

FICTION

Henry James

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# Georginas Reasons

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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FICTION

# GEORGINA'S REASONS

By Henry James

1885

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## PART I.

### I.

She was certainly a singular girl, and if he felt at the end that he did n't know her nor understand her, it is not surprising that he should have felt it at the beginning. But he felt at the beginning what he did not feel at the end, that her singularity took the form of a charm which--once circumstances had made them so intimate--it was impossible to resist or conjure away. He had a strange impression (it amounted at times to a positive distress, and shot through the sense of pleasure--morally speaking--with the acuteness of a sudden twinge of neuralgia) that it would be better for each of them that they should break off short and never see each other again. In later years he called this feeling a foreboding, and remembered two or three occasions when he had been on the point of expressing it to Georgina. Of course, in fact, he never expressed it; there were plenty of good reasons for that. Happy love is not disposed to assume disagreeable duties, and Raymond Benyon's love was happy, in spite of grave presentiments, in spite of the singularity of his mistress and the insufferable rudeness of her parents. She was a tall, fair girl, with a beautiful cold eye and a smile of which the perfect sweetness, proceeding from the lips, was full of compensation; she had auburn hair of a hue that could be qualified as nothing less than gorgeous, and she seemed to move through life with a stately grace, as she would have walked through an old-fashioned minuet. Gentlemen connected with the navy have the advantage of seeing many types of women; they are able to compare the ladies of New York with those of Valparaiso, and those of Halifax with those of the Cape of Good Hope. Eaymond Benyon had had these advantages, and being very fond of women he had learnt his lesson; he was in a position to appreciate Georgina Gressie's fine points. She looked like a duchess,--I don't mean that in foreign ports Benyon had associated with duchesses,--and she took everything so seriously. That was flattering for the young man, who was only a lieutenant, detailed for duty at the Brooklyn navy-yard, without a penny in the world but his pay, with a set of plain, numerous, seafaring, God-fearing relations in New Hampshire, a considerable appearance of talent, a feverish, disguised ambition, and a slight impediment in his speech.

He was a spare, tough young man, his dark hair was straight and fine, and his face, a trifle pale, was smooth and carefully drawn. He stammered a little, blushing when he did so, at long intervals. I scarcely know how he appeared on shipboard, but on shore, in his civilian's garb, which was of the neatest, he had as little as possible an aroma of winds and waves. He was neither salt nor brown, nor red, nor particularly "hearty." He never twitched up his trousers, nor, so far as one could see, did he, with his modest, attentive manner, carry himself as one accustomed to command. Of course, as a subaltern, he had more to do in the way of obeying. He looked as if he followed some sedentary calling, and was, indeed, supposed to be decidedly intellectual. He was a lamb with women, to whose charms he was, as I have hinted, susceptible; but with men he was different, and, I believe, as much of a wolf as was necessary. He had a manner of adoring the handsome, insolent queen of his affections (I will explain in a moment why I call her insolent); indeed, he looked up to her literally as well as sentimentally; for she was the least bit the taller of the two. He had met her the summer before, on the piazza of a hotel at Fort Hamilton, to which, with a brother officer, in a dusty buggy, he had driven over from Brooklyn to spend a tremendously hot Sunday,--the kind of day when the navy-yard was loathsome; and the acquaintance had been renewed by his calling in Twelfth Street on New-Year's Day,--a considerable time to wait for a pretext, but which proved the impression had not been transitory. The acquaintance ripened, thanks to a zealous cultivation (on his part) of occasions which Providence, it must be confessed, placed at his disposal none too liberally; so that now Georgina took up all his thoughts and a considerable part of his time. He was in love with her, beyond a doubt; but he could not flatter himself that she was in love with him, though she appeared willing (what was so strange) to quarrel with her family about him. He did n't see how she could really care for him,--she seemed marked out by nature for so much greater a fortune; and he used to say to her, "Ah, you don't--there's no use talking, you don't--really care for me at all!" To which she answered, "Really? You are very particular. It seems to me it's real enough if I let you touch one of my fingertips!" That was one of her ways of being insolent. Another was simply her manner of looking at him, or at other people (when they spoke to her), with her hard, divine blue eye,--looking quietly, amusedly, with the air of considering (wholly from her own point of view) what they might have said, and then turning her head or her back, while, without taking the trouble to answer them, she broke into a short, liquid, irrelevant laugh. This may seem to contradict what I said just now about her taking the young lieutenant in the navy seriously. What I mean is that she appeared to take him more seriously than she took anything else. She said to him once, "At any rate you have the merit of not being a shop-keeper;" and it was by this epithet she was pleased to designate most of the young men who at that time flourished in the best society of New York. Even if she had rather a free way of expressing general indifference, a young lady is supposed to be serious enough when she consents to marry you. For the rest, as regards

a certain haughtiness that might be observed in Geogina Gressie, my story will probably throw sufficient light upon it. She remarked to Benyon once that it was none of his business why she liked him, but that, to please herself, she did not mind telling him she thought the great Napoleon, before he was celebrated, before he had command of the army of Italy, must have looked something like him; and she sketched in a few words the sort of figure she imagined the incipient Bonaparte to have been,—short, lean, pale, poor, intellectual, and with a tremendous future under his hat. Benyon asked himself whether *he* had a tremendous future, and what in the world Geogina expected of him in the coming years. He was flattered at the comparison, he was ambitious enough not to be frightened at it, and he guessed that she perceived a certain analogy between herself and the Empress Josephine. She would make a very good empress. That was true; Georgina was remarkably imperial. This may not at first seem to make it more clear why she should take into her favor an aspirant who, on the face of the matter, was not original, and whose Corsica was a flat New England seaport; but it afterward became plain that he owed his brief happiness—it was very brief—to her father's opposition; her father's and her mother's, and even her uncles' and her aunts'. In those days, in New York, the different members of a family took an interest in its alliances, and the house of Gressie looked askance at an engagement between the most beautiful of its daughters and a young man who was not in a paying business. Georgina declared that they were meddling and vulgar,—she could sacrifice her own people, in that way, without a scruple,—and Benyon's position improved from the moment that Mr. Gressie—ill-advised Mr. Gressie—ordered the girl to have nothing to do with him. Georgina was imperial in this—that she wouldn't put up with an order. When, in the house in Twelfth Street, it began to be talked about that she had better be sent to Europe with some eligible friend, Mrs. Portico, for instance, who was always planning to go, and who wanted as a companion some young mind, fresh from manuals and extracts, to serve as a fountain of history and geography,—when this scheme for getting Georgina out of the way began to be aired, she immediately said to Raymond Benyon, "Oh, yes, I'll marry you!" She said it in such an off-hand way that, deeply as he desired her, he was almost tempted to answer, "But, my dear, have you really thought about it?"

This little drama went on, in New York, in the ancient days, when Twelfth Street had but lately ceased to be suburban, when the squares had wooden palings, which were not often painted; when there were poplars in important thoroughfares and pigs in the lateral ways; when the theatres were miles distant from Madison Square, and the battered rotunda of Castle Garden echoed with expensive vocal music; when "the park" meant the grass-plats of the city hall, and the Bloomingdale road was an eligible drive; when Hoboken, of a summer afternoon, was a genteel resort, and the handsomest house in town was on the corner of the Fifth Avenue and Fifteenth Street. This will strike the modern reader, I fear, as rather a primitive epoch; but I am not sure that the strength of human passions is in proportion to the elongation of a city. Several of them, at any rate, the most robust and most familiar,—love, ambition, jealousy, resentment, greed,—subsisted in considerable force in the little circle at which we have glanced, where a view by no means favorable was taken of Raymond Benyon's attentions to Miss Gressie. Unanimity was a family trait among these people (Georgina was an exception), especially in regard to the important concerns of life, such as marriages and closing scenes. The Gressies hung together; they were accustomed to do well for themselves and for each other. They did everything well: got themselves born well (they thought it excellent to be born a Gressie), lived well, married well, died well, and managed to be well spoken of afterward. In deference to this last-mentioned habit, I must be careful what I say of them. They took an interest in each other's concerns, an interest that could never be regarded as of a meddling nature, inasmuch as they all thought alike about all their affairs, and interference took the happy form of congratulation and encouragement. These affairs were invariably lucky, and, as a general thing, no Gressie had anything to do but feel that another Gressie had been almost as shrewd and decided as he himself would have been. The great exception to that, as I have said, was this case of Georgina, who struck such a false note, a note that startled them all, when she told her father that she should like to unite herself to a young man engaged in the least paying business that any Gressie had ever heard of. Her two sisters had married into the most flourishing firms, and it was not to be thought of that—with twenty cousins growing up around her—she should put down the standard of success. Her mother had told her a fortnight before this that she must request Mr. Benyon to cease coming to the house; for hitherto his suit had been of the most public and resolute character. He had been conveyed up town from the Brooklyn ferry, in the "stage," on certain evenings, had asked for Miss Georgina at the door of the house in Twelfth Street, and had sat with her in the front parlor if her parents happened to occupy the back, or in the back if the family had disposed itself in the front. Georgina, in her way, was a dutiful girl, and she immediately repeated her mother's admonition to Benyon. He was not surprised, for though he was aware that he had not, as yet, a great knowledge of society, he flattered himself he could tell when—and where—a young man was not wanted. There were houses in Brooklyn where such an animal was much appreciated, and there the signs were quite different. They had been discouraging—except on Georgina's part—from the first of his calling in Twelfth Street. Mr. and Mrs. Gressie used to look at each other in silence when he came in, and indulge in strange, perpendicular salutations, without any shaking of hands. People did that at Portsmouth, N.H., when they were glad to see you; but in New York there was more luxuriance, and gesture had a different value. He had never, in Twelfth Street, been asked to "take anything," though the house had a delightful suggestion, a positive aroma, of sideboards,—as if there were mahogany "cellarettes" under every table. The old people, moreover, had repeatedly expressed surprise at the quantity of leisure that officers in the navy seemed to enjoy. The only way in which they had not made themselves offensive was by always remaining in the other room; though at times even this

detachment, to which he owed some delightful moments, presented itself to Benyon as a form of disapprobation. Of course, after Mrs. Gressie's message, his visits were practically at an end; he would n't give the girl up, but he would n't be beholden to her father for the opportunity to converse with her. Nothing was left for the tender couple--there was a curious mutual mistrust in their tenderness--but to meet in the squares, or in the topmost streets, or in the sidemost avenues, on the afternoons of spring. It was especially during this phase of their relations that Georgina struck Benyon as imperial. Her whole person seemed to exhale a tranquil, happy consciousness of having broken a law. She never told him how she arranged the matter at home, how she found it possible always to keep the appointments (to meet him out of the house) that she so boldly made, in what degree she dissimulated to her parents, and how much, in regard to their continued acquaintance, the old people suspected and accepted. If Mr. and Mrs. Gressie had forbidden him the house, it was not, apparently, because they wished her to walk with him in the Tenth Avenue or to sit at his side under the blossoming lilacs in Stuyvesant Square. He didn't believe that she told lies in Twelfth Street; he thought she was too imperial to lie; and he wondered what she said to her mother when, at the end of nearly a whole afternoon of vague peregrination with her lover, this bridling, bristling matron asked her where she had been. Georgina was capable of simply telling the truth; and yet if she simply told the truth, it was a wonder that she had not been simply packed off to Europe.

Benyon's ignorance of her pretexts is a proof that this rather oddly-mated couple never arrived at perfect intimacy,--in spite of a fact which remains to be related. He thought of this afterwards, and thought how strange it was that he had not felt more at liberty to ask her what she did for him, and how she did it, and how much she suffered for him. She would probably not have admitted that she suffered at all, and she had no wish to pose for a martyr. Benyon remembered this, as I say, in the after years, when he tried to explain to himself certain things which simply puzzled him; it came back to him with the vision, already faded, of shabby cross-streets, straggling toward rivers, with red sunsets, seen through a haze of dust, at the end; a vista through which the figures of a young man and a girl slowly receded and disappeared,--strolling side by side, with the relaxed pace of desultory talk, but more closely linked as they passed into the distance, linked by its at last appearing safe to them--in the Tenth Avenue--that the young lady should take his arm. They were always approaching that inferior thoroughfare; but he could scarcely have told you, in those days, what else they were approaching. He had nothing in the world but his pay, and he felt that this was rather a "mean" income to offer Miss Gressie. Therefore he did n't put it forward; what he offered, instead, was the expression--crude often, and almost boyishly extravagant--of a delighted admiration of her beauty, the tenderest tones of his voice, the softest assurances of his eye and the most insinuating pressure of her hand at those moments when she consented to place it in his arm. All this was an eloquence which, if necessary, might have been condensed into a single sentence; but those few words were scarcely needful, when it was as plain that he expected--in general--she would marry him, as it was indefinite that he counted upon her for living on a few hundreds a year. If she had been a different girl he might have asked her to wait,--might have talked to her of the coming of better days, of his prospective promotion, of its being wiser, perhaps, that he should leave the navy and look about for a more lucrative career. With Georgina it was difficult to go into such questions; she had no taste whatever for detail. She was delightful as a woman to love, because when a young man is in love he discovers that; but she could not be called helpful, for she never suggested anything. That is, she never had done so till the day she really proposed--for that was the form it took--to become his wife without more delay. "Oh, yes, I will marry you;" these words, which I quoted a little way back, were not so much the answer to something he had said at the moment, as the light conclusion of a report she had just made, for the first time, of her actual situation in her father's house.

"I am afraid I shall have to see less of you," she had begun by saying. "They watch me so much."

"It is very little already," he answered. "What is once or twice a week?"

"That's easy for you to say. You are your own master, but you don't know what I go through."

"Do they make it very bad for you, dearest? Do they make scenes?" Benyon asked.

