

**RHODA
BROUGHTON**

ALAS! A
NOVEL

Rhoda Broughton

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Alas! A Novel

PART I. Amelia

CHAPTER I

"If you will allow me, I shall have the pleasure of reading aloud to you some passages from 'Mrs. Lirriper's Lodgings,' by Charles Dickens. I do not know much about the book myself, as I have never read it. I dare say that you know more about it than I do; but I am given to understand" (with a glance at the page before him) "that Mrs. Lirriper was a lodging-house-keeper, that she kept lodgings in London. She was a very good sort of woman, I believe" (another hasty glance), "but she sometimes had trouble with her servants. I am told that servants are troublesome sometimes" (a slight nervous laugh, the more nervous because it does not seem to be followed by any echo from the audience). "If you will allow me then, as I say, and if you think it will amuse you, I will read you a little of what she says about these troubles."

The foregoing remarks are uttered in a loud, shy, dogged voice by James Burgoyne to the "Oxford Women's Provident Association." His voice is loud because, being quite unused to public reading, he does not know how to modulate it; it is shy from the same cause of unaccustomedness; it is dogged because he is very much displeased with his present occupation, and has not been successful in concealing that displeasure. When a man runs down to Oxford for a couple of nights, to see how the six years that have passed since he turned his undergraduate back upon the old place have treated her – runs down to a college chum unseen for the same six years – this is certainly not the way in which he expects to spend one of his two evenings.

"I hope you will not mind, Jim" – ominous phrase – the college friend has said; "but I am afraid we shall have to turn out for half an hour after dinner. It is rather a nuisance, particularly as it is such a wet night; but the fact is, I have promised to read to the 'Oxford Women's Provident Association.' Ah, by-the-bye, that is new since you were here – we had no Provident Women in your day!"

"On the other hand, we had a great many improvident men," returns Jim dryly.

"Well, the fact is, my wife is on the committee, and a good deal interested in it, and we give them a sort of entertainment once a month through the winter terms – tea and buns, that kind of thing, sixpence a head; they enjoy it far more than if we gave it them for nothing; and after tea we get people to recite and read and sing to them. I am sure I wish them joy of my reading to-night, for I do not see how I am to make myself audible; I am as hoarse as a crow."

"I know those Oxford colds of old," returns Burgoyne, with that temperate compassion in his voice which we accord to our neighbours' minor diseases. He is sorry that his friend has a cold; but he little knows how much sorrier he will be in the course of the next hour as he adds: "Do not distress yourself about me; I shall be quite happy in your den with a book and a cigarette. Mrs. Brown does not object, does she? And I dare say you will not be very long away."

As he speaks he realizes, with a sort of pang – the pang we pay sometimes to our dead pasts – that, though it is only three hours since he was reunited to his once inseparable Brown, he is already looking forward with relief to the prospect of an hour's freedom from his society – so terribly far apart is it possible to grow in six years. But, before his half-fledged thought has had time to do more

than traverse his brain, Brown has broken into it with the eager remonstrances of a mistaken species of hospitality.

"Leave you behind? Could not hear of such a thing! Of course you must come too! It will be a new experience for you; a wholesome change. Ha! ha! and we can talk all the way there and back; we have had no talk worth speaking of yet."

Again it flashes across the other's mind, with the same pensive regret as before, that talk worth speaking of is for ever over between them; but, seeing that further attempts at evasion will seriously hurt the good-natured Brown, he acquiesces, with as fair a grace as he may.

While putting on his own mackintosh, he watches, with a subdued wonder, his friend winding himself into a huge white woollen comforter, and stepping into a pair of goloshes (he had been rather a smart undergraduate in his day), while outside the opened hall door the rain is heard to swish, and the wind to bellow.

"Had not we better have a hansom?" suggests Burgoyne, blinking, as the slant gust sends two or three stinging drops into his eyes.

"A hansom! nonsense!" returns the other, laughing, and with difficulty unfurling an umbrella in the teeth of the blast. "It is all very well for a bloated bachelor like you; but a man whose family is increasing at the rate mine is cannot afford himself such luxuries; come along, you are not sugar or salt."

Burgoyne feels that at this moment he can at all events conscientiously disclaim affinity with the first of the two.

It is indeed a wet night, wet as the one immortalized by Browning in "Christmas Eve and Easter Day;" and who ever brought a wet night and wet umbrellas "wry and flapping" so piercingly home to us as he? The talk so cheerfully promised by Burgoyne's sanguine friend is rendered absolutely impossible by the riot of the elements. It is a good step from the suburban villa, which is the scene of Brown's married joys, to the room in the heart of the town where the Provident Matrons hold their *sabbat*; and by the time that the two men have reached that room there is, despite his mackintosh, little of Burgoyne left dry except his speech. They are under shelter at last, however, have entered the building, added their umbrellas to many other streaming wrecks of whalebone huddled in a corner, and exchanged the dark blustering drench for a flare of gas, a reek of tea, and a sultry stream of wet clothes and humanity. The tea, indeed, is a thing of the past – all its apparatus has been removed. The rows of chairs are all set to face the platform, and on those chairs the Provident Women sit, smiling, if damp, with here and there a little boy, evidently too wicked to be left at home, comfortably wedged between a couple of matronly figures.

