal, red and purple columbine; and the purple liverwort, and a shower of those frail white wind-flowers called anemones, although in no wise do they resemble their European cousins. Young ferns, pale green fronds, sprang vigorously from the clefts in the rocks, juniper and barberry bushes and a savin lent here and there a hardy note and an added shelter to the scattering of spring blossoms.

"It's so exclusive here," laughed Ruth, taking a lichen-covered seat formed in the grey stone. "These canny flowers have discovered the place for themselves after the habit of the land.... Sit down," she invited him. She crossed her hands in her lap, she looked towards him; a mischievous light glanced bewitchingly in her dark eyes.

"Dear child," Pontycroft began—he was trying, very hard, to resume his paternal air.

"Please don't 'dear child' me any more—I haven't brought you here for that," petulantly cried Ruth. "I won't have you for a father and I've already got an uncle, and I don't think you'd make, for me, a satisfactory brother."

"Miss Adgate," said Pontycroft, he possessed himself of one of her hands, and examining it carefully (it was, as we know a very white hand with slim and rosy fingers), "Miss Adgate, I have a proposition to make to you. Since my schemes, since all my weary plottings and plannings for a Royal End for you, do, it seems, gang aft

agley,—though, and mark my words, Bertram is no stickler for lucre; but since they've been knocked flat on the head by a blow of chance, let me suggest that we make a fresh start, let us consider a new alliance for you.

"Here," he said—he laid a large bony hand tightly, as though afraid of its escape, over the little hand he held in his,—“here is a novel, international situation, a situation, free, thank goodness, of any blessed complications. Shall you and I,—he lifted the hand to his lips again, he touched his lips tenderly to each finger-tip, and Ruth looked on—“shall you and I get married? Shall we run this dear place together? Shall we love it, live in it? I had dreamed, for you, infant, of a royal end. What will you? Heaven mercifully disposes.... But I *had* dreamed for you a Royal End!”

"I do not like being proposed to in this manner," said Ruth, rounding upon him with a smiling face.

"Oh, my dear, blessed angel little Ruth!" cried Pontycroft, letting himself go. "Ruth... Hopelessly, hopelessly, denied me—found at last. Little Lady Precious Ruth! Ruth whom I love, Ruth whom I dote on—Ruth whom I've worshipped ever since she was a toddling child in her father's house... Ruth!" Miss Adgate could feel the beating of Pontycroft's heart as she stayed against his side.

"Shall we live here together?" he asked presently. "You—you—of course you love this old place! I love it because you do. And Thou, singing beside me in the Wilderness! It needs us, doesn't it? This peaceful Wilderness, this New England Garden of Eden!"

"Eden, from which William Rutherford has killed the snake," laughed Ruth blinking a crystal tear that rolled down her cheek.

"Rutherford?" Pontycroft frowned, "*who* is William Rutherford?"

"Oh, nobody. No one in particular," Ruth hastened to reply. "A mere mighty hunter before the Lord." And Pontycroft did not pursue the subject of William Rutherford.

"But," said Ruth a trifle anxiously, in a moment, "we must go abroad from time to time? We could never forsake Pontycroft.

"Oh, hang Pontycroft. Lucilla shall have it for her kids."

"I want it for mine," said Ruth. Then she looked away and blushed crimson—and then she laughed.

"What is the motto, Harry, of your house?" she queried, irrelevantly. "I've forgotten."

"It once was," Pontycroft said, and he smiled at her: "*Super mare, super fluvia.*"

"Once?" said Ruth, a little shyly, "*once?* And now?"

"*Constantia*, now, henceforth," he whispered with a throbbing of the heart.... "But will your uncle be pleased at all this?" he enquired.

"My uncle?" said Ruth, waking from a reverie. "Oh—he would have liked me to marry Rutherford, I imagine. But if you're awfully nice to him, and if you let him see how infatuated you are with Barracks Hill—he'll end, I know, by giving me and you his blessing. But I won't give up England—and I want Italy, too,—Venice, Rome!" wilfully persisted Ruth.

"You precious little piece of covetous cosmopolitanism! Haven't you learned that if in Heaven, may be, it is given us to be everywhere—in this life: One Paradise, one Eden? In this world one Eden shall suffice, for things learned on earth may or may not be practised in Heaven; but love is, ever was, the language of repetition. In this life the lesson is to be contented with a single Paradise."

"Oh," exclaimed Miss Adgate, laying her hand on Ponty's mouth. "Oh, middle-aged sentiment... not in the Catechism. Don't, I beg, say it again!"

He seized the hand, he pressed his lips to it, he pressed it against his breast.

"Even an infant like you," he whispered, "let alone a world-worn chap like the man you propose to take as a husband, can't stand perpetual motion."

"Very well," Ruth compromised, "shall we alternate with a year in England, one here, one in Italy, Jobias and Paolina to pack for us. That will make it easy."

"Ah," laughed Pontycroft, "you shall see! The pendulum is bound to narrow its oscillations! We'll earn a well-needed rest,—*here.*"

"Oh me!" sighed Ruth, "ah me!" cried Ruth. "In that event how charmed our ancestors will be. But, I forgot! You haven't heard the story." Ruth told it gaily and waited, curious to see what Harry Pontycroft would say.

"Dear young one, these old four-posters," he began—"are the most dangerous things to sleep in," and Ruth was seized with laughter.

"But I'll never sell them to the nearest dealer in old bric-a-brac. Rather," she concluded, "we'll do as you advised, we'll take the greatest care not to offend our forbears. But——" her forefinger went up impressively, "but a destiny was in preparation for us—I felt it, Harry, on the very day after I reached here. Harry, I felt, I knew, Destiny had something up her sleeve. The day I went for a walk alone," said Ruth, with a serious air. "It is a delicious destiny... to be married in the little Parish church by that Saint of a Priest and to live here, 'forever afterwards!' (with a malicious nod,) "with a break now and then to Europe."

"Moreover and because journeys end in lovers' meeting, we'll probably have a June wedding," Pontycroft unexpectedly suggested, wise in his generation.

"A June wedding!... I've built better than I knew," exclaimed Ruth. "I've asked a house party of friends, friends of yours, Lucilla's and mine, to come here in June. Let them haste to the wedding—I'll have Jackie Enderfield for page and he shall carry my train."

"Another admirer," Ponty said resigned.

"The merest bit of a boy of twelve. Without him, without my uncle, these wits like as not had perished utterly. Jack when he's a man intends to marry a woman with a low voice and a red glint in her hair. He will turn Catholic with my consent and go abroad and write. He doesn't believe either in Divorce—in other words, you perceive he *is* an intellectual. But," she said, rising, "we've forgotten—oh, we've forgotten to send that message by Jobias to poor King Bertram! We shall have to take it ourselves."

Henry Pontycroft and Ruth descended the hill along the violet-sprinkled road.

“Ruth,” he urged, as they went their way, “for conscience sake, consider,—consider, little Ruth,” he said, “ah, consider.... It is not yet too late, infant, and I had dreamed for Ruth Adgate of a Royal End!”

“Ah,” Miss Adgate replied; a little happy sigh escaped from her lips; she looked down at the apple blossoms in her belt,—strange to say, the apple blossoms were fresh as though just plucked.

“Harry,” she replied, with a little quizzical look, “I, too, had dreamed for Ruth Adgate of a Royal End.... Both our dreams have come true! *Love is the Royal End.*”

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