"No, of course not. Don't you know us enough to know how we behave? No scenes,--that would be a relief. However, I never make them myself, and I never will--that's one comfort for you, for the future, if you want to know. Father and mother keep very quiet, looking at me as if I were one of the lost, with hard, screwing eyes, like gimlets. To me they scarcely say anything, but they talk it all over with each other, and try and decide what is to be done. It's my belief that father has written to the people in Washington--what do you call it! the Department--to have you moved away from Brooklyn,--to have you sent to sea."

"I guess that won't do much good. They want me in Brooklyn, they don't want me at sea."

"Well, they are capable of going to Europe for a year, on purpose to take me," Georgina said.

"How can they take you, if you won't go? And if you should go, what good would it do, if you were only to find me here when you came back, just the same as you left me?"

"Oh, well!" said Georgina, with her lovely smile, "of course they think that absence would cure me of--cure me of--" And she paused, with a certain natural modesty, not saying exactly of what.

"Cure you of what, darling? Say it, please say it," the young man murmured, drawing her hand surreptitiously into

his arm.

"Of my absurd infatuation!"

"And would it, dearest?"

"Yes, very likely. But I don't mean to try. I sha'n't go to Europe,--not when I don't want to. But it's better I should see less of you,--even that I should appear--a little--to give you up."

"A little? What do you call a little?"

Georgina said nothing, for a moment. "Well, that, for instance, you should n't hold my hand quite so tight!" And she disengaged this conscious member from the pressure of his arm.

"What good will that do?" Benyon asked,

"It will make them think it 's all over,--that we have agreed to part."

"And as we have done nothing of the kind, how will that help us?"

They had stopped at the crossing of a street; a heavy dray was lumbering slowly past them. Georgina, as she stood there, turned her face to her lover, and rested her eyes for some moments on his own. At last: "Nothing will help us; I don't think we are very happy," she answered, while her strange, ironical, inconsequent smile played about her beautiful lips.

"I don't understand how you see things. I thought you were going to say you would marry me!" Benyon rejoined, standing there still, though the dray had passed.

"Oh, yes, I will marry you!" And she moved away, across the street. That was the manner in which she had said it, and it was very characteristic of her. When he saw that she really meant it, he wished they were somewhere else,--he hardly knew where the proper place would be,--so that he might take her in his arms. Nevertheless, before they separated that day he had said to her he hoped she remembered they would be very poor, reminding her how great a change she would find it. She answered that she should n't mind, and presently she said that if this was all that prevented them the sooner they were married the better. The next time he saw her she was quite of the same opinion; but he found, to his surprise, it was now her conviction that she had better not leave her father's house. The ceremony should take place secretly, of course; but they would wait awhile to let their union be known.

"What good will it do us, then?" Raymond Benyon asked.

Georgina colored. "Well, if you don't know, I can't tell you!"

Then it seemed to him that he did know. Yet, at the same time, he could not see why, once the knot was tied, secrecy should be required. When he asked what special event they were to wait for, and what should give them the signal to appear as man and wife, she answered that her parents would probably forgive her, if they were to discover, not too abruptly, after six months, that she had taken the great step. Benyon supposed that she had ceased to care whether they forgave her or not; but he had already perceived that women are full of inconsistencies. He had believed her capable of marrying him out of bravado, but the pleasure of defiance was absent if the marriage was kept to themselves. Now, too, it appeared that she was not especially anxious to defy,--she was disposed rather to manage, to cultivate opportunities and reap the fruits of a waiting game.

"Leave it to me. Leave it to me. You are only a blundering man," Georgina said. "I shall know much better than you the right moment for saying, 'Well, you may as well make the best of it, because we have already done it!'"

That might very well be, but Benyon did n't quite understand, and he was awkwardly anxious (for a lover) till it came over him afresh that there was one thing at any rate in his favor, which was simply that the loveliest girl he had ever seen was ready to throw herself into his arms. When he said to her, "There is one thing I hate in this plan of yours,--that, for ever so few weeks, so few days, your father should support my wife,"--when he made this homely remark, with a little flush of sincerity in his face, she gave him a specimen of that unanswerable laugh of hers, and declared that it would serve Mr. Gressie right for being so barbarous and so horrid. It was Benyon's view that from the moment she disobeyed her father, she ought to cease to avail herself of his protection; but I am bound to add that he was not particularly surprised at finding this a kind of honor in which her feminine nature was little versed. To make her his wife first--at the earliest moment--whenever she would, and trust to fortune, and the new influence he should have, to give him, as soon thereafter as possible, complete possession of her,--this rather promptly presented itself to the young man as the course most worthy of a person of spirit. He would be only a pedant who would take nothing because he could not get everything at once. They wandered further than usual this afternoon, and the dusk was thick by the time he brought her back to her father's door. It was not his habit to come so near it, but to-day they had so much to talk about that he actually stood with her for ten minutes at the foot of the steps. He was keeping her hand in his, and she let it rest there while she said,--by way of a remark that should sum up all their reasons and reconcile their differences,--

"There's one great thing it will do, you know; it will make me safe."

"Safe from what?"

"From marrying any one else."

"Ah, my girl, if you were to do that--!" Benyon exclaimed; but he did not mention the other branch of the contingency. Instead of this, he looked up at the blind face of the house--there were only dim lights in two or three windows, and no apparent eyes--and up and down the empty street, vague in the friendly twilight; after which he drew Georgina Gressie to his breast and gave her a long, passionate kiss. Yes, decidedly, he felt, they had better be married. She had run quickly up the steps, and while she stood there, with her hand on the bell, she almost hissed at him, under her breath, "Go away, go away; Amanda's coming!" Amanda was the parlor-maid, and it was in those terms that the Twelfth Street Juliet dismissed her Brooklyn Romeo. As he wandered back into the Fifth Avenue, where the evening air was conscious of a vernal fragrance from the shrubs in the little precinct of the pretty Gothic church ornamenting that charming part of the street, he was too absorbed in the impression of the delightful contact from which the girl had violently released herself to reflect that the great reason she had mentioned a moment before was a reason for their marrying, of course, but not in the least a reason for their not making it public. But, as I said in the opening lines of this chapter, if he did not understand his mistress's motives at the end, he cannot be expected to have understood them at the beginning.

## II.

Mrs. Portico, as we know, was always talking about going to Europe; but she had not yet--I mean a year after the incident I have just related--put her hand upon a youthful cicerone. Petticoats, of course, were required; it was necessary that her companion should be of the sex which sinks most naturally upon benches, in galleries and cathedrals, and pauses most frequently upon staircases that ascend to celebrated views. She was a widow, with a good fortune and several sons, all of whom were in Wall Street, and none of them capable of the relaxed pace at which she expected to take her foreign tour. They were all in a state of tension. They went through life standing. She was a short, broad, high-colored woman, with a loud voice, and superabundant black hair, arranged in a way peculiar to herself--with so many combs and bands that it had the appearance of a national coiffure. There was an impression in New York, about 1845, that the style was Danish; some one had said something about having seen it in Schleswig-Holstein.

Mrs. Portico had a bold, humorous, slightly flamboyant look; people who saw her for the first time received an impression that her late husband had married the daughter of a barkeeper or the proprietress of a menagerie. Her high, hoarse, good-natured voice seemed to connect her in some way with public life; it was not pretty enough to suggest that she might have been an actress. These ideas quickly passed away, however, even if you were not sufficiently initiated to know--as all the Grossies, for instance, knew so well--that her origin, so far from being enveloped in mystery, was almost the sort of thing she might have boasted of. But in spite of the high pitch of her appearance, she didn't boast of anything; she was a genial, easy, comical, irreverent person, with a large charity, a democratic, fraternizing turn of mind, and a contempt for many worldly standards, which she expressed not in the least in general axioms (for she had a mortal horror of philosophy), but in violent ejaculations on particular occasions. She had not a grain of moral timidity, and she fronted a delicate social problem as sturdily as she would have barred the way of a gentleman she might have met in her vestibule with the plate-chest. The only thing which prevented her being a bore in orthodox circles was that she was incapable of discussion. She never lost her temper, but she lost her vocabulary, and ended quietly by praying that Heaven would give her an opportunity to *show* what she believed.

She was an old friend of Mr. and Mrs. Gressie, who esteemed her for the antiquity of her lineage and the frequency of her subscriptions, and to whom she rendered the service of making them feel liberal--like people too sure of their own position to be frightened. She was their indulgence, their dissipation, their point of contact with dangerous heresies; so long as they continued to see her they could not be accused of being narrow-minded--a matter as to which they were perhaps vaguely conscious of the necessity of taking their precautions. Mrs. Portico never asked herself whether she liked the Gressies; she had no disposition for morbid analysis, she accepted transmitted associations, and she found, somehow, that her acquaintance with these people helped her to relieve herself. She was always making scenes in their drawing-room, scenes half indignant, half jocose, like all her manifestations, to which it must be confessed that they adapted themselves beautifully. They never "met" her in the language of controversy; but always collected to watch her, with smiles and comfortable platitudes, as if they envied her superior richness of temperament. She took an interest in Georgina, who seemed to her different from the others, with suggestions about her of being likely not to marry so unrefreshingly as her sisters had done, and of a high, bold standard of duty. Her sisters had married from duty, but Mrs. Portico would rather have chopped off one of her large, plump hands than behave herself so well as that She had, in her daughterless condition, a certain ideal of a girl that should be beautiful and romantic, with lustrous eyes, and a little persecuted, so that she, Mrs. Portico, might get her out of her troubles. She looked to Georgina, to a considerable degree, to gratify her in this way; but she had really never understood Georgina

at all She ought to have been shrewd, but she lacked this refinement, and she never understood anything until after many disappointments and vexations. It was difficult to startle her, but she was much startled by a communication that this young lady made her one fine spring morning. With her florid appearance and her speculative mind, she was probably the most innocent woman in New York.

Georgina came very early,--earlier even than visits were paid in New York thirty years ago; and instantly, without any preface, looking her straight in the face, told Mrs. Portico that she was in great trouble and must appeal to her for assistance. Georgina had in her aspect no symptom of distress; she was as fresh and beautiful as the April day itself; she held up her head and smiled, with a sort of familiar bravado, looking like a young woman who would naturally be on good terms with fortune. It was not in the least in the tone of a person making a confession or relating a misadventure that she presently said: "Well, you must know, to begin with--of course, it will surprise you--that I'm married."

"Married, Georgina Gressie!" Mrs. Portico repeated in her most resonant tones.

Georgina got up, walked with her majestic step across the room, and closed the door. Then she stood there, her back pressed against the mahogany panels, indicating only by the distance she had placed between herself and her hostess the consciousness of an irregular position. "I am not Georgina Gressie! I am Georgina Benyon,--and it has become plain, within a short time, that the natural consequence will take place."

Mrs. Portico was altogether bewildered. "The natural consequence?" she exclaimed, staring.

"Of one's being married, of course,--I suppose you know what that is. No one must know anything about it. I want you to take me to Europe."

Mrs. Portico now slowly rose from her place, and approached her visitor, looking at her from head to foot as she did so, as if to challenge the truth of her remarkable announcement. She rested her hands on Georgina's shoulders a moment, gazing into her blooming face, and then she drew her closer and kissed her. In this way the girl was conducted back to the sofa, where, in a conversation of extreme intimacy, she opened Mrs. Portico's eyes wider than they had ever been opened before. She was Raymond Benyon's wife; they had been married a year, but no one knew anything about it. She had kept it from every one, and she meant to go on keeping it. The ceremony had taken place in a little Episcopal church at Harlem, one Sunday afternoon, after the service. There was no one in that dusty suburb who knew them; the clergyman, vexed at being detained, and wanting to go home to tea, had made no trouble; he tied the knot before they could turn round. It was ridiculous how easy it had been. Raymond had told him frankly that it must all be under the rose, as the young lady's family disapproved of what she was doing. But she was of legal age, and perfectly free; he could see that for himself. The parson had given a grunt as he looked at her over his spectacles. It was not very complimentary; it seemed to say that she was indeed no chicken. Of course she looked old for a girl; but she was not a girl now, was she? Raymond had certified his own identity as an officer in the United States Navy (he had papers, besides his uniform, which he wore), and introduced the clergyman to a friend he had brought with him, who was also in the navy, a venerable paymaster. It was he who gave Georgina away, as it were; he was an old, old man, a regular grandmother, and perfectly safe. He had been married three times himself. After the ceremony she went back to her father's; but she saw Mr. Benyon the next day. After that, she saw him--for a little while--pretty often. He was always begging her to come to him altogether; she must do him that justice. But she wouldn't--she wouldn't now--perhaps she would n't ever. She had her reasons, which seemed to her very good, but were very difficult to explain. She would tell Mrs. Portico in plenty of time what they were. But that was not the question now, whether they were good or bad; the question was for her to get away from the country for several months,--far away from any one who had ever known her. She would like to go to some little place in Spain or Italy, where she should be out of the world until everything was over.

Mrs. Portico's heart gave a jump as this serene, handsome, familiar girl, sitting there with a hand in hers, and pouring forth this extraordinary tale, spoke of everything being over. There was a glossy coldness in it, an unnatural lightness, which suggested--poor Mrs. Portico scarcely knew what. If Georgina was to become a mother, it was to be supposed she was to remain a mother. She said there was a beautiful place in Italy--Genoa--of which Raymond had often spoken--and where he had been more than once,--he admired it so much; could n't they go there and be quiet for a little while? She was asking a great favor,--that she knew very well; but if Mrs. Portico would n't take her, she would find some one who would. They had talked of such a journey so often; and, certainly, if Mrs. Portico had been willing before, she ought to be much more willing now. The girl declared that she must do something,--go somewhere,--keep, in one way or another, her situation unperceived. There was no use talking to her about telling,--she would rather die than tell. No doubt it seemed strange, but she knew what she was about. No one had guessed anything yet,--she had succeeded perfectly in doing what she wished,--and her father and mother believed--as Mrs. Portico had believed,--had n't she?--that, any time the last year, Raymond Benyon was less to her than he had been before. Well, so he was; yes, he was. He had gone away--he was off, Heaven knew where--in the Pacific; she was alone, and now she would remain alone. The family believed it was all over,--with his going back to his ship, and other things, and they were right: for it *was* over, or it would be soon.