The entertainment has already begun, and an undergraduate – damp, like everyone else – is singing, in a booming bass voice, something of a vaguely boastful nature about what he once did "In Bilboa's Bay." Burgoyne has for the moment lost sight of his chaperon, and remains standing near the door, looking upon the scene around him with an eye from which philanthropy is all too criminally absent. About him are grouped a few ladies and gentlemen – more of the former than the latter – who are obviously about to give their services, judging by their rolls of music and the books in their hands. His look passes over them indifferently – he has no acquaintance among them. He had never known many of the Oxford householders, and there is no place where a man becomes superannuated after so short a lapse of years.

Here are new arrivals. He turns his head mechanically as the opening door reveals the advent of more umbrellaed and mackintoshed waterfalls. Two men and a lady. As his eye alights on the woman, he does not start – we Anglo-Saxons are not apt to make our slow grave bodies the indexes of our emotions – but he is conscious of an odd and puzzling sensation. Where has he seen that face before?

"Bilboa's Bay" has come to an end without his perceiving it. He is putting his memory through her paces, trying to find some niche in his three happy Oxford years in which to place that strangely known yet unknown figure. There is no such niche. It is not an Oxford memory at all. What is it then?

An earlier or a later one? His eyebrows are drawn together in the effort of recollection, making him look, if possible, crosser than before, when he is made aware of the return of Brown by finding his arm seized, and his friend's voice – a good deal hoarser even than when they left home – in his ear, "Jim, do you feel inclined to do a very good-natured thing?"

"Not in the least," replies Burgoyne promptly; "if anyone wishes to borrow £5 from me, I should advise him to choose a moment when I am drier about the legs."

Burgoyne has very often stood up to and over his knees in water for hours, watching for ducks among whistling reeds on winter mornings, and never thought himself at all to be pitied; but he is thoroughly vexed now at his moist trousers. Brown, however, is not so easily rebuffed.

"I should be awfully obliged to you," he says croakily; "you would be laying me under a very real obligation if you would – " He stops to cough.

"If I would what?" returns the other curtly, and looking apprehensively at a book which Brown is expanding before his eyes.

"If you would read instead of me."

"I!"

"Why, the fact is" – coughing noisily again as if to show that there is no imposition – "I suppose the fog must have got down my throat; but I find I cannot speak above a whisper. I should not be heard beyond the front row; come, old man, do a good-natured thing for once in your life."

There is a pause; Burgoyne is not very fond of being asked to do a good-natured thing. He can do a big one every now and then, but he is not particularly fond of being asked to do a small one.

"Surely there must be many people here much better suited for it than I am," he says presently, looking uncomfortably round in search of the little group of booked and musicked persons whom he had seen but now standing near him, but it had melted.

"That is just what there are not," rejoins Brown, pressing his point with the more eagerness, as he thinks he sees signs of yielding; "we are very short of hands to-night, and my wife has just heard that the girl upon whom she was counting for a couple of songs is in bed with influenza."

"Happy girl! I wish I too was in bed with influenza," says Jim sardonically, for he sees his fate about to overtake him.

And so it comes to pass that, five minutes later, as described at the opening of this chapter, he is seated on the platform with "Mrs. Lirriper's Lodgings" before him, rows of Provident Matrons' eyes fastened expectantly upon him, and horrid qualms of strange shyness racing over him.

Brown has indicated by a dog's-ear the page at which he is to begin; so he is spared indecision on this head. But has Brown indicated the page at which he is to stop? He is gnawed by a keen anxiety as to this point all through his performance. It is hot upon the platform, the smell of tea potent, and the naked gas-jets close above his head throw an ugly yellow glare upon his book.

Having offered his prefatory observations in the manner I have indicated, he rushes *in media res*. "Girls, as I was beginning to remark, are one of your first and your lasting troubles, being like your teeth, which begin with convulsions, and never cease tormenting you from the time you cut them till they cut you, and then you do not want to part with them, which seems hard, but we must all succumb, or buy artificial." (Do his ears deceive him? Is there already a slight titter? Have the simile of the convulsions and the necessity for a *râtelier* already struck a chord in the matrons' breasts?) "And, even where you get a will, nine times out of ten you get a dirty face with it, and naturally lodgers do not like good society to be shown in with a smear of black across the nose, or a smudgy eyebrow!" (Is he managing his voice alright? Is he mumbling, or is he bellowing? He rather inclines to a suspicion of the latter. Why did not they laugh at the "smudgy eyebrow"? They ought to have done so, and he had paused to give them the opportunity. Perhaps it is among them too familiar a phenomenon to provoke mirth.) "Where they pick the black up is a mystery I cannot solve, as in the case of the willingest girl that ever came into a house, half-starved, poor thing; a girl so willing that I called her 'Willing Sophy;' down upon her knees scrubbing early and late, and ever cheerful, but always with a

black face. And I says to Sophy, 'Now, Sophy, my good girl, have a regular day for your stoves, and do not brush your hair with the bottoms of the saucepans, and do not meddle with the snuffs of the candles, and it stands to reason that it cannot be.'" (Ah! what welcome sound is this? "Willing Sophy" has produced an undoubted giggle, which Burgoyne hears spreading and widening through the room. Heartened by this indication, he goes on in a more emphatic and hilarious voice:) "Yet there it was, and always on her nose, which, turning up, and being broad at the end, seemed to boast of it, and caused warning from a steady gentleman, an excellent lodger, with breakfast by the week."

There can be no mistake about it now; the giggle has changed into a universal resonant laugh, which goes on swelling and rising, until, in the final roar of approbation which greets the concluding paragraph, the reader's voice is drowned. The matrons have all along been ready to be amused; it is only that, owing to the gravity of his face and solemnity of his manner, it was some time before they recognised that his intention was comic. As soon as they do so, they reward that intention with more than adequate mirth. Burgoyne has reached the second dog's-ear, that dog's-ear which his eye has been earnestly searching for throughout. His task then is ended. He heaves a deep sigh of relief, and, with a reflection that, after all, he is glad he was obliging, is preparing to shut the volume, when he feels the inevitable Brown's hand on his shoulder, and his husky voice in his ear.

"Capital! you got on capitally! Could not be better; but you will not mind going on a little longer, will you? You have only read for ten minutes. I want you to try something different this time – a little pathos, for a change. I have marked the page. Here!"

What is there to do but acquiesce? Burgoyne, complying, finds himself at once in the middle of a melancholy tale of a poor young woman left ruined and deserted in Mrs. Lirriper's Lodgings, and only rescued from suicide by the efforts of that good lady, who, however, is unable to save her from a tragic and premature death. The reader has reached the point at which Mrs. Lirriper has met the poor creature on her way to the river.

"Mrs. Edson, I says, my dear, take care! However, did you lose your way, and stumble in a dangerous place like this? No wonder you're lost, I'm sure.'" (What is this sound? Is it possible that the giggle is rising again? the giggle which he was so glad to welcome a little while ago, but which is so disastrously out of place here. He redoubles his efforts to put an unmistakably serious and pathetic tone into his voice.) "She was all in a shiver, and she so continued till I laid her on her own bed, and up to the early morning she held me by the hand and moaned, and moaned, 'Oh, wicked, wicked, wicked! –'"

What can the Provident Matrons be made of? They are laughing unrestrainedly. Too late Burgoyne realizes that he had not made it sufficiently clear that his intention is no longer comic. The idea of his being a funny man has so firmly rooted itself in his hearers' minds, that nothing can now dislodge it. Such being the case, he feels that the best thing he can do is to reach the end as quickly as possible. He begins to read very fast, which is taken for a new stroke of facetiousness, the result of which is that the last sigh of the poor young would-be suicide is drowned in a storm of hilarity even heartier and more prolonged than that which greeted "Willing Sophy's" smudged nose. In much confusion, greatly abashed by the honours so mistakenly heaped upon him, Burgoyne hastily leaves the platform. Twenty thousand Browns shall not keep him there!

CHAPTER II

"Tell me now in what hidden way is
Lady Flora the lovely Roman?
Where is Hipparchia, and where is Thais?
Neither of them the fairer woman.
Where is Echo beheld of no one,
Only heard on river and mere?
She whose beauty was more than human,
But where are the snows of yester-year?"

"There is no reason why we should not go home now; are you ready?" cries Brown, bustling up to his friend, who has not waited for this question to make straight, as the needle to the pole, for the corner where the collected umbrellas stand in their little area of lake.

Burgoyne would probably have laughed at the unconscious irony of this inquiry if he had heard it; but he has not, his attention being otherwise directed. On the same umbrella quest as himself, being helped on with her mackintosh by one of the two men who had accompanied her, a pepper-and-salt-haired, sturdy gentleman of an obviously unacademic cut, is the lady whose face had flashed upon him with that puzzling sense of unfamiliar familiarity. Since they are now in close proximity, and both employed alike in struggling into their wraps, there is nothing more natural than that she should turn her eyes full upon him. They are very fine eyes, though far from young ones. Is it a trick of his imagination, or does he see a look of half-recognition dawn in them, such as must have been born in his own when they first alighted on her? At all events, if there is such a look of half-recognition in her eyes, she is determined that it shall not have a chance of becoming a whole one. Either he is mistaken, and she has not recognised him, or she is determined not to acknowledge the acquaintance, for she looks away again at once, nor does she throw another glance in his direction. Indeed, it seems to him that she hurries on her preparations with added speed, and walks out into the night accompanied by her double escort before him.

The weather has changed, and for the better. The rollicking wind has lulled, the pattering rain ceased. Between the ragged, black cloud-sheets star-points shine, and a shimmering moon shows her wet face reflected in the puddles. Talk, which had been impossible on their way to the meeting, is not only possible but easy now, and Brown is evidently greatly inclined for it. Burgoyne, on the other hand, had never felt more disinclined. It is not so much that he is out of humour with his tiresome friend, though he is that too, as that his whole mind is centred on making his memory give up the secret of that face that has come back to him out of some vague cavern of his past.

Who is the woman whom he knows, and who knows him (for on reflection he is sure that that look of hers was one of half – of more than half – recognition), and yet whose place in his history, whose very name, he seeks so vainly? She does not belong to his Oxford days, as he has already ascertained. He has learnt from Brown that she does not belong to the Oxford of to-day, being apparently a stranger, and, with her husband, a visitor to the Warden of – College, in whose company they had arrived. He explores the succeeding years of his life. In vain; she has no place there; in vain he dives and plunges into the sea of his memory; he cannot fish up the pearl he seeks. He must hark back to earlier days – his school-time, the six months he spent in Devonshire with a coach before he came up to New. Ah! he has it – he has it at last! just as they have reached Brown's door, while he is fumbling with his latch-key for the keyhole, imprecating the moon for withdrawing her shining at the very instant he most needs her, Burgoyne has come up with the shy object of his chase. It is conjured back into his mind by the word Devonshire.

"I have it," he says to himself; "her hair has turned white, that was why I did not recognise her; it used to be raven-black. But it is she – of course it is she! To think of my not knowing her again! Of course it is Mrs. Le Marchant."