Mrs. Portico, by this time, had grown almost afraid of her young friend; *she* had so little fear, she had even, as it were, so little shame. If the good lady had been accustomed to analyzing things a little more, she would have said she had so little conscience. She looked at Georgina with dilated eyes,—her visitor was so much the calmer of the two,—and exclaimed, and murmured, and sunk back, and sprung forward, and wiped her forehead with her pocket-handkerchief! There were things she didn't understand; that they should all have been so deceived, that they should have thought Georgina was giving her lover up (they flattered themselves she was discouraged, or had grown tired of him), when she was really only making it impossible she should belong to any one else. And with this, her inconsequence, her capriciousness, her absence of motive, the way she contradicted herself, her apparent belief that she could hush up such a situation forever! There was nothing shameful in having married poor Mr. Benyon, even in a little church at Harlem, and being given away by a paymaster. It was much more shameful to be in such a state without being prepared to make the proper explanations. And she must have seen very little of her husband; she must have given him up—so far as meeting him went—almost as soon as she had taken him. Had not Mrs. Gressie herself told Mrs. Portico (in the preceding October, it must have been) that there now would be no need of sending Georgina away, inasmuch as the affair with the little navy man—a project in every way so unsuitable—had quite blown over?

"After our marriage I saw him less, I saw him a great deal less," Georgina explained; but her explanation only appeared to make the mystery more dense.

"I don't see, in that case, what on earth you married him for!"

"We had to be more careful; I wished to appear to have given him up. Of course we were really more intimate,—I saw him differently," Georgina said, smiling.

"I should think so! I can't for the life of me see why you were n't discovered."

"All I can say is we weren't. No doubt it's remarkable. We managed very well,—that is, I managed,—he did n't want to manage at all. And then, father and mother are incredibly stupid!"

Mrs. Portico exhaled a comprehensive moan, feeling glad, on the whole, that she had n't a daughter, while Georgina went on to furnish a few more details. Raymond Benyon, in the summer, had been ordered from Brooklyn to Charlestown, near Boston, where, as Mrs. Portico perhaps knew, there was another navy-yard, in which there was a temporary press of work, requiring more oversight. He had remained there several months, during which he had written to her urgently to come to him, and during which, as well, he had received notice that he was to rejoin his ship a little later. Before doing so he came back to Brooklyn for a few weeks to wind up his work there, and then she had seen him—well, pretty often. That was the best time of all the year that had elapsed since their marriage. It was a wonder at home that nothing had then been guessed; because she had really been reckless, and Benyon had even tried to force on a disclosure. But they *were* stupid, that was very certain. He had besought her again and again to put an end to their false position, but she did n't want it any more than she had wanted it before. They had rather a bad parting; in fact, for a pair of lovers, it was a very queer parting indeed. He did n't know, now, the thing she had come to tell Mrs. Portico. She had not written to him. He was on a very long cruise. It might be two years before he returned to the United States. "I don't care how long he stays away," Georgina said, very simply.

"You haven't mentioned why you married him. Perhaps you don't remember," Mrs. Portico broke out, with her masculine laugh.

"Oh, yes; I loved him!"

"And you have got over that?"

Georgina hesitated a moment. "Why, no, Mrs. Portico, of course I haven't; Raymond's a splendid fellow."

"Then why don't you live with him? You don't explain that."

"What would be the use when he's always away? How can one live with a man that spends half his life in the South Seas? If he was n't in the navy it would be different; but to go through everything,—I mean everything that making our marriage known would bring upon me,—the scolding and the exposure and the ridicule, the scenes at home,—to go through it all, just for the idea, and yet be alone here, just as I was before, without my husband after all,—with none of the good of him,"—and here Georgina looked at her hostess as if with the certitude that such an enumeration of inconveniences would touch her effectually,—"really, Mrs. Portico, I am bound to say I don't think that would be worth while; I haven't the courage for it."

"I never thought you were a coward," said Mrs. Portico.

"Well, I am not,—if you will give me time. I am very patient."

"I never thought that, either."

"Marrying changes one," said Georgina, still smiling.

"It certainly seems to have had a very peculiar effect upon you. Why don't you make him leave the navy, and arrange your life comfortably, like every one else?"

"I would n't for the world interfere with his prospects—with his promotion. That is sure to come for him, and to come

quickly, he has such talents. He is devoted to his profession; it would ruin him to leave it."

"My dear young woman, you are a wonderful creature!" Mrs. Portico exclaimed, looking at her companion as if she had been in a glass case.

"So poor Raymond says," Georgina answered, smiling more than ever.

"Certainly, I should have been very sorry to marry a navy man; but if I had married him, I should stick to him, in the face of all the scoldings in the universe!"

"I don't know what your parents may have been; I know what mine are," Georgina replied, with some dignity. "When he's a captain, we shall come out of hiding."

"And what shall you do meanwhile? What will you do with your children? Where will you hide them? What will you do with this one?"

Georgina rested her eyes on her lap for a minute; then, raising them, she met those of Mrs. Portico. "Somewhere in Europe," she said, in her sweet tone.

"Georgina Gressie, you 're a monster!" the elder lady cried.

"I know what I am about, and you will help me," the girl went on.

"I will go and tell your father and mother the whole story,--that's what I will do!"

"I am not in the least afraid of that, not in the least. You will help me,--I assure you that you will."

"Do you mean I will support the child?"

Georgina broke into a laugh. "I do believe you would, if I were to ask you! But I won't go so far as that; I have something of my own. All I want you to do is to be with me."

"At Genoa,--yes, you have got it all fixed! You say Mr. Benyon is so fond of the place. That's all very well; but how will he like his infant being deposited there?"

"He won't like it at all. You see I tell you the whole truth," said Georgina, gently.

"Much obliged; it's a pity you keep it all for me! It is in his power, then, to make you behave properly. *He* can publish your marriage if you won't; and if he does you will have to acknowledge your child."

"Publish, Mrs. Portico? How little you know my Raymond! He will never break a promise; he will go through fire first."

"And what have you got him to promise?"

"Never to insist on a disclosure against my will; never to claim me openly as his wife till I think it is time; never to let any one know what has passed between us if I choose to keep it still a secret--to keep it for years--to keep it forever. Never to do anything in the matter himself, but to leave it to me. For this he has given me his solemn word of honor. And I know what that means!"

Mrs. Portico, on the sofa, fairly bounded.

"You *do* know what you are about And Mr. Benyon strikes me as more fantastic even than yourself. I never heard of a man taking such an imbecile vow. What good can it do him?"

"What good? The good it did him was that, it gratified me. At the time he took it he would have made any promise under the sun. It was a condition I exacted just at the very last, before the marriage took place. There was nothing at that moment he would have refused me; there was nothing I could n't have made him do. He was in love to that degree--but I don't want to boast," said Georgina, with quiet grandeur. "He wanted--he wanted--" she added; but then she paused.

"He does n't seem to have wanted much!" Mrs. Portico cried, in a tone which made Georgina turn to the window, as if it might have reached the street.

Her hostess noticed the movement and went on: "Oh, my dear, if I ever do tell your story, I will tell it so that people will hear it!"

"You never will tell it. What I mean is, that Raymond wanted the sanction--of the affair at the church--because he saw that I would never do without it. Therefore, for him, the sooner we had it the better, and, to hurry it on, he was ready to take any pledge."

"You have got it pat enough," said Mrs. Portico, in homely phrase. "I don't know what you mean by sanctions, or what *you* wanted of 'em!"

Georgina got up, holding rather higher than before that beautiful head which, in spite of the embarrassments of this interview, had not yet perceptibly abated of its elevation. "Would you have liked me to--to not marry?"

Mrs. Portico rose also, and, flushed with the agitation of unwonted knowledge,--it was as if she had discovered a skeleton in her favorite cupboard,--faced her young friend for a moment. Then her conflicting sentiments resolved themselves into an abrupt question, uttered,--for Mrs. Portico,--with much solemnity: "Georgina Gressie, were you

really in love with him?"

The question suddenly dissipated the girl's strange, studied, wilful coldness; she broke out, with a quick flash of passion,—a passion that, for the moment, was predominantly anger, "Why else, in Heaven's name, should I have done what I have done? Why else should I have married him? What under the sun had I to gain?"

A certain quiver in Georgina's voice, a light in her eye which seemed to Mrs. Portico more spontaneous, more human, as she uttered these words, caused them to affect her hostess rather less painfully than anything she had yet said. She took the girl's hand and emitted indefinite, admonitory sounds. "Help me, my dear old friend, help me," Georgina continued, in a low, pleading tone; and in a moment Mrs. Portico saw that the tears were in her eyes.

"You 're a queer mixture, my child," she exclaimed. "Go straight home to your own mother, and tell her everything; that is your best help."

"You are kinder than my mother. You must n't judge her by yourself."

"What can she do to you? How can she hurt you? We are not living in pagan times," said Mrs. Portico, who was seldom so historical "Besides, you have no reason to speak of your mother—to think of her, even—so! She would have liked you to marry a man of some property; but she has always been a good mother to you."

At this rebuke Georgina suddenly kindled again; she was, indeed, as Mrs. Portico had said, a queer mixture. Conscious, evidently, that she could not satisfactorily justify her present stiffness, she wheeled round upon a grievance which absolved her from self-defence. "Why, then, did he make that promise, if he loved me? No man who really loved me would have made it,—and no man that was a man, as I understand being a man! He might have seen that I only did it to test him,—to see if he wanted to take advantage of being left free himself. It is a proof that he does n't love me,—not as he ought to have done; and in such a case as that a woman is n't bound to make sacrifices!"

Mrs. Portico was not a person of a nimble intellect; her mind moved vigorously, but heavily; yet she sometimes made happy guesses. She saw that Georgia's emotions were partly real and partly fictitious; that, as regards this last matter, especially, she was trying to "get up" a resentment, in order to excuse herself. The pretext was absurd, and the good lady was struck with its being heartless on the part of her young visitor to reproach poor Benyon with a concession on which she had insisted, and which could only be a proof of his devotion, inasmuch as he left her free while he bound himself. Altogether, Mrs. Portico was shocked and dismayed at such a want of simplicity in the behavior of a young person whom she had hitherto believed to be as candid as she was elegant, and her appreciation of this discovery expressed itself in the uncompromising remark: "You strike me as a very bad girl, my dear; you strike me as a very bad girl!"

## PART II.

### III.

It will doubtless seem to the reader very singular that, in spite of this reflection, which appeared to sum up her judgment of the matter, Mrs. Portico should, in the course of a very few days, have consented to everything that Georgina asked of her. I have thought it well to narrate at length the first conversation that took place between them, but I shall not trace further the details of the girl's hard pleading, or the steps by which--in the face of a hundred robust and salutary convictions--the loud, kind, sharp, simple, sceptical, credulous woman took under her protection a damsel whose obstinacy she could not speak of without getting red with anger. It was the simple fact of Georgina's personal condition that moved her; this young lady's greatest eloquence was the seriousness of her predicament. She might be bad, and she had a splendid, careless, insolent, fair-faced way of admitting it, which at moments, incoherently, inconsistently, and irresistibly, resolved the harsh confession into tears of weakness; but Mrs. Portico had known her from her rosiest years, and when Georgina declared that she could not go home, that she wished to be with her and not with her mother, that she could not expose herself--how could she?--and that she must remain with her and her only till the day they should sail, the poor lady was forced to make that day a reality. She was overmastered, she was cajoled, she was, to a certain extent, fascinated. She had to accept Georgina's rigidity (she had none of her own to oppose to it; she was only violent, she was not continuous), and once she did this, it was plain, after all, that to take her young friend to Europe was to help her, and to leave her alone was not to help her. Georgina literally frightened Mrs. Portico into compliance. She was evidently capable of strange things if thrown upon her own devices.

So, from one day to another Mrs. Portico announced that she was really at last about to sail for foreign lands (her doctor having told her that if she did not look out she would get too old to enjoy them), and that she had invited that robust Miss Gressie, who could stand so long on her feet, to accompany her. There was joy in the house of Gressie at this announcement, for though the danger was over, it was a great general advantage to Georgina to go, and the Gressies were always elated at the prospect of an advantage. There was a danger that she might meet Mr. Benyon on the other side of the world; but it didn't seem likely that Mrs. Portico would lend herself to a plot of that kind. If she had taken it into her head to favor their love affair, she would have done it frankly, and Georgina would have been married by this time. Her arrangements were made as quickly as her decision had been--or rather had appeared--slow; for this concerned those agile young men down town. Georgina was perpetually at her house; it was understood in Twelfth Street that she was talking over her future travels with her kind friend. Talk there was, of course to a considerable degree; but after it was settled they should start nothing more was said about the motive of the journey. Nothing was said, that is, till the night before they sailed; then a few words passed between them. Georgina had already taken leave of her relations in Twelfth Street, and was to sleep at Mrs. Portico's in order to go down to the ship at an early hour. The two ladies were sitting together in the firelight, silent, with the consciousness of corded luggage, when the elder one suddenly remarked to her companion that she seemed to be taking a great deal upon herself in assuming that Raymond Benyon wouldn't force her hand. *He* might choose to acknowledge his child, if she didn't; there were promises and promises, and many people would consider they had been let off when circumstances were so altered. She would have to reckon with Mr. Benyon more than she thought.

"I know what I am about," Georgina answered. "There is only one promise, for him. I don't know what you mean by circumstances being altered."

"Everything seems to me to be changed," poor Mrs. Portico murmured, rather tragically.