What a door into the distance that name has opened! – a door through which he passes into a Devonshire garden, and romps with rose-faced Devonshire children. The very names of those children are coming back to him. Tom and Charles, those were the schoolboys; Rose and Miriam, and – Elizabeth. He recalls – absurd trick of freakish memory – those children's pets. Tom and Charles had guinea-pigs; Miriam had a white rat; Rose – what had Rose? Rose must have had something; and Elizabeth had a kangaroo. Elizabeth's kangaroo was short-lived, poor beast, and died about hay-time; the guinea-pigs and the white rat have been dead too for ages now, of course. And are Tom and Charles, and Rose and Miriam, and bright Elizabeth dead also? Absurd! Why should they be? Nothing more unlikely! Why, it is only ten years ago, after all.

He is roused from his meditations by Brown's voice, to find himself in Brown's study, where its owner is filling himself a pipe, and festally offering him whisky-and-water. But it is only an abstracted attention that Burgoyne lends, either to the whisky or the whisky's master; and his answers are sometimes inattentively beside the mark, to talk, which indeed is not without some likeness to the boasted exploits in Clement's Inn, and the affectionate inquiries after Jane Nightwork, of a more famous fool than he.

It is a relief to the guest when, earlier than he had expected – a blessing he, no doubt, owes to Mrs. Brown – his host breaks up the *séance*, and he is free to retire to his own room. At once he is back in that Devonshire garden, he is there almost all night, between sleep and wake. It is strange that persons and circumstances banished from his memory for ten long years should rush back with such tyrannous insistence now.

Such silly recollected trifles crowd back upon his mind. The day on which Tom nearly choked himself by swallowing a barley beard; the day on which the lop-eared rabbit littered – ah, rabbits, of course! those were what Rose had! – the day on which Tom pushed Miriam into the moat, and Elizabeth fell in, too, in trying to fish her out. Elizabeth, the eldest, the almost grown-up one, embarrassed by her newly lengthened petticoats, so harassing at cricket, in races, in climbing apple-trees. Elizabeth was sixteen; he remembers the fact, because her birthday had fallen two days before his own departure. He had given her a gold thimble set with turquoises upon the occasion; it was not a surprise, because he recalls measuring her finger for the size. He can see that small middle finger now. Elizabeth must now be twenty-six years of age. Where is she? What is she – maid, wife, or widow?

And why has Mrs. Le Marchant's hair turned snow-white? Had it been merely gray he would not have complained, though he would have deplored the loss of the fine smooth inky sweep he remembers. She has a fair right to be gray; Mrs. Le Marchant must be about forty-six or forty-seven, *bien sonné*. But white, snow-white – the hue that one connects with a venerable extremity of age. Can it be bleached? He has heard of women bleaching their hair; but not Mrs. Le Marchant, not the Mrs. Le Marchant he remembers. She would have been as incapable of bleach as of dye. Then why is she snow-haired? Because Providence has so willed it is the obvious answer. But somehow Burgoyne cannot bring himself to believe that she has come fairly by that white head.

With the morning light the might of the Devonshire memories grows weaker; and, as the day advances, the Oxford ones resume their sway. How can it be otherwise, when all day long he strays among the unaltered buildings in the sweet sedate college gardens, down the familiar "High," where, six years ago, he could not take two steps without being hailed by a jolly fresh voice, claiming his company for some new pleasure; but where now he walks ungreeted, where the smooth-faced boys he meets, and who strike him as so much more boyish than his own contemporaries had done, pass him by indifferently, unknown to the whole two thousand as he is. He feels a sort of irrational anger with them for not recognising him, though they have never seen him before.

Yes, there is no place where a man is so quickly superannuated as in Oxford. He is saying this to himself all day, is saying it still as he strolls in the afternoon down Mesopotamia, to fill up the time before the hour for college chapel. Yes, there is no place where men so soon turn into ghosts. He has been knocking up against them all day at every street-corner; they have looked out at him from every gray window in the Quad at New – jovial, athletic young ghosts, so much painfuller to meet than rusty, century-worn old ones. They are rather less plentiful in Mesopotamia than elsewhere; perhaps, because in his day, as now, Mesopotamia on Sundays was given over to the mechanic and the perambulator. Oh, that Heaven would put it into the head of some Chancellor of the Exchequer to lay a swingeing tax upon that all-accursed vehicle! But not even mechanic and perambulator can hinder Mesopotamia from being fair on a fine February day, when the beautiful floods are out, the floods that the Thames Conservators and the Oxford authorities have combined to put down, as they have most other beautiful things within their reach. But they have not yet quite succeeded. To-day, for instance, the floods are out in might.

Burgoyne is pacing along a brown walk, like a raised causeway, with a sheet of white water on either hand, rolling strong ripples to the bank. Gnarled willows stand islanded in the coldly argent water. A blackbird is flying out of the bushes, with a surprised look at finding himself turned into a sea-bird. No sun; an even sweep of dull silver to right and left. No sun; and yet as he looks, after days of rain, the "*grand décorateur*," as someone happily called him, rides out in royalty on a cleared sky-field, turning the whole drenched country into mother-of-pearl – a sheet of opal stretched across the drowned meadows; the distance opal too, a delicate, dainty, evanescent loveliness snatched from the ugly brown jaws of winter.

Burgoyne is leaning over the wooden bridge beneath which, in its normal state, the water of the lasher rushes down impetuously; but it is now raised to such a height that it lies level, almost flush with the planking. He is staring across the iridescent water-plain to where, in the poetic atmosphere of sun and mist, dome, and schools and soaring spires stand etherealized.

"Dear old place!" he says, under his breath, "everybody is dead; and I am dead; and Brown is deader than anyone. I am glad that you, at least, are still alive!"

Are these more ghosts coming round the corner? A man and a woman ghost strolling along, and looking about them as strangers look. When they are within a pace or two of him the woman says something – something about the floods – to her companion, and at the sound Burgoyne starts.

"She did not speak last night; if she had spoken I should have known her at once. She always had such a sweet voice."

He raises his arms from the bridge-top, and, turning, meets them face to face, eye to eye, and in an instant he has seen that both recognise him. At the same instant he is aware of a simultaneous inclination on the part of man and wife to avert their heads, and pass him without claiming his acquaintance. Perhaps, if he had had time to reflect, he would have allowed them to do so, but the impulse of the moment forbids it. Why should they wish to cut him? What has he done to deserve it? Ten years ago, they were his very good friends, and he was the familiar comrade of their children, the daily guest at their table. What has the unavoidable lapse of those years done to make him less fit for their company at twenty-nine than he was at nineteen? There must be some misconception, which a moment will set right.

"I am afraid that you do not remember me, Mrs. Le Marchant," he says, lifting his hat.

This is not quite true, as he is perfectly convinced that they are as much aware of his identity as he is of theirs. But what formula has a man to employ in such a case? They both look back at him with a sort of irresolution. To his astonishment, in their eyes is a velleity of flight, but apparently she – women's minds moving more quickly than men's – is the first to realize that flight is out of the question.

"I am sure that you have no intention of cutting me," Jim goes on, with a smile, seeing that she is apparently struggling with a difficulty in utterance; "at least, you must be very much changed from what you were ten years ago if you have. My name is –"

"I know – I know!" she interrupts, finding speech at last – speech low and hurried. "I remember perfectly. You are Mr. Burgoyne."

Her confusion – she used always to be such a placid, even-mannered woman – is so patent, born of whatever unaccountable feeling it may be, that he now heartily wishes he had let the poor woman pass unmolested. But such repentance is too late. He has arrested her; she is standing on the gravel path before him, and though he feels that her extraordinary shyness —*mauvaise honte*, whatever it may be – has infected himself, he must make some further remark to her. Nothing better occurs to him than the obvious one:

"It is a long time – it is ten years since we met."

"Yes, ten years; it must be quite ten years," she assents, evidently making a great effort to regain composure.

She does not feign the slightest pleasure in the meeting, and Burgoyne feels that the one thought that occupies her mind is how she can soonest end it. But his roused curiosity, together with the difficulty of parting without further observation after having forced his presence upon them, combine to prevent her succeeding.

"And how is the Moat?" he asks, reflecting that this, at least, is a safe question; a brick and mortar house, at all events, cannot be dead. "How is Devonshire?"

Apparently it is not so harmless a question as he had imagined; at least, Mrs. Le Marchant is obviously quite incapable of answering it. Her husband, for the first time, comes to her rescue.

"The Moat is let," he says, in a dry voice; "we have left Devonshire a long while – nine, nine and a half years ago."

The Moat let! Judging by the light of Burgoyne's recollections, it would have seemed less surprising to him to hear that Windsor Castle had been turned into a Joint Stock Company Hotel. It is probably, then, some money trouble that has turned Mrs. Le Marchant's hair white – snow white, as he now sees it to be. But no; he rejects the explanation as insufficient. She is not the woman to have taken a diminished income so much to heart.

Good manners forbid him to ask, "Why is the Moat let?" so all that he says is, "Nine and a half years ago? Why, that must have been very soon after I left Devonshire."

He addresses his remark involuntarily rather to the wife than the husband, but she does not answer it. Her eyes are fixed upon the bubbles sailing so fast upon the swollen river, which is distinguishable only by its current from the sameness of the surrounding water. A lark – there is always a lark in Mesopotamia – a tiny, strong-throated singer, that never seems to have to stop to take breath, fills up the silence, shouting somewhere out of sight among the black clouds, in and out of which the uncertain sun is plunging. Whether of a moneyed nature or not, there is evidently something very unpleasant connected with their leaving their native county and their immemorial home, so he had better get away from the subject as fast as possible.

"Anyhow," he says, with a rather nervous smile, "I hope that the world has been treating you kindly – that things have gone well with you since those dear old days when you were so good to me."

There is an instant's pause – perhaps he would not have noticed it had not his suspicions been already roused – before the husband, again taking upon him the task of replying, answers, with a sort of laboured carelessness:

"Oh, yes, thanks; we do not complain. It has not been a very rosy time for landlords lately, as you are aware."

"And *you*?" cries the wife, striking in with a species of hurry in her voice – a hurry due, as his instinct tells him, to the fact of her fear of his entering into more detailed inquiries. "And *you*? We must not forget you. Have you been well, flourishing, all this long time? Do you still live with your –"

She stops abruptly. It is apparent that she has entirely forgotten what was the species of relation with whom he lived. There is a little tinge of bitterness in his heart, though not in his tone, as he supplies the missing word "aunt." After all, he had forgotten *her* name; why should not she forget his aunt?

"With my aunt? Well, I never exactly lived with her; I made, and make my headquarters there when I am in England, which is not very often. I have been a rolling stone; I have rolled pretty well round the world since we parted."