"Well, he is not, and he never will! I am sure of him,--as sure as that I sit here. Do you think I would have looked at him if I had not known he was a man of his word?"

"You have chosen him well, my dear," said Mrs. Portico, who by this time was reduced to a kind of bewildered acquiescence.

"Of course I have chosen him well! In such a matter as this he will be perfectly splendid." Then suddenly, "Perfectly splendid,--that's why I cared for him!" she repeated, with a flash of incongruous passion.

This seemed to Mrs. Portico audacious to the point of being sublime; but she had given up trying to understand anything that the girl might say or do. She understood less and less, after they had disembarked in England and begun to travel southward; and she understood least of all when, in the middle of the winter, the event came off with which, in imagination, she had tried to familiarize herself, but which, when it occurred, seemed to her beyond measure strange and dreadful. It took place at Genoa, for Georgina had made up her mind that there would be more privacy in a big town

than in a little; and she wrote to America that both Mrs. Portico and she had fallen in love with the place and would spend two or three months there. At that time people in the United States knew much less than to-day about the comparative attractions of foreign cities, and it was not thought surprising that absent New Yorkers should wish to linger in a seaport where they might find apartments, according to Georgina's report, in a palace painted in fresco by Vandyke and Titian. Georgina, in her letters, omitted, it will be seen, no detail that could give color to Mrs. Portico's long stay at Genoa. In such a palace--where the travellers hired twenty gilded rooms for the most insignificant sum--a remarkably fine boy came into the world. Nothing could have been more successful and comfortable than this transaction. Mrs. Portico was almost appalled at the facility and felicity of it. She was by this time in a pretty bad way, and--what had never happened to her before in her life--she suffered from chronic depression of spirits. She hated to have to lie, and now she was lying all the time. Everything she wrote home, everything that had been said or done in connection with their stay in Genoa, was a lie. The way they remained indoors to avoid meeting chance compatriots was a lie. Compatriots, in Genoa, at that period, were very rare; but nothing could exceed the businesslike completeness of Georgina's precautions. Her nerves, her self-possession, her apparent want of feeling, excited on Mrs. Portico's part a kind of gloomy suspense; a morbid anxiety to see how far her companion would go to take possession of the excellent woman, who, a few months before, hated to fix her mind on disagreeable things.

Georgina went very far indeed; she did everything in her power to dissimulate the origin of her child. The record of its birth was made under a false name, and he was baptized at the nearest church by a Catholic priest. A magnificent contadina was brought to light by the doctor in a village in the hills, and this big, brown, barbarous creature, who, to do her justice, was full of handsome, familiar smiles and coarse tenderness, was constituted nurse to Raymond Benyon's son. She nursed him for a fortnight under the mother's eye, and she was then sent back to her village with the baby in her arms and sundry gold coin knotted into a corner of her rude pocket-handkerchief. Mr. Gressie had given his daughter a liberal letter of credit on a London banker, and she was able, for the present, to make abundant provision for the little one. She called Mrs. Portico's attention to the fact that she spent none of her money on futilities; she kept it all for her small pensioner in the Genoese hills. Mrs. Portico beheld these strange doings with a stupefaction that occasionally broke into passionate protest; then she relapsed into a brooding sense of having now been an accomplice so far that she must be an accomplice to the end. The two ladies went down to Rome--Georgina was in wonderful trim--to finish the season, and here Mrs. Portico became convinced that she intended to abandon her offspring. She had not driven into the country to see the nursling before leaving Genoa,--she had said that she could n't bear to see it in such a place and among such people. Mrs. Portico, it must be added, had felt the force of this plea,--felt it as regards a plan of her own, given up after being hotly entertained for a few hours, of devoting a day, by herself, to a visit to the big contadina. It seemed to her that if she should see the child in the sordid hands to which Georgina had consigned it she would become still more of a participant than she was already. This young woman's blooming hardness, after they got to Borne, acted upon her like a kind of Medusa-mask. She had seen a horrible thing, she had been mixed up with it, and her motherly heart had received a mortal chill. It became more clear to her every day that, though Georgina would continue to send the infant money in considerable quantities, she had dispossessed herself of it forever. Together with this induction a fixed idea settled in her mind,--the project of taking the baby herself, of making him her own, of arranging that matter with the father. The countenance she had given Georgina up to this point was an effective pledge that she would not expose her; but she could adopt the child without exposing her; she could say that he was a lovely baby--he was lovely, fortunately--whom she had picked up in a poor village in Italy,--a village that had been devastated by brigands. She would pretend--she could pretend; oh, yes, of course, she could pretend! Everything was imposture now, and she could go on to lie as she had begun. The falsity of the whole business sickened her; it made her so yellow that she scarcely knew herself in her glass. None the less, to rescue the child, even if she had to become false still, would be in some measure an atonement for the treachery to which she had already lent herself. She began to hate Georgina, who had drawn her into such an atrocious current, and if it had not been for two considerations she would have insisted on their separating. One was the deference she owed to Mr. and Mrs. Gressie, who had reposed such a trust in her; the other was that she must keep hold of the mother till she had got possession of the infant. Meanwhile, in this forced communion, her aversion to her companion increased; Georgina came to appear to her a creature of brass, of iron; she was exceedingly afraid of her, and it seemed to her now a wonder of wonders that she should ever have trusted her enough to come so far. Georgina showed no consciousness of the change in Mrs. Portico, though there was, indeed, at present, not even a pretence of confidence between the two. Miss Gressie--that was another lie, to which Mrs. Portico had to lend herself--was bent on enjoying Europe, and was especially delighted with Rome. She certainly had the courage of her undertaking, and she confessed to Mrs. Portico that she had left Raymond Benyon, and meant to continue to leave him, in ignorance of what had taken place at Genoa. There was a certain confidence, it must be said, in that. He was now in Chinese waters, and she probably should not see him for years.

Mrs. Portico took counsel with herself, and the result of her cogitation was, that she wrote to Mr. Benyon that a charming little boy had been born to him, and that Georgina had put him to nurse with Italian peasants, but that, if he would kindly consent to it, she, Mrs. Portico, would bring him up much better than that. She knew not how to address her letter, and Georgina, even if *she* should know, which was doubtful, would never tell her; so she sent the missive to

the care of the Secretary of the Navy, at Washington, with an earnest request that it might immediately be forwarded. Such was Mrs. Portico's last effort in this strange business of Georgina's. I relate rather a complicated fact in a very few words when I say that the poor lady's anxieties, indignations, repentances, preyed upon her until they fairly broke her down. Various persons whom she knew in Borne notified her that the air of the Seven Hills was plainly unfavorable to her, and she had made up her mind to return to her native land, when she found that, in her depressed condition, malarial fever had laid its hand upon her. She was unable to move, and the matter was settled for her in the course of an illness which, happily, was not prolonged. I have said that she was not obstinate, and the resistance that she made on the present occasion was not worthy even of her spasmodic energy. Brain-fever made its appearance, and she died at the end of three weeks, during which Georgina's attentions to her patient and protectress had been unremitting. There were other Americans in Rome who, after this sad event, extended to the bereaved young lady every comfort and hospitality. She had no lack of opportunities for returning under a proper escort to New York. She selected, you may be sure, the best, and re-entered her father's house, where she took to plain dressing; for she sent all her pocket-money, with the utmost secrecy, to the little boy in the Genoese hills.

#### IV.

"Why should he come if he doesn't like you? He is under no obligation, and he has his ship to look after. Why should he sit for an hour at a time, and why should he be so pleasant?"

"Do you think he is very pleasant?" Kate Theory asked, turning away her face from her sister. It was important that Mildred should not see how little the expression of that charming countenance corresponded with the inquiry.

This precaution was useless, however, for in a moment Mildred said, from the delicately draped couch, where she lay at the open window, "Kate Theory, don't be affected!"

"Perhaps it's for you he comes. I don't see why he should n't; you are far more attractive than I, and you have a great deal more to say. How can he help seeing that you are the cleverest of the clever? You can talk to him of everything: of the dates of the different eruptions, of the statues and bronzes in the Museum, which you have never seen, poor darling! but which you know more about than he does, than any one does. What was it you began on last time? Oh, yes, you poured forth floods about Magna Graecia. And then--and then--" But with this Kate Theory paused; she felt it would n't do to speak the words that had risen to her lips. That her sister was as beautiful as a saint, and as delicate and refined as an angel,--she had been on the point of saying something of that sort. But Mildred's beauty and delicacy were the fairness of mortal disease, and to praise her for her refinement was simply to intimate that she had the tenuity of a consumptive. So, after she had checked herself, the younger girl--she was younger only by a year or two--simply kissed her tenderly, and settled the knot of the lace handkerchief that was tied over her head. Mildred knew what she had been going to say,--knew why she had stopped. Mildred knew everything, without ever leaving her room, or leaving, at least, that little salon of their own, at the *pension*, which she had made so pretty by simply lying there, at the window that had the view of the bay and of Vesuvius, and telling Kate how to arrange and rearrange everything. Since it began to be plain that Mildred must spend her small remnant of years altogether in warm climates, the lot of the two sisters had been cast in the ungarnished hostleries of southern Europe. Their little sitting-room was sure to be very ugly, and Mildred was never happy till it was rearranged. Her sister fell to work, as a matter of course, the first day, and changed the place of all the tables, sofas, chairs, till every combination had been tried, and the invalid thought at last that there was a little effect. Kate Theory had a taste of her own, and her ideas were not always the same as her sister's; but she did whatever Mildred liked, and if the poor girl had told her to put the doormat on the dining-table, or the clock under the sofa, she would have obeyed without a murmur. Her own ideas, her personal tastes, had been folded up and put away, like garments out of season, in drawers and trunks, with camphor and lavender. They were not, as a general thing, for southern wear, however indispensable to comfort in the climate of New England, where poor Mildred had lost her health. Kate Theory, ever since this event, had lived for her companion, and it was almost an inconvenience for her to think that she was attractive to Captain Benyon. It was as if she had shut up her house and was not in a position to entertain. So long as Mildred should live, her own life was suspended; if there should be any time afterwards, perhaps she would take it up again; but for the present, in answer to any knock at her door, she could only call down from one of her dusty windows that she was not at home. Was it really in these terms she should have to dismiss Captain Benyon? If Mildred said it was for her he came she must perhaps take upon herself such a duty; for, as we have seen, Mildred knew everything, and she must therefore be right. She knew about the statues in the Museum, about the excavations at Pompeii, about the antique splendor of Magna Graecia. She always had some instructive volume on the table beside her sofa, and she had strength enough to hold the book for half an hour at a time. That was about the only strength she had now. The Neapolitan winters had been remarkably soft, but after the first month or two she had been obliged to give up her little walks in the garden. It lay beneath her window like a single enormous bouquet; as early as

May, that year, the flowers were so dense. None of them, however, had a color so intense as the splendid blue of the bay, which filled up all the rest of the view. It would have looked painted, if you had not been able to see the little movement of the waves. Mildred Theory watched them by the hour, and the breathing crest of the volcano, on the other side of Naples, and the great sea-vision of Capri, on the horizon, changing its tint while her eyes rested there, and wondered what would become of her sister after she was gone. Now that Percival was married,—he was their only brother, and from one day to the other was to come down to Naples to show them his new wife, as yet a complete stranger, or revealed only in the few letters she had written them during her wedding tour,—now that Percival was to be quite taken up, poor Kate's situation would be much more grave. Mildred felt that she should be able to judge better, after she should have seen her sister-in-law, how much of a home Kate might expect to find with the pair; but even if Agnes should prove—well, more satisfactory than her letters, it was a wretched prospect for Kate,—this living as a mere appendage to happier people. Maiden aunts were very well, but being a maiden aunt was only a last resource, and Kate's first resources had not even been tried.

Meanwhile the latter young lady wondered as well,—wondered in what book Mildred had read that Captain Benyon was in love with her. She admired him, she thought, but he didn't seem a man that would fall in love with one like that. She could see that he was on his guard; he would n't throw himself away. He thought too much of himself, or at any rate he took too good care of himself,—in the manner of a man to whom something had happened which had given him a lesson. Of course what had happened was that his heart was buried somewhere,—in some woman's grave; he had loved some beautiful girl,—much more beautiful, Kate was sure, than she, who thought herself small and dark,—and the maiden had died, and his capacity to love had died with her. He loved her memory,—that was the only thing he would care for now. He was quiet, gentle, clever, humorous, and very kind in his manner; but if any one save Mildred had said to her that if he came three times a week to Posilippo, it was for anything but to pass his time (he had told them he didn't know another soul in Naples), she would have felt that this was simply the kind of thing—usually so idiotic—that people always thought it necessary to say. It was very easy for him to come; he had the big ship's boat, with nothing else to do; and what could be more delightful than to be rowed across the bay, under a bright awning, by four brown sailors with "Louisiana" in blue letters on their immaculate white shirts, and in gilt letters on their fluttering hat ribbons? The boat came to the steps of the garden of the *pension*, where the orange-trees hung over and made vague yellow balls shine back out of the water. Kate Theory knew all about that, for Captain Benyon had persuaded her to take a turn in the boat, and if they had only had another lady to go with them, he could have conveyed her to the ship, and shown her all over it. It looked beautiful, just a little way off, with the American flag hanging loose in the Italian air. They would have another lady when Agnes should arrive; then Percival would remain with Mildred while they took this excursion. Mildred had stayed alone the day she went in the boat; she had insisted on it, and, of course it was really Mildred who had persuaded her; though now that Kate came to think of it, Captain Benyon had, in his quiet, waiting way—he turned out to be waiting long after you thought he had let a thing pass—said a good deal about the pleasure it would give him. Of course, everything would give pleasure to a man who was so bored. He was keeping the "Louisiana" at Naples, week after week, simply because these were the commodore's orders. There was no work to be done there, and his time was on his hands; but of course the commodore, who had gone to Constantinople with the two other ships, had to be obeyed to the letter, however mysterious his motives. It made no difference that he was a fantastic, grumbling, arbitrary old commodore; only a good while afterwards it occurred to Kate Theory that, for a reserved, correct man, Captain Benyon had given her a considerable proof of confidence, in speaking to her in these terms of his superior officer. If he looked at all hot when he arrived at the *pension*, she offered him a glass of cold "orangeade." Mildred thought this an unpleasant drink,—she called it messy; but Kate adored it, and Captain Benyon always accepted it.