They do not care in the least where he has rolled, nor how much nor how little moss he has collected in the process. They are only thinking how they can best get rid of him. But the past is strong upon him; he cannot let them slide out of his life again for another ten – twenty years perhaps, without finding out from them something about his five merry playmates. His inquiry must needs be a vague one. Who dares ask specifically after this or that man, woman, or even child, when ten years have rolled their tides between?

"And you are all well?" he says, with a certain wistfulness lurking in the indifferent *banal* phrase. "Dear me, what a jolly party we used to be! I suppose that – that they are all out in the world now?"

His eyes are fixed apprehensively upon the mother of those young comrades, to whom he thus cautiously alludes. Perhaps, carefully as he has worded his question, he may have touched some terrible raw. Her face is turned aside, presenting only its profile to him, but she answers almost at once:

"Yes; we are all scattered now. Charlie is planting oranges in Florida – he does not mind the heat; you know he always said no weather could be too hot for him; and Tom has an ostrich farm in Australia; and Rose has been married two years – she has a dear little baby; and Miriam is married too; we have just come down from her wedding."

"Miriam married!" repeats Burgoyne in a tone of wonder. "Miriam with a husband instead of a white rat!"

The mother laughs. It is the first time that he has heard her laugh, and she used to laugh so often.

"I think she likes the exchange."

There is another little pause, again filled by the lark's crowding notes. There are two words battering against the gate of Burgoyne's lips for egress – two words that he dares not utter.

"And Elizabeth?" She was the eldest. She would naturally have been mentioned first; but neither first nor last is there any speech of her. She must, then, be dead – dead long ago, too; for there is no trace of mourning in her parents' dress. Elizabeth is dead – bright Elizabeth, the beauty and the pet! Charles Lamb's tender lines come pensively back to him —

"My sprightly neighbour gone before
To that unknown and silent shore,
Shall we not meet as heretofore,
Some summer morning?"

Is it only fancy that he sees in the eye of Elizabeth's mother a dread lest he shall ask tidings of her, as she says, hastily, and with a smile, "Well, I am afraid we must be going; it has been very pleasant meeting you again, but I am afraid that the Warden will be expecting us"?

She adds to her parting hand-shake no wish for a repetition of that meeting, and he watches them down the Willow Walk with a sort of sadness in his heart.

"Elizabeth is dead! Elizabeth is undoubtedly dead!"

CHAPTER III

"Do you know that Willy has been sent down again?"

Six weeks have passed since Burgoyne's eye followed his quondam friends down Mesopotamia, and he is not in Oxford now. He left it, indeed, twenty-four hours after the rencounter described; left it with something of a determination never to revisit it. This, too, in spite of the good Brown's vociferously reiterated invitation to him to run down for another Sunday, whenever he should feel inclined, and which he accepted civilly, knowing that he should never feel inclined.

At the present moment he is pacing up and down the still wintry, north-windswept walks of a country-house garden in Shropshire, in the company of a lady whom he has known as long as he can remember; a lady who would have been a friend of circumstance, even if she had not been one of choice, since her home has been in the immediate neighbourhood of the only one he has ever had; a lady whose friendship he has tested by letters on thin paper from New Guinea and Central Africa all about himself; at whose feet he has laid on his return more heads, and skins, and claws than she has well known what to do with; whose husband he thought a very good fellow, and to whom he wrote a very nice letter on that husband's death; lastly, concerning whose only child has been made the communication that opens this chapter – "Do you know that Willy has been sent down again?"

"I did not know it; but I am very sorry now that I do know."

"You need not be," returns she cheerfully; "he does not mind it in the least; indeed, happily for him, most of his friends have been sent down too."

"What has he been doing this time? Putting the porter into the fountain? or screwing up the Dean? or what other playful little pleasantry?"

"You need not speak in that nasty sarcastic voice," says she, half laughing and half vexed. "After all, you must know that young men will be young men, or, at least, if you do not know it now, you must have known it once."

"If you take that tone to me," retorts Burgoyne, smiling, "I shall have to souse your gardener in your fountain, to prove my juvenility; but come, what has he done?"

"Absolutely nothing, as far as I can make out," replies she, spreading out her hands as if to emphasize the statement.

"Do you mean to say that the authorities have sent him down *de gaieté de cœur*, without any provocation at all?" asks Burgoyne, in a tone out of which he is unable to keep a shade of incredulity.

"I mean to say," replies she, nettled, "that he had a few men to supper, and I suppose they were making a little noise; did you ever in your day hear of an undergraduate supper where there was not noise? However, in this case, from what he tells me, Willy was taking positively no part in it."

"He was sitting in a corner, with cotton-wool in his ears, reading Aristotle," suggests Burgoyne teasingly.

"And it seems," continued she, not deigning to notice the interruption, "that the Proctor came in, and was very rude, and Willy was told to go to the Dean next morning, and he either was a little late, or mistook the hour, or some trifle of that sort; and when he did go he was told that he was sent down. However" – with some triumph in her voice – "it did not matter in the least – he did not mind; in fact, he was rather glad, as he has long wanted to go to Italy in the spring."

"To Italy? Then perhaps we shall meet; I too am going to Italy."

"Are you?" she says. "Why should you go to Italy? There is nothing to kill there, is there? Is not it at Naples that they go out in full chasseur uniform to shoot tomtits?" Which speech is her revenge for his sarcasms upon her son.

But Burgoyne's face has taken on a rather careworn look; and her little arrow misses its mark.

"You see, Amelia is at Florence," he says explanatorily; "her father, Mr. Wilson, had a clergyman's throat in the autumn, and was obliged to give up duty, so they all went abroad. They have been abroad all the winter; you know that I have not seen her since I came back from the Rockies."

They are now walking in a winding shrubbery path, whose laurels protect them from the pinching wind. They have turned several corners, and traversed half a quarter of a mile before either again breaks silence. It is the lady who does so finally.

"Jim, how long have you been engaged to Amelia?"

There is a sigh mixed with his answer.

"Eight years – eight years this next June; it was the second summer term after I came up."

"And as far as you can see, you are likely to be engaged for another eight years?"

"As far as I can see – yes; but then I cannot see far."

Perhaps his companion is a fanciful woman; but she notices that this time he does not sigh.

"Poor Amelia!" she says, half under her breath.

"Poor Amelia!" repeats he sharply; "why poor? – for being engaged to me? You are not very complimentary, Mrs. Byng."

She looks up friendlily at him. "For being engaged to you, or being only engaged to you? – which? I leave you a choice of interpretation."

But either Jim is too ruffled by the pity expressed in her tone towards his betrothed, or her remarks have provoked in him a train of thought which does not tend towards loquacity. The loud rooks, balancing themselves on improbably small twigs above their heads, and, hoarsely melodious, calling out their airy vernal news to each other, make for some time the only sound that breaks the silence of the cold spring afternoon. It is again Mrs. Byng who at last infringes it.

"If you and Willy are both going to Italy, why should not you go together?"

Jim does not immediately answer; the project is sprung upon him with such suddenness that he does not at once know whether it is agreeable to him or the reverse.

"You do not like the idea?" continues the mother, trying, not very successfully, to keep out of her tone the surprise she feels at his not having jumped at a plan so obviously to his own advantage.

"I did not say so. I did not even think so."

"Willy is an ideal fellow-traveller," says she, "excepting in the matter of punctuality; I warn you" – laughing – "that you would always have to drag him out of bed."

"But," suggests Jim slowly, "even supposing that I embraced your design with the warmth which I see you think it deserves, how can you tell that it would meet with his approbation? He has probably made up a party with some of the other innocent victims of a corrupt University system."

"No, he has not; the friend with whom he was to have gone has thrown him over; at least, poor man, that is hardly the way to express it, for he has broken his leg; but anyhow he is *hors de combat*. If you went with Willy," she adds, after a pause, and with a rather wistful air, "I should be sure of knowing if anything went wrong."

"I am to dry-nurse him, in fact, only I stipulate that, if he brings you home a Contadina daughter-in-law, or 'commits himself with a countess,' like the commercial gentleman at Todgers's, you are not to hold me responsible."

And so it came to pass that a fortnight later, while April is still young, Burgoyne, *en route* to his Amelia, is standing at a window of the Hotel de Gênes at Genoa, noisiest of hotels, though, to be sure, that is its only fault. He is looking out at the gay market that is held in the piazza below – the gay market that is over and gone by nine o'clock.

It seems odd that so many women, so many umbrellas, so many baskets, so many oranges and lemons – each lemon with a glossy green leaf still adhering to its inch of stalk – so many fresh vegetables can be swept away in so short a time. But they are; all the gay kerchiefs are fled, and have been replaced by a row of fiacres with sad droop-headed horses, a good hour before Byng appears – appears radiantly well washed and apologetic.

"How many morning chapels did you attend last term?" asks Burgoyne with some dryness.

"It is a vile habit," replies the other sweetly, sitting down at a little table, and unfolding his breakfast napkin. "I do not mean going to chapel, but being so late; however, I really am improving. I am a quarter of an hour – twenty minutes earlier than I was yesterday, and, thank God, we have no train to catch to-day."

Burgoyne is rather inclined to echo the thanksgiving a little later in the day, as they stroll with the pleasant vagueness with which one strays about a little-known foreign town, not exactly knowing whither, through the streets of the queenly city, with which neither of them has much acquaintance; Byng's twenty-two years of school and college, of cricket, and grouse, and stalking, having left not much margin for aught else; and Burgoyne being in the case of some widely-wandered shots and explorers, to whom the Nyanza Lake and the Australian Bush are more familiar than Giotto's Campanile or the Lagoons. There is a grayish-looking English sky, with now and then little sprays of rain, and now and then flashes of warm sun.

Neither of the young men knows much Italian, and such as they possess they are ashamed to air before each other in asking their way, so they wander wherever chance or fancy leads them. They look curiously into churches, they walk down deep narrow streets, whose houses have for three centuries been threatening to embrace each other across the strait sky strip far, far above their heads. They glance at palace-fronts, and wonder at the sculptured portals where fresco and fruit garland and fine tracery speak of a time at more leisure for delicate work that has no end but beauty, than this breathless one. Everywhere in the gardens they see budding green, untrained roses making bowers, ripe oranges hanging over the walls. They jostle against women, each made charming, even the ugliest of them, by the black lace kerchief tied about her head.

"Henry James says that an English crowd is the best-looking in the world," says Byng, in a tone of strong dissent, following with his eyes a little tripping figure, and with an expression of pronounced approbation in those eyes, which gives Burgoyne a momentary twinge of misgiving as to his chaperonship. "I should put it the other way up, and say that they are the ugliest."

"All crowds are ugly, and most individuals," replies Burgoyne, misanthropically looking up from his guide-book.