The day I speak of, to change the subject, she called her sister's attention to the extraordinary sharpness of a zigzagging cloud-shadow, on the tinted slope of Vesuvius; but Mildred only remarked in answer that she wished her sister would marry the captain. It was in this familiar way that constant meditation led Miss Theory to speak of him; it shows how constantly she thought of him, for, in general, no one was more ceremonious than she, and the failure of her health had not caused her to relax any form that it was possible to keep up. There was a kind of slim erectness, even in the way she lay on her sofa; and she always received the doctor as if he were calling for the first time.

"I had better wait till he asks me," Kate Theory said. "Dear Milly, if I were to do some of the things you wish me to do, I should shock you very much."

"I wish he would marry you, then. You know there is very little time, if I wish to see it."

"You will never see it, Mildred. I don't see why you should take so for granted that I would accept him."

"You will never meet a man who has so few disagreeable qualities. He is probably not enormously rich. I don't know what is the pay of a captain in the navy—"

"It's a relief to find there is something you don't know," Kate Theory broke in.

"But when I am gone," her sister went on calmly, "when I am gone there will be plenty for both of you."

The younger sister, at this, was silent for a moment; then she exclaimed, "Mildred, you may be out of health, but I

don't see why you should be dreadful!"

"You know that since we have been leading this life we have seen no one we liked better," said Milly. When she spoke of the life they were leading--there was always a soft resignation of regret and contempt in the allusion--she meant the southern winters, the foreign climates, the vain experiments, the lonely waitings, the wasted hours, the interminable rains, the bad food, the pottering, humbugging doctors, the damp *pensions*, the chance encounters, the fitful apparitions, of fellow-travellers.

"Why should n't you speak for yourself alone? I am glad *you* like him, Mildred."

"If you don't like him, why do you give him orangeade?"

At this inquiry Kate began to laugh, and her sister continued,--

"Of course you are glad I like him, my dear. If I did n't like him, and you did, it would n't be satisfactory at all. I can imagine nothing more miserable; I should n't die in any sort of comfort."

Kate Theory usually checked this sort of allusion--she was always too late--with a kiss; but on this occasion she added that it was a long time since Mildred had tormented her so much as she had done to-day. "You will make me hate him," she added.

"Well, that proves you don't already," Milly rejoined; and it happened that almost at this moment they saw, in the golden afternoon, Captain Benyon's boat approaching the steps at the end of the garden. He came that day, and he came two days later, and he came yet once again after an interval equally brief, before Percival Theory arrived, with Mrs. Percival, from Borne. He seemed anxious to crowd into these few days, as he would have said, a good deal of intercourse with the two remarkably nice girls--or nice women, he hardly knew which to call them--whom in the course of a long, idle, rather tedious detention at Naples, he had discovered in the lovely suburb of Posilippo. It was the American consul who had put him into relation with them; the sisters had had to sign, in the consul's presence, some law-papers, transmitted to them by the man of business who looked after their little property in America, and the kindly functionary, taking advantage of the pretext (Captain Benyon happened to come into the consulate as he was starting, indulgently, to wait upon the ladies) to bring together "two parties" who, as he said, ought to appreciate each other, proposed to his fellow-officer in the service of the United States that he should go with him as witness of the little ceremony. He might, of course, take his clerk, but the captain would do much better; and he represented to Benyon that the Miss Theoryses (singular name, wa' n't it?) suffered--he was sure--from a lack of society; also that one of them was very sick, that they were real pleasant and extraordinarily refined, and that the sight of a compatriot, literally draped, as it were, in the national banner, would cheer them up more than most anything, and give them a sense of protection. They had talked to the consul about Benyon's ship, which they could see from their windows, in the distance, at its anchorage. They were the only American ladies then at Naples,--the only residents, at least,--and the captain would n't be doing the polite thing unless he went to pay them his respects. Benyon felt afresh how little it was in his line to call upon strange women; he was not in the habit of hunting up female acquaintance, or of looking out for the soft emotions which the sex only can inspire. He had his reasons for this abstention, and he seldom relaxed it; but the consul appealed to him on rather strong grounds; and he suffered himself to be persuaded. He was far from regretting, during the first weeks at least, an act which was distinctly inconsistent with his great rule,--that of never exposing himself to the chance of seriously caring for an unmarried woman. He had been obliged to make this rule, and had adhered to it with some success. He was fond of women, but he was forced to restrict himself to superficial sentiments. There was no use tumbling into situations from which the only possible issue was a retreat. The step he had taken with regard to poor Miss Theory and her delightful little sister was an exception on which at first he could only congratulate himself. That had been a happy idea of the ruminating old consul; it made Captain Benyon forgive him his hat, his boots, his shirtfront,--a costume which might be considered representative, and the effect of which was to make the observer turn with rapture to a half-naked lazzarone. On either side the acquaintance had helped the time to pass, and the hours he spent at the little *pension* at Posilippo left a sweet--and by no means innutritive--taste behind.

As the weeks went by his exception had grown to look a good deal like a rule; but he was able to remind himself that the path of retreat was always open to him. Moreover, if he should fall in love with the younger girl there would be no great harm, for Kate Theory was in love only with her sister, and it would matter very little to her whether he advanced or retreated. She was very attractive, or rather very attracting. Small, pale, attentive without rigidity, full of pretty curves and quick movements, she looked as if the habit of watching and serving had taken complete possession of her, and was literally a little sister of charity. Her thick black hair was pushed behind her ears, as if to help her to listen, and her clear brown eyes had the smile of a person too full of tact to cany a dull face to a sickbed. She spoke in an encouraging voice, and had soothing and unselfish habits. She was very pretty,--producing a cheerful effect of contrasted black and white, and dressed herself daintily, so that Mildred might have something agreeable to look at. Benyon very soon perceived that there was a fund of good service in her. Her sister had it all now; but poor Miss Theory was fading fast, and then what would become of this precious little force? The answer to such a question that seemed most to the point was that it was none of his business. He was not sick,--at least not physically,--and he was not looking out for a nurse. Such a companion might be a luxury, but was not, as yet, a necessity: The welcome of the two ladies, at first, had been



simple, and he scarcely knew what to call it but sweet; a bright, gentle friendliness remained the tone of their greeting. They evidently liked him to come,—they liked to see his big transatlantic ship hover about those gleaming coasts of exile. The fact of Miss Mildred being always stretched on her couch—in his successive visits to foreign waters Benyon had not unlearned (as why should he?) the pleasant American habit of using the lady's personal name—made their intimacy seem greater, their differences less; it was as if his hostesses had taken him into their confidence and he had been—as the consul would have said—of the same party. Knocking about the salt parts of the globe, with a few feet square on a rolling frigate for his only home, the pretty, flower-decked sitting-room of the quiet American sisters became, more than anything he had hitherto known, his interior. He had dreamed once of having an interior, but the dream had vanished in lurid smoke, and no such vision had come to him again. He had a feeling that the end of this was drawing nigh; he was sure that the advent of the strange brother, whose wife was certain to be disagreeable, would make a difference. That is why, as I have said, he came as often as possible the last week, after he had learned the day on which Percival Theory would arrive. The limits of the exception had been reached.

He had been new to the young ladies at Posilippo, and there was no reason why they should say to each other that he was a very different man from the ingenuous youth who, ten years before, used to wander with Georgina Gressie down vistas of plank fences brushed over with the advertisements of quack medicines. It was natural he should be, and we, who know him, would have found that he had traversed the whole scale of alteration. There was nothing ingenuous in him now; he had the look of experience, of having been seasoned and hardened by the years.

His face, his complexion, were the same; still smooth-shaven and slim, he always passed, at first, for a man scarcely out of his twenties. But his expression was old, and his talk was older still,—the talk of one who had seen much of the world (as indeed he had, to-day), and judged most things for himself, with a humorous scepticism which, whatever concessions it might make, superficially, for the sake of not offending (for instance) two remarkably nice American women, of the kind that had kept most of their illusions, left you with the conviction that the next minute it would go quickly back to its own standpoint. There was a curious contradiction in him; he struck you as serious, and yet he could not be said to take things seriously. This was what made Kate Theory feel so sure that he had lost the object of his affections; and she said to herself that it must have been under circumstances of peculiar sadness, for that was, after all, a frequent accident, and was not usually thought, in itself, a sufficient stroke to make a man a cynic. This reflection, it may be added, was, on the young lady's part, just the least bit acrimonious. Captain Benyon was not a cynic in any sense in which he might have shocked an innocent mind; he kept his cynicism to himself, and was a very clever, courteous, attentive gentleman. If he was melancholy, you knew it chiefly by his jokes, for they were usually at his own expense; and if he was indifferent, it was all the more to his credit that he should have exerted himself to entertain his countrywomen.

The last time he called before the arrival of the expected brother, he found Miss Theory alone, and sitting up, for a wonder, at her window. Kate had driven into Naples to give orders at the hotel for the reception of the travellers, who required accommodation more spacious than the villa at Posilippo (where the two sisters had the best rooms) could offer them; and the sick girl had taken advantage of her absence and of the pretext afforded by a day of delicious warmth, to transfer herself, for the first time in six months, to an arm-chair. She was practising, as she said, for the long carriage-journey to the north, where, in a quiet corner they knew of, on the Lago Maggiore, her summer was to be spent. Eaymond Benyon remarked to her that she had evidently turned the corner and was going to get well, and this gave her a chance to say various things that were on her mind. She had many things on her mind, poor Mildred Theory, so caged and restless, and yet so resigned and patient as she was; with a clear, quick spirit, in the most perfect health, ever reaching forward, to the end of its tense little chain, from her wasted and suffering body; and, in the course of the perfect summer afternoon, as she sat there, exhilarated by the success of her effort to get up, and by her comfortable opportunity, she took her friendly visitor into the confidence of most of her anxieties. She told him, very promptly and positively, that she was not going to get well at all, that she had probably not more than ten months yet to live, and that he would oblige her very much by not forcing her to waste any more breath in contradicting him on that point. Of course she could n't talk much; therefore, she wished to say to him only things that he would not hear from any one else. Such, for instance, was her present secret—Katie's and hers—the secret of their fearing so much that they should n't like Percival's wife, who was not from Boston, but from New York. Naturally, that by itself would be nothing, but from what they had heard of her set—this subject had been explored by their correspondents—they were rather nervous, nervous to the point of not being in the least reassured by the fact that the young lady would bring Percival a fortune. The fortune was a matter of course, for that was just what they had heard about Agnes's circle—that the stamp of money was on all their thoughts and doings. They were very rich and very new and very splashing, and evidently had very little in common with the two Miss Theories, who, moreover, if the truth must be told (and this was a great secret), did not care much for the letters their sister-in-law had hitherto addressed them. She had been at a French boarding-school in New York, and yet (and this was the greatest secret of all) she wrote to them that she had performed a part of the journey through France in *diligance!*

Of course, they would see the next day; Miss Mildred was sure she should know in a moment whether Agnes would like them. She could never have told him all this if her sister had been there, and Captain Benyon must promise never to

reveal to Kate how she had chattered. Kate thought always that they must hide everything, and that even if Agnes should be a dreadful disappointment they must never let any one guess it. And yet Kate was just the one who would suffer, in the coming years, after she herself had gone. Their brother had been everything to them, but now it would all be different. Of course it was not to be expected that he should have remained a bachelor for their sake; she only wished he had waited till she was dead and Kate was married. One of these events, it was true, was much less sure than the other; Kate might never marry,--much as she wished she would! She was quite morbidly unselfish, and did not think she had a right to have anything of her own--not even a husband. Miss Mildred talked a good while about Kate, and it never occurred to her that she might bore Captain Benyon. She did not, in point of fact; he had none of the trouble of wondering why this poor, sick, worried lady was trying to push her sister down his throat. Their peculiar situation made everything natural, and the tone she took with him now seemed only what their pleasant relation for the last three months led up to. Moreover, he had an excellent reason for not being bored: the fact, namely, that after all, with regard to her sister, Miss Mildred appeared to him to keep back more than she uttered. She didn't tell him the great thing,--she had nothing to say as to what that charming girl thought of Eaymond Benyon. The effect of their interview, indeed, was to make him shrink from knowing, and he felt that the right thing for him would be to get back into his boat, which was waiting at the garden steps, before Kate Theory should return from Naples. It came over him, as he sat there, that he was far too interested in knowing what this young lady thought of him. She might think what she pleased; it could make no difference to him. The best opinion in the world--if it looked out at him from her tender eyes--would not make him a whit more free or more happy. Women of that sort were not for him, women whom one could not see familiarly without falling in love with them, and whom it was no use to fall in love with unless one was ready to marry them. The light of the summer afternoon, and of Miss Mildred's pure spirit, seemed suddenly to flood the whole subject. He saw that he was in danger, and he had long since made up his mind that from this particular peril it was not only necessary but honorable to flee. He took leave of his hostess before her sister reappeared, and had the courage even to say to her that he would not come back often after that; they would be so much occupied by their brother and his wife! As he moved across the glassy bay, to the rhythm of the oars, he wished either that the sisters would leave Naples or that his confounded commodore would send for him.

When Kate returned from her errand, ten minutes later, Milly told her of the captain's visit, and added that she had never seen anything so sudden as the way he left her. "He would not wait for you, my dear, and he said he thought it more than likely that he should never see us again. It is as if he thought you were going to die too!"

"Is his ship called away?" Kate Theory asked.

"He did not tell me so; he said we should be so busy with Percival and Agnes."

"He has got tired of us,--that's all. There's nothing wonderful in that; I knew he would."

Mildred said nothing for a moment; she was watching her sister, who was very attentively arranging some flowers. "Yes, of course, we are very dull, and he is like everybody else."

"I thought you thought he was so wonderful," said Kate, "and so fond of us."

"So he is; I am surer of that than ever. That's why he went away so abruptly."

Kate looked at her sister now. "I don't understand."

"Neither do I, darling. But you will, one of these days."

"How if he never comes back?"

"Oh, he will--after a while--when I am gone. Then he will explain; that, at least, is clear to me."

"My poor precious, as if I cared!" Kate Theory exclaimed, smiling as she distributed her flowers. She carried them to the window, to place them near her sister, and here she paused a moment, her eye caught by an object, far out in the bay, with which she was not unfamiliar. Mildred noticed its momentary look, and followed its direction.

"It's the captain's gig going back to the ship," Milly said. "It's so still one can almost hear the oars."

Kate Theory turned away, with a sudden, strange violence, a movement and exclamation which, the very next minute, as she became conscious of what she had said,--and, still more, of what she felt--smote her own heart (as it flushed her face) with surprise, and with the force of a revelation: "I wish it would sink him to the bottom of the sea!"

Her sister stared, then caught her by the dress, as she passed from her, drawing her back with a weak hand. "Oh, my dearest, my poorest!" And she pulled Kate down and down toward her, so that the girl had nothing for it but to sink on her knees and bury her face in Mildred's lap. If that ingenious invalid did not know everything now, she knew a great deal.

## PART III.

### V.

Mrs. Percival proved very pretty. It is more gracious to begin with this declaration, instead of saying that, in the first place, she proved very silly. It took a long day to arrive at the end of her silliness, and the two ladies at Posilippo, even after a week had passed, suspected that they had only skirted its edges. Kate Theory had not spent half an hour in her company before she gave a little private sigh of relief; she felt that a situation which had promised to be embarrassing was now quite clear, was even of a primitive simplicity. She would spend with her sister-in-law, in the coming time, one week in the year; that was all that was mortally possible. It was a blessing that one could see exactly what she was, for in that way the question settled itself. It would have been much more tiresome if Agnes had been a little less obvious; then she would have had to hesitate and consider and weigh one thing against another. She was pretty and silly, as distinctly as an orange is yellow and round; and Kate Theory would as soon have thought of looking to her to give interest to the future as she would have thought of looking to an orange to impart solidity to the prospect of dinner. Mrs. Percival travelled in the hope of meeting her American acquaintance, or of making acquaintance with such Americans as she did meet, and for the purpose of buying mementos for her relations. She was perpetually adding to her store of articles in tortoise-shell, in mother-of-pearl, in olive-wood, in ivory, in filigree, in tartan lacquer, in mosaic; and she had a collection of Roman scarfs and Vénétian beads, which she looked over exhaustively every night before she went to bed. Her conversation bore mainly upon the manner in which she intended to dispose of these accumulations. She was constantly changing about, among each other, the persons to whom they were respectively to be offered. At Borne one of the first things she said to her husband after entering the Coliseum had been: "I guess I will give the ivory work-box to Bessie and the Roman pearls to Aunt Harriet!" She was always hanging over the travellers' book at the hotel; she had it brought up to her, with a cup of chocolate, as soon as she arrived. She searched its pages for the magical name of New York, and she indulged in infinite conjecture as to who the people were--the name was sometimes only a partial cue--who had inscribed it there. What she most missed in Europe, and what she most enjoyed, were the New Yorkers; when she met them she talked about the people in their native city who had "moved" and the streets they had moved to. "Oh, yes, the Drapers are going up town, to Twenty-fourth Street, and the Vanderdeckens are going to be in Twenty-third Street, right back of them. My uncle, Henry Piatt, thinks of building round there." Mrs. Percival Theory was capable of repeating statements like these thirty times over--of lingering on them for hours. She talked largely of herself, of her uncles and aunts, of her clothes--past, present, and future. These articles, in especial, filled her horizon; she considered them with a complacency which might have led you to suppose that she had invented the custom of draping the human form. Her main point of contact with Naples was the purchase of coral; and all the while she was there the word "set"--she used it as if every one would understand--fell with its little, flat, common sound upon the ears of her sisters-in-law, who had no sets of anything. She cared little for pictures and mountains; Alps and Apennines were not productive of New Yorkers, and it was difficult to take an interest in Madonnas who flourished at periods when, apparently, there were no fashions, or, at any rate, no trimmings.

I speak here not only of the impression she made upon her husband's anxious sisters, but of the judgment passed on her (he went so far as that, though it was not obvious how it mattered to him) by Raymond Benyon. And this brings me at a jump (I confess it's a very small one) to the fact that he did, after all, go back to Posilippo. He stayed away for nine days, and at the end of this time Percival Theory called upon him, to thank him for the civility he had shown his kinswomen. He went to this gentleman's hotel, to return his visit, and there he found Miss Kate, in her brother's sitting-room. She had come in by appointment from the villa, and was going with the others to seek the royal palace, which she had not yet had an opportunity to inspect. It was proposed (not by Kate), and presently arranged, that Captain Benyon should go with them, and he accordingly walked over marble floors for half an hour, exchanging conscious commonplaces with the woman he loved. For this truth had rounded itself during those nine days of absence; he discovered that there was nothing particularly sweet in his life when once Kate Theory had been excluded from it. He had stayed away to keep himself from falling in love with her; but this expedient was in itself illuminating, for he perceived that, according to the vulgar adage, he was locking the stable door after the horse had been stolen. As he paced the deck of his ship and looked toward Posilippo, his tenderness crystallized; the thick, smoky flame of a sentiment that knew itself forbidden and was angry at the knowledge, now danced upon the fuel of his good resolutions. The latter, it must be said, resisted, declined to be consumed. He determined that he would see Kate Theory again, for a time, just sufficient to bid her good-by, and to add a little explanation. He thought of his explanation very lovingly, but it may not strike the reader as a happy inspiration. To part from her dryly, abruptly, without an

allusion to what he might have said if everything had been different,—that would be wisdom, of course, that would be virtue, that would be the line of a practical man, of a man who kept himself well in hand. But it would be virtue terribly unrewarded,—it would be virtue too austere for a person who sometimes flattered himself that he had taught himself stoicism. The minor luxury tempted him irresistibly, since the larger—that of happy love—was denied him; the luxury of letting the girl know that it would not be an accident—oh, not at all—that they should never meet again. She might easily think it was, and thinking it was would doubtless do her no harm. But this would not give him his pleasure,—the Platonic satisfaction of expressing to her at the same time his belief that they might have made each other happy, and the necessity of his renunciation. That, probably, wouldn't hurt her either, for she had given him no proof whatever that she cared for him. The nearest approach to it was the way she walked beside him now, sweet and silent, without the least reference to his not having been back to the villa. The place was cool and dusky, the blinds were drawn, to keep out the light and noise, and the little party wandered through the high saloons, where precious marbles and the gleam of gilding and satin made reflections in the rich dimness. Here and there the cicerone, in slippers, with Neapolitan familiarity, threw open a shutter to show off a picture on a tapestry. He strolled in front with Percival Theory and his wife, while this lady, drooping silently from her husband's arm as they passed, felt the stuff of the curtains and the sofas. When he caught her in these experiments, the cicerone, in expressive deprecation, clasped his hands and lifted his eyebrows; whereupon Mrs. Theory exclaimed to her husband, "Oh, bother his old king!" It was not striking to Captain Benyon why Percival Theory had married the niece of Mr. Henry Piatt. He was less interesting than his sisters,—a smooth, cool, correct young man, who frequently took out a pencil and did a little arithmetic on the back of a letter. He sometimes, in spite of his correctness, chewed a toothpick, and he missed the American papers, which he used to ask for in the most unlikely places. He was a Bostonian converted to New York; a very special type.

"Is it settled when you leave Naples?" Benyon asked of Kate Theory.

"I think so; on the twenty-fourth. My brother has been very kind; he has lent us his carriage, which is a large one, so that Mildred can lie down. He and Agnes will take another; but, of course, we shall travel together."

"I wish to Heaven I were going with you?" Captain Benyon said. He had given her the opportunity to respond, but she did not take it; she merely remarked, with a vague laugh, that of course he couldn't take his ship over the Apennines. "Yes, there is always my ship," he went on. "I am afraid that in future it will carry me far away from you."

They were alone in one of the royal apartments; their companions had passed, in advance of them, into the adjoining room. Benyon and his fellow-visitor had paused beneath one of the immense chandeliers of glass, which in the clear, colored gloom (through it one felt the strong outer light of Italy beating in) suspended its twinkling drops from the decorated vault. They looked round them confusedly, made shy for the moment by Benyon's having struck a note more serious than any that had hitherto sounded between them, looked at the sparse furniture, draped in white overalls, at the scaggiola floor, in which the great cluster of crystal pendants seemed to shine again.

"You are master of your ship. Can't you sail it as you like?" Kate Theory asked, with a smile.

"I am not master of anything. There is not a man in the world less free. I am a slave. I am a victim."

She looked at him with kind eyes; something in his voice suddenly made her put away all thought of the defensive airs that a girl, in certain situations, is expected to assume. She perceived that he wanted to make her understand something, and now her only wish was to help him to say it. "You are not happy," she murmured, simply, her voice dying away in a kind of wonderment at this reality.

The gentle touch of the words—it was as if her hand had stroked his cheek—seemed to him the sweetest thing he had ever known. "No, I am not happy, because I am not free. If I were—if I were, I would give up my ship. I would give up everything, to follow you. I can't explain; that is part of the hardness of it. I only want you to know it,—that if certain things were different, if everything was different, I might tell you that I believe I should have a right to speak to you. Perhaps some day it will change; but probably then it will be too late. Meanwhile, I have no right of any kind. I don't want to trouble you, and I don't ask of you—anything! It is only to have spoken just once. I don't make you understand, of course. I am afraid I seem to you rather a brute,—perhaps even a humbug. Don't think of it now,—don't try to understand. But some day, in the future, remember what I have said to you, and how we stood here, in this strange old place, alone! Perhaps it will give you a little pleasure."

Kate Theory began by listening to him with visible eagerness; but in a moment she turned away her eyes. "I am very sorry for you," she said, gravely.

"Then you do understand enough?"

"I shall think of what you have said, in the future."

Benyon's lips formed the beginning of a word of tenderness, which he instantly suppressed; and in a different tone, with a bitter smile and a sad shake of the head, raising his arms a moment and letting them fall, he said: "It won't hurt any one, your remembering this!"

"I don't know whom you mean." And the girl, abruptly, began to walk to the end of the room. He made no attempt to tell her whom he meant, and they proceeded together in silence till they overtook their companions.

There were several pictures in the neighboring room, and Percival Theory and his wife had stopped to look at one of them, of which the cicerone announced the title and the authorship as Benyon came up. It was a modern portrait of a Bourbon princess, a woman young, fair, handsome, covered with jewels. Mrs. Percival appeared to be more struck with it than with anything the palace had yet offered to her sight, while her sister-in-law walked to the window, which the custodian had opened, to look out into the garden. Benyon noticed this; he was conscious that he had given the girl something to reflect upon, and his ears burned a little as he stood beside Mrs. Percival and looked up, mechanically, at the royal lady. He already repented a little of what he had said, for, after all, what was the use? And he hoped the others wouldn't observe that he had been making love.

"Gracious, Percival! Do you see who she looks like?" Mrs. Theory said to her husband.

"She looks like a woman who has run up a big bill at Tiffany's," this gentleman answered.

"She looks like my sister-in-law; the eyes, the mouth, the way the hair's done,--the whole thing."

"Which do you mean? You have got about a dozen."

"Why, Georgina, of course,--Georgina Roy. She's awfully like."

"Do you call *her* your sister-in-law?" Percival Theory asked. "You must want very much to claim her."

"Well, she's handsome enough. You have got to invent some new name, then. Captain Benyon, what do you call your brother-in-law's second wife?" Mrs. Percival continued, turning to her neighbor, who still stood staring at the portrait. At first he had looked without seeing; then sight, and hearing as well, became quick. They were suddenly peopled with thrilling recognitions. The Bourbon princess--the eyes, the mouth, the way the hair was done; these things took on an identity, and the gaze of the painted face seemed to fasten itself to his own. But who in the world was Georgina Roy, and what was this talk about sisters-in-law? He turned to the little lady at his side a countenance unexpectedly puzzled by the problem she had airily presented to him.

"Your brother-in-law's second wife? That's rather complicated."

"Well, of course, he need n't have married again?" said Mrs. Percival, with a small sigh.

"Whom did he marry?" asked Benyon, staring.

Percival Theory had turned away. "Oh, if you are going into her relationships!" he murmured, and joined his sister at the brilliant window, through which, from the distance, the many-voiced uproar of Naples came in.

"He married first my sister Dora, and she died five years ago. Then he married *her*," and Mrs. Percival nodded at the princess.

Benyon's eyes went back to the portrait; he could see what she meant--it stared out at him. "Her? Georgina?"

"Georgina Gressie. Gracious, do you know her?"

It was very distinct--that answer of Mrs. Percival's, and the question that followed it as well. But he had the resource of the picture; he could look at it, seem to take it very seriously, though it danced up and down before him. He felt that he was turning red, then he felt that he was turning pale. "The brazen impudence!" That was the way he could speak to himself now of the woman he had once loved, and whom he afterwards hated, till this had died out, too. Then the wonder of it was lost in the quickly growing sense that it would make a difference for him,--a great difference. Exactly what, he didn't see yet; only a difference that swelled and swelled as he thought of it, and caught up, in its expansion, the girl who stood behind him so quietly, looking into the Italian garden.

The custodian drew Mrs. Percival away to show her another princess, before Benyon answered her last inquiry. This gave him time to recover from his first impulse, which had been to answer it with a negative; he saw in a moment that an admission of his acquaintance with Mrs. Roy (Mrs. Roy!--it was prodigious!) was necessarily helping him to learn more. Besides, it needn't be compromising. Very likely Mrs. Percival would hear one day that he had once wanted to marry her. So, when he joined his companions a minute later he remarked that he had known Miss Gressie years before, and had even admired her considerably, but had lost sight of her entirely in later days. She had been a great beauty, and it was a wonder that she had not married earlier. Five years ago, was it? No, it was only two. He had been going to say that in so long a time it would have been singular he should not have heard of it. He had been away from New York for ages; but one always heard of marriages and deaths. This was a proof, though two years was rather long. He led Mrs. Percival insidiously into a further room, in advance of the others, to whom the cicerone returned. She was delighted to talk about her "connections," and she supplied him with every detail he could trust himself now; his self-possession was complete, or, so far as it was wanting, the fault was that of a sudden gayety which he could not, on the spot, have accounted for. Of course it was not very flattering to them--Mrs. Percival's own people--that poor Dora's husband should have consoled himself; but men always did it (talk of widows!) and he had chosen a girl who was--well, very fine-looking, and the sort of successor to Dora that they needn't be ashamed of. She had been awfully admired, and no one had understood why she had waited so long to marry. She had had some affair as a girl,--an engagement to an officer in the army,--and the man had jilted her, or they had quarrelled, or something or other. She was almost an old maid,--well, she was thirty, or very nearly,--but she had done something good now. She was handsomer than ever, and tremendously stylish. William Roy had one of the biggest incomes in the city, and he was quite

affectionate. He had been intensely fond of Dora--he often spoke of her still, at least to her own relations; and her portrait, the last time Mrs. Percival was in his house (it was at a party, after his marriage to Miss Gressie), was still in the front parlor. Perhaps by this time he had had it moved to the back; but she was sure he would keep it somewhere, anyway. Poor Dora had had no children; but Georgina was making that all right,--she had a beautiful boy. Mrs. Percival had what she would have called quite a pleasant chat with Captain Benyon about Mrs. Roy. Perhaps *he* was the officer--she never thought of that? He was sure he had never jilted her? And he had never quarrelled with a lady? Well, he must be different from most men.

He certainly had the air of being so, before he parted that afternoon with Kate Theory. This young lady, at least, was free to think him wanting in that consistency which is supposed to be a distinctively masculine virtue. An hour before, he had taken an eternal farewell of her, and now he was alluding to future meetings, to future visits, proposing that, with her sister-in-law, she should appoint an early day for coming to see the "Louisiana." She had supposed she understood him, but it would appear now that she had not understood him at all. His manner had changed, too. More and more off his guard, Raymond Benyon was not aware how much more hopeful an expression it gave him, his irresistible sense that somehow or other this extraordinary proceeding of his wife's would set him free. Kate Theory felt rather weary and mystified,--all the more for knowing that henceforth Captain Benyon's variations would be the most important thing in life for her.

This officer, on his ship in the bay, lingered very late on deck that night,--lingered there, indeed, under the warm southern sky, in which the stars glittered with a hot, red light, until the early dawn began to show. He smoked cigar after cigar, he walked up and down by the hour, he was agitated by a thousand reflections, he repeated to himself that it made a difference,--an immense difference; but the pink light had deepened in the east before he had discovered in what the diversity consisted. By that time he saw it clearly,--it consisted in Georgina's being in his power now, in place of his being in hers. He laughed as he sat there alone in the darkness at the thought of what she had done. It had occurred to him more than once that she would do it,--he believed her capable of anything; but the accomplished fact had a freshness of comicality. He thought of Mr. William Roy, of his big income, of his being "quite affectionate," of his blooming son and heir, of his having found such a worthy successor to poor Mrs. Dora. He wondered whether Georgina had happened to mention to him that she had a husband living, but was strongly of the belief that she had not. Why should she, after all? She had neglected to mention it to so many others. He had thought he knew her, in so many years,--that he had nothing more to learn about her; but this ripe stroke revived his sense of her audacity. Of course it was what she had been waiting for, and if she had not done it sooner it was because she had hoped he would be lost at sea in one of his long cruises and relieve her of the necessity of a crime. How she must hate him to-day for not having been lost, for being alive, for continuing to put her in the wrong! Much as she hated him, however, his own loathing was at least a match for hers. She had done him the foulest of wrongs,--she had ravaged his life. That he should ever detest in this degree a woman whom he had once loved as he loved her, he would not have thought possible in his innocent younger years. But he would not have thought it possible then that a woman should be such a cold-blooded devil as she had been. His love had perished in his rage,--his blinding, impotent rage at finding that he had been duped, and measuring his impotence. When he learned, years before, from Mrs. Portico, what she had done with her baby, of whose entrance into life she herself had given him no intimation, he felt that he was face to face with a full revelation of her nature. Before that it had puzzled him; it had amazed him; his relations with her were bewildering, stupefying. But when, after obtaining, with difficulty and delay, a leave of absence from Government, and betaking himself to Italy to look for the child and assume possession of it, he had encountered absolute failure and defeat,--then the case presented itself to him more simply. He perceived that he had mated himself with a creature who just happened to be a monster, a human exception altogether. That was what he could n't pardon--her conduct about the child; never, never, never! To him she might have done what she chose,--dropped him, pushed him out into eternal cold, with his hands fast tied,--and he would have accepted it, excused her almost, admitted that it had been his business to mind better what he was about. But she had tortured him through the poor little irrecoverable son whom he had never seen, through the heart and the vitals that she had not herself, and that he had to have, poor wretch, for both of them!

All his efforts for years had been to forget these horrible months, and he had cut himself off from them so that they seemed at times to belong to the life of another person. But to-night he lived them over again; he retraced the different gradations of darkness through which he had passed, from the moment, so soon after his extraordinary marriage, when it came over him that she already repented, and meant, if possible, to elude all her obligations. This was the moment when he saw why she had reserved herself--in the strange vow she extracted from him--an open door for retreat; the moment, too, when her having had such an inspiration (in the midst of her momentary good faith, if good faith it had ever been) struck him as a proof of her essential depravity. What he had tried to forget came back to him: the child that was not his child produced for him when he fell upon that squalid nest of peasants in the Genoese country; and then the confessions, retractations, contradictions, lies, terrors, threats, and general bottomless, baffling baseness of every one in the place. The child was gone; that had been the only definite thing. The woman who had taken it to nurse had a dozen different stories,--her husband had as many,--and every one in the village had a hundred more. Georgina had been sending money,--she had managed, apparently, to send a good deal,--and the whole country seemed to have been

living on it and making merry. At one moment the baby had died and received a most expensive burial; at another he had been intrusted (for more healthy air, Santissima Madonna!) to the woman's cousin in another village. According to a version, which for a day or two Benyon had inclined to think the least false, he had been taken by the cousin (for his beauty's sake) to Genoa (when she went for the first time in her life to the town to see her daughter in service there), and had been confided for a few hours to a third woman, who was to keep him while the cousin walked about the streets, but who, having no child of her own, took such a fancy to him that she refused to give him up, and a few days later left the place (she was a Pisana) never to be heard of more. The cousin had forgotten her name,--it had happened six months before. Benyon spent a year looking up and down Italy for his child, and inspecting hundreds of swaddled infants, impenetrable candidates for recognition. Of course he could only get further and further from real knowledge, and his search was arrested by the conviction that it was making him mad. He set his teeth and made up his mind (or tried to) that the baby had died in the hands of its nurse. This was, after all, much the likeliest supposition, and the woman had maintained it, in the hope of being rewarded for her candor, quite as often as she had asseverated that it was still, somewhere, alive, in the hope of being remunerated for her good news. It may be imagined with what sentiments toward his wife Benyon had emerged from this episode. To-night his memory went further back,--back to the beginning and to the days when he had had to ask himself, with all the crudity of his first surprise, what in the name of wantonness she had wished to do with him. The answer to this speculation was so old,--it had dropped so out of the line of recurrence,--that it was now almost new again. Moreover, it was only approximate, for, as I have already said, he could comprehend such conduct as little at the end as at the beginning. She had found herself on a slope which her nature forced her to descend to the bottom. She did him the honor of wishing to enjoy his society, and she did herself the honor of thinking that their intimacy--however brief--must have a certain consecration. She felt that, with him, after his promise (he would have made any promise to lead her on), she was secure,--secure as she had proved to be, secure as she must think herself now. That security had helped her to ask herself, after the first flush of passion was over, and her native, her twice-inherited worldliness had had time to open its eyes again, why she should keep faith with a man whose deficiencies (as a husband before the world--another affair) had been so scientifically exposed to her by her parents. So she had simply determined not to keep faith; and her determination, at least, she did keep.

By the time Benyon turned in he had satisfied himself, as I say, that Georgina was now in his power; and this seemed to him such an improvement in his situation that he allowed himself (for the next ten days) a license which made Kate Theory almost as happy as it made her sister, though she pretended to understand it far less. Mildred sank to her rest, or rose to fuller comprehensions, within the year, in the Isle of Wight, and Captain Benyon, who had never written so many letters as since they left Naples, sailed westward about the same time as the sweet survivor. For the "Louisiana" at last was ordered home.

## VI.

Certainly, I will see you if you come, and you may appoint any day or hour you like. I should have seen you with pleasure any time these last years. Why should we not be friends, as we used to be? Perhaps we shall be yet. I say "perhaps" only, on purpose,--because your note is rather vague about your state of mind. Don't come with any idea about making me nervous or uncomfortable. I am not nervous by nature, thank Heaven, and I won't--I positively won't (do you hear, dear Captain Benyon?)--be uncomfortable. I have been so (it served me right) for years and years; but I am very happy now. To remain so is the very definite intention of, yours ever,

Georgina Roy.

This was the answer Benyon received to a short letter that he despatched to Mrs. Roy after his return to America. It was not till he had been there some weeks that he wrote to her. He had been occupied in various ways: he had had to look after his ship; he had had to report at Washington; he had spent a fortnight with his mother at Portsmouth, N. H.; and he had paid a visit to Kate Theory in Boston. She herself was paying visits, she was staying with various relatives and friends. She had more color--it was very delicately rosy--than she had had of old, in spite of her black dress; and the effect of looking at him seemed to him to make her eyes grow still prettier. Though sisterless now, she was not without duties, and Benyon could easily see that life would press hard on her unless some one should interfere. Every one regarded her as just the person to do certain things. Every one thought she could do everything, because she had nothing else to do. She used to read to the blind, and, more onerously, to the deaf. She looked after other people's children while the parents attended anti-slavery conventions.

She was coming to New York later to spend a week at her brother's, but beyond this she didn't know what she should do. Benyon felt it to be awkward that he should not be able, just now, to tell her; and this had much to do with his coming to the point, for he accused himself of having rather hung fire. Coming to the point, for Benyon, meant writing a note to Mrs. Roy (as he must call her), in which he asked whether she would see him if he should present himself. The

missive was short; it contained, in addition to what I have noted, little more than the remark that he had something of importance to say to her. Her reply, which we have just read, was prompt. Benyon designated an hour, and the next day rang the doorbell of her big modern house, whose polished windows seemed to shine defiance at him.

As he stood on the steps, looking up and down the straight vista of the Fifth Avenue, he perceived that he was trembling a little, that *he* was nervous, if she was not. He was ashamed of his agitation, and he addressed himself a very stern reprimand. Afterwards he saw that what had made him nervous was not any doubt of the goodness of his cause, but his revived sense (as he drew near her) of his wife's hardness,—her capacity for insolence. He might only break himself against that, and the prospect made him feel helpless. She kept him waiting for a long time after he had been introduced; and as he walked up and down her drawing-room, an immense, florid, expensive apartment, covered with blue satin, gilding, mirrors and bad frescos, it came over him as a certainty that her delay was calculated. She wished to annoy him, to weary him; she was as ungenerous as she was unscrupulous. It never occurred to him that in spite of the bold words of her note, she, too, might be in a tremor, and if any one in their secret had suggested that she was afraid to meet him, he would have laughed at this idea. This was of bad omen for the success of his errand; for it showed that he recognized the ground of her presumption,—his having the superstition of old promises. By the time she appeared, he was flushed,—very angry. She closed the door behind her, and stood there looking at him, with the width of the room between them.

The first emotion her presence excited was a quick sense of the strange fact that, after all these years of loneliness, such a magnificent person should be his wife. For she was magnificent, in the maturity of her beauty, her head erect, her complexion splendid, her auburn tresses undimmed, a certain plenitude in her very glance. He saw in a moment that she wished to seem to him beautiful, she had endeavored to dress herself to the best effect. Perhaps, after all, it was only for this she had delayed; she wished to give herself every possible touch. For some moments they said nothing; they had not stood face to face for nearly ten years, and they met now as adversaries. No two persons could possibly be more interested in taking each other's measure. It scarcely belonged to Georgina, however, to have too much the air of timidity; and after a moment, satisfied, apparently, that she was not to receive a broadside, she advanced, slowly rubbing her jewelled hands and smiling. He wondered why she should smile, what thought was in her mind. His impressions followed each other with extraordinary quickness of pulse, and now he saw, in addition to what he had already perceived, that she was waiting to take her cue,—she had determined on no definite line. There was nothing definite about her but her courage; the rest would depend upon him. As for her courage, it seemed to glow in the beauty which grew greater as she came nearer, with her eyes on his and her fixed smile; to be expressed in the very perfume that accompanied her steps. By this time he had got still a further impression, and it was the strangest of all. She was ready for anything, she was capable of anything, she wished to surprise him with her beauty, to remind him that it belonged, after all, at the bottom of everything, to him. She was ready to bribe him, if bribing should be necessary. She had carried on an intrigue before she was twenty; it would be more, rather than less, easy for her, now that she was thirty. All this and more was in her cold, living eyes, as in the prolonged silence they engaged themselves with his; but I must not dwell upon it, for reasons extraneous to the remarkable fact She was a truly amazing creature.

"Raymond!" she said, in a low voice, a voice which might represent either a vague greeting or an appeal.

He took no heed of the exclamation, but asked her why she had deliberately kept him waiting,—as if she had not made a fool enough of him already. She could not suppose it was for his pleasure he had come into the house.

She hesitated a moment,—still with her smile. "I must tell you I have a son,—the dearest little boy. His nurse happened to be engaged for the moment, and I had to watch him. I am more devoted to him than you might suppose."

He fell back from her a few steps. "I wonder if you are insane," he murmured.

"To allude to my child? Why do you ask me such questions then? I tell you the simple truth. I take every care of this one. I am older and wiser. The other one was a complete mistake; he had no right to exist."

"Why didn't you kill him then with your own hands, instead of that torture?"

"Why did not I kill myself? That question would be more to the point. You are looking wonderfully well," she broke off in another tone; "had not we better sit down?"

"I did not come here for the advantage of conversation," Benyon answered. And he was going on, but she interrupted him—

"You came to say something dreadful, very likely; though I hoped you would see it was better not. But just tell me this before you begin. Are you successful, are you happy? It has been so provoking, not knowing more about you."

There was something in the manner in which this was said that caused him to break into a loud laugh; whereupon she added,—

"Your laugh is just what it used to be. How it comes back to me! You *have* improved in appearance," she went on.

She had seated herself, though he remained standing; and she leaned back in a low, deep chair, looking up at him, with her arms folded. He stood near her and over her, as it were, dropping his baffled eyes on her, with his hand resting on the corner of the chimney-piece. "Has it never occurred to you that I may deem myself absolved from the promise



made you before I married you?"

"Very often, of course. But I have instantly dismissed the idea. How can you be 'absolved'? One promises, or one doesn't. I attach no meaning to that, and neither do you." And she glanced down to the front of her dress.

Benyon listened, but he went on as if he had not heard her. "What I came to say to you is this: that I should like your consent to my bringing a suit for divorce against you."

"A suit for divorce? I never thought of that."

"So that I may marry another woman. I can easily obtain a divorce on the ground of your desertion."

She stared a moment, then her smile solidified, as it were, and she looked grave; but he could see that her gravity, with her lifted eyebrows, was partly assumed. "Ah, you want to marry another woman!" she exclaimed, slowly, thoughtfully. He said nothing, and she went on: "Why don't you do as I have done?"

"Because I don't want my children to be--"

Before he could say the words she sprang up, checking him with a cry. "Don't say it; it is n't necessary! Of course I know what you mean; but they won't be if no one knows it."

"I should object to knowing it myself; it's enough for me to know it of yours."

"Of course I have been prepared for your saying that"

"I should hope so!" Benyon exclaimed. "You may be a bigamist if it suits you, but to me the idea is not attractive. I wish to marry--" and, hesitating a moment, with his slight stammer, he repeated, "I wish to marry--"

"Marry, then, and have done with it!" cried Mrs. Roy.

He could already see that he should be able to extract no consent from her; he felt rather sick. "It's extraordinary to me that you should n't be more afraid of being found out," he said after a moment's reflection. "There are two or three possible accidents."

"How do you know how much afraid I am? I have thought of every accident, in dreadful nights. How do you know what my life is, or what it has been all these miserable years?"

"You look wasted and worn, certainly."

"Ah, don't compliment me!" Georgina exclaimed. "If I had never known you--if I had not been through all this--I believe I should have been handsome. When did you hear of my marriage? Where were you at the time?"

"At Naples, more than six months ago, by a mere chance."

"How strange that it should have taken you so long! Is the lady a Neapolitan? They don't mind what they do over there."

"I have no information to give you beyond what I just said," Benyon rejoined. "My life does n't in the least regard you."

"Ah, but it does from the moment I refuse to let you divorce me."

"You refuse?" Benyon said softly.

"Don't look at me that way! You have n't advanced so rapidly as I used to think you would; you haven't distinguished yourself so much," she went on, irrelevantly.

"I shall be promoted commodore one of these days," Benyon answered. "You don't know much about it, for my advancement has already been very exceptionally rapid." He blushed as soon as the words were out of his mouth. She gave a light laugh on seeing it; but he took up his hat and added: "Think over a day or two what I have proposed to you. Think of the temper in which I ask it."

"The temper?" she stared. "Pray, what have you to do with temper?" And as he made no reply, smoothing his hat with his glove, she went on: "Years ago, as much as you please I you had a good right, I don't deny, and you raved, in your letters, to your heart's content That's why I would n't see you; I did n't wish to take it full in the face. But that's all over now, time is a healer, you have cooled off, and by your own admission you have consoled yourself. Why do you talk to me about temper! What in the world have I done to you, but let you alone?"

"What do you call this business?" Benyon asked, with his eye flashing all over the room.

"Ah, excuse me, that doesn't touch you,--it's my affair. I leave you your liberty, and I can live as I like. If I choose to live in this way, it may be queer (I admit it is, awfully), but you have nothing to say to it. If I am willing to take the risk, you may be. If I am willing to play such an infernal trick upon a confiding gentleman (I will put it as strongly as you possibly could), I don't see what you have to say to it except that you are tremendously glad such a woman as that is n't known to be your wife!" She had been cool and deliberate up to this time; but with these words her latent agitation broke out "Do you think I have been happy? Do you think I have enjoyed existence? Do you see me freezing up into a stark old maid?"

"I wonder you stood out so long!" said Benyon.

"I wonder I did. They were bad years."

"I have no doubt they were!"

"You could do as you pleased," Georgina went on. "You roamed about the world; you formed charming relations. I am delighted to hear it from your own lips. Think of my going back to my father's house--that family vault--and living there, year after year, as Miss Gressie! If you remember my father and mother--they are round in Twelfth Street, just the same--you must admit that I paid for my folly!"

"I have never understood you; I don't understand you now," said Benyon.

She looked at him a moment. "I adored you."

"I could damn you with a word!" he went on.

The moment he had spoken she grasped his arm and held up her other hand, as if she were listening to a sound outside the room. She had evidently had an inspiration, and she carried it into instant effect. She swept away to the door, flung it open, and passed into the hall, whence her voice came back to Benyon as she addressed a person who was apparently her husband. She had heard him enter the house at his habitual hour, after his long morning at business; the closing of the door of the vestibule had struck her ear. The parlor was on a level with the hall, and she greeted him without impediment. She asked him to come in and be introduced to Captain Benyon, and he responded with due solemnity. She returned in advance of him, her eyes fixed upon Benyon and lighted with defiance, her whole face saying to him, vividly: "Here is your opportunity; I give it to you with my own hands. Break your promise and betray me if you dare! You say you can damn me with a word: speak the word and let us see!"

Benyon's heart beat faster, as he felt that it was indeed a chance; but half his emotion came from the spectacle--magnificent in its way--of her unparalleled impudence. A sense of all that he had escaped in not having had to live with her rolled over him like a wave, while he looked strangely at Mr. Roy, to whom this privilege had been vouchsafed. He saw in a moment his successor had a constitution that would carry it. Mr. Roy suggested squareness and solidity; he was a broadbased, comfortable, polished man, with a surface in which the rank tendrils of irritation would not easily obtain a foothold. He had a broad, blank face, a capacious mouth, and a small, light eye, to which, as he entered, he was engaged in adjusting a double gold-rimmed glass. He approached Benyon with a prudent, civil, punctual air, as if he habitually met a good many gentlemen in the course of business, and though, naturally, this was not that sort of occasion he was not a man to waste time in preliminaries. Benyon had immediately the impression of having seen him--or his equivalent--a thousand times before. He was middle-aged, fresh-colored, whiskered, prosperous, indefinite. Georgina introduced them to each other. She spoke of Benyon as an old friend whom she had known long before she had known Mr. Roy, who had been very kind to her years ago, when she was a girl.

"He's in the navy. He has just come back from a long cruise."

Mr. Roy shook hands,--Benyon gave him his before he knew it,--said he was very happy, smiled, looked at Benyon from head to foot, then at Georgina, then round the room, then back at Benyon again,--at Benyon, who stood there, without sound or movement, with a dilated eye, and a pulse quickened to a degree of which Mr. Roy could have little idea. Georgina made some remark about their sitting down, but William Roy replied that he had n't time for that,--if Captain Benyon would excuse him. He should have to go straight into the library, and write a note to send back to his office, where, as he just remembered, he had neglected to give, in leaving the place, an important direction.

"You can wait a moment, surely," Georgina said. "Captain Benyon wants so much to see you."

"Oh, yes, my dear; I can wait a minute, and I can come back."

Benyon saw, accordingly, that he was waiting, and that Georgina was waiting too. Each was waiting for him to say something, though they were waiting for different things. Mr. Roy put his hands behind him, balanced himself on his toes, hoped that Captain Benyon had enjoyed his cruise,--though he should n't care much for the navy himself,--and evidently wondered at the stolidity of his wife's visitor. Benyon knew he was speaking, for he indulged in two or three more observations, after which he stopped. But his meaning was not present to our hero. This personage was conscious of only one thing, of his own momentary power,--of everything that hung on his lips; all the rest swam before him; there was vagueness in his ears and eyes. Mr. Roy stopped, as I say, and there was a pause, which seemed to Benyon of tremendous length. He knew, while it lasted, that Georgina was as conscious as himself that he felt his opportunity, that he held it there in his hand, weighing it noiselessly in the palm, and that she braved and scorned, or, rather, that she enjoyed, the danger. He asked himself whether he should be able to speak if he were to try, and then he knew that he should not, that the words would stick in his throat, that he should make sounds that would dishonor his cause. There was no real choice or decision, then, on Benyon's part; his silence was after all the same old silence, the fruit of other hours and places, the stillness to which Georgina listened, while he felt her eager eyes fairly eat into his face, so that his cheeks burned with the touch of them. The moments stood before him in their turn; each one was distinct. "Ah, well," said Mr. Roy, "perhaps I interrupt,--I'll just dash off my note" Benyon knew that he was rather bewildered, that he was making a pretext, that he was leaving the room; knew presently that Georgina again stood before him alone.

"You are exactly the man I thought you!" she announced, as joyously as if she had won a bet.

"You are the most horrible woman I can imagine. Good God! if I *had* had to live with you!" That is what he said to her in answer.

Even at this she never flushed; she continued to smile in triumph. "He adores me--but what's that to you? Of course you have all the future," she went on; "but I know you as if I had made you!"

Benyon reflected a moment "If he adores you, you are all right. If our divorce is pronounced, you will be free, and then he can marry you properly, which he would like ever so much better."

"It's too touching to hear you reason about it. Fancy me telling such a hideous story--about myself--me--me!" And she touched her breasts with her white fingers.

Benyon gave her a look that was charged with all the sickness of his helpless rage. "You--*you!*" he repeated, as he turned away from her and passed through the door which Mr. Roy had left open.

She followed him into the hall, she was close behind him; he moved before her as she pressed. "There was one more reason," she said. "I would n't be forbidden. It was my hideous pride. That's what prevents me now."

"I don't care what it is," Benyon answered, wearily, with his hand on the knob of the door.

She laid hers on his shoulder; he stood there an instant feeling it, wishing that her loathsome touch gave him the right to strike her to the earth,--to strike her so that she should never rise again.

"How clever you are, and intelligent always,--as you used to be; to feel so perfectly and know so well, without more scenes, that it's hopeless--my ever consenting! If I have, with you, the shame of having made you promise, let me at least have the profit!"

His back had been turned to her, but at this he glanced round. "To hear you talk of shame--!"

"You don't know what I have gone through; but, of course, I don't ask any pity from you. Only I should like to say something kind to you before we part I admire you, esteem you: I don't many people! Who will ever tell her, if you don't? How will she ever know, then? She will be as safe as I am. You know what that is," said Georgina, smiling.

He had opened the door while she spoke, apparently not heeding her, thinking only of getting away from her forever. In reality he heard every word she said, and felt to his marrow the lowered, suggestive tone in which she made him that last recommendation. Outside, on the steps--she stood there in the doorway--he gave her his last look. "I only hope you will die. I shall pray for that!" And he descended into the street and took his way.

It was after this that his real temptation came. Not the temptation to return betrayal for betrayal; that passed away even in a few days, for he simply knew that he couldn't break his promise, that it imposed itself on him as stubbornly as the color of his eyes or the stammer of his lips; it had gone forth into the world to live for itself, and was far beyond his reach or his authority. But the temptation to go through the form of a marriage with Kate Theory, to let her suppose that he was as free as herself, and that their children, if they should have any, would, before the law, have a right to exist,--this attractive idea held him fast for many weeks, and caused him to pass some haggard nights and days. It was perfectly possible she might learn his secret, and that, as no one could either suspect it or have an interest in bringing it to light, they both might live and die in security and honor. This vision fascinated him; it was, I say, a real temptation. He thought of other solutions,--of telling her that he was married (without telling her to whom), and inducing her to overlook such an accident, and content herself with a ceremony in which the world would see no flaw. But after all the contortions of his spirit it remained as clear to him as before that dishonor was in everything but renunciation. So, at last, he renounced. He took two steps which attested this act to himself. He addressed an urgent request to the Secretary of the Navy that he might, with as little delay as possible, be despatched on another long voyage; and he returned to Boston to tell Kate Theory that they must wait. He could explain so little that, say what he would, he was aware that he could not make his conduct seem natural, and he saw that the girl only trusted him,--that she never understood. She trusted without understanding, and she agreed to wait. When the writer of these pages last heard of the pair they were waiting still.