They are sauntering down the Via Garibaldi, street of palaces that deserves an antiquer name than that of the somewhat shoddy and recent hero who has god-fathered it. Noblest Via, down whose stately length great towering bulks succeed each other in solid majesty on either hand; bulks on whose high fronts, lofty-ported, o'errun with fresco, glorified by brush and chisel, strength and beauty take hands in unending wedlock. Into the noblest of all, up the echoing stone stairs, down which the feet of the masters have for ever ceased to tread, they enter. As we all know, it has been given to the city of Genoa – lovely queen-city meriting so great a gift – by the dying hand of its latest possessor, the last of that high and beautiful race – if we may judge of the dead by their pictures – who paced its floors, and went forth in final funeral pomp through its worthy-to-be-imperial portals.

Burgoyne and Byng are standing before the great Vandyke. The custode, opening a shutter, and throwing wider a door, casts a brighter ray of light for the staring Britons – several others have joined themselves to our friends – to gape at it by. What does the stately gentleman on his great white horse, whom Vandyke has made able to set at naught death's effacement, think of them, as the custode slowly swings him forward on his hinges, so that the day-beams may bring out more clearly still the arresting charm of his serious face, his outstretched arm, and grave, gallant bearing? Looking at him, whose heart among us is not besieged by an ache of longing that that "young and princely" gentleman on the brave white charger should ride down to us out of his frame, and bring back his world with him? probably not a better world than ours, but surely, surely a handsomer one.

After awhile the other tourists drift away, but the two men still stand and gaze. Into Burgoyne's mind has come a sense of disgust with the present, a revolt against steam trams and the Cromwell Road – most perfect symbol of that bald, unending, vulgar ugliness, which, in some moods, must

seem to everyone the dominant note of nineteenth-century life. The light-hearted Byng, who always takes his colour from his surroundings, is hushed into a silence that is almost reverent too.

"What a difference there is between his Italian and his English pictures," he says presently. "Do you remember the Marchesa Balbi, and those divine Balbi children in the Grosvenor, last year? Oh, no! by-the-bye, you were in America. The fog seemed to get into his brush whenever he painted an Englishwoman, always excepting Henrietta Maria, who was not an Englishwoman, and whom he was obviously rather in love with."

"Is that a piece of scandal of your own invention, or is it founded on fact?" asks Burgoyne, rousing himself, and looking over his shoulder towards the entrance to the next frescoed, mirrored, pictured room, whence he hears the sound of approaching voices. In his eye is an idle and mechanical curiosity, mixed with vexation that his short respite from his fellow-countrymen is ended; in this case, it is fellow-countrywomen, for the tones that are nearing are those of a woman, a woman who is saying in a key of satisfaction, "Oh, here it is! I thought I remembered that it was in this room."

At the same moment the speaker, as well as the person addressed, came into sight; and in an instant out of Burgoyne's eye has raced away the lack-lustre curiosity, and has given way to an expression of something beyond surprise, of something more nearly verging on consternation; and yet, after all, there is nothing very astonishing in the fact that it is Mrs. Le Marchant who is the woman in search of the Vandyke. There is nothing more surprising in her being at Genoa than in his being there himself. At that mart of nations it can never be matter for wonder to meet anyone; but who is this to whom her observation is addressed? It is not Mr. Le Marchant, it is not a man at all; it is a slight woman —

"White as a lily, and small as a wand" —

like Lance's sister, dressed with that neat, tight, gray-tinted simplicity, severe yet smart, which marks the well-bred Englishwoman on her travels. Is it one of the younger ones, who has grown up so startlingly like her? Miriam? Rose? or is it, can it be, the dead Elizabeth?

CHAPTER IV

In a ripe civilization such as ours there are formulas provided to meet the requirements of every exigency that may possibly arise; but amongst them there is not one which teaches us how to greet a person come back from the dead, because it is held impossible that such a contingency can occur. Perhaps this is the reason why Jim Burgoyne, usually a docile and obedient member of the society to which he belongs, now flies in the face of all the precepts instilled into him by that society's code. At the sight of Elizabeth Le Marchant entering the room, clad in a very neat tailor gown, instead of the winding-sheet with which he had credited her, he at first stands transfixed, staring at her with a hardness of intensity which is allowed to us in the case of Titian's "Bella," or Botticelli's "Spring," but has never been accounted permissible in the case of a more living loveliness. Then, before he can control, or even question the impulse that drives him, it has carried him to her.

"Elizabeth!" he says, in that sort of awed semi-whisper with which one would salute a being plainly returned from the other side, fearing that the fulness of a living voice might strike too strongly on his disused ear – "is it really Elizabeth?"

Had Burgoyne been quite sure, even now, of that fact; if he had had his wits well about him, he would certainly not have addressed her by her Christian name. But from the dead the small pomps and ceremonies of earth fall off. We think of them by their naked names – must we not then appeal to them by the same when they reappear before us?

The girl – for she does not look much more – thus rudely and startlingly bombarded, drops her Baedeker out of her slim-gloved hand, and with a positive jump at the suddenness of the address, looks back apprehensively at her interlocutor. In her eyes is, at first, only the coldly frightened expression of one discourteously assailed by an insolent stranger; but in a space of time as short as had served him to note the same metamorphosis in the case of her parents, he sees the look of half – three-quarter – whole recognition dawn in her eyes, followed – alas! there can be no mistake about it – by the same aspiration after flight. There is no reason why she should not recognise him again at once. He has fallen a prey neither to hair nor fat – the two main disguisers and disfigurers of humanity. His face is as smooth and his figure as spare as when, ten years ago, he had given the pretty tomboy of sixteen lessons in jumping the ha-ha. And as to her identity, no shadow of doubt any longer lingers in his mind.

The violence and shock of his attack have made her crimson, have matched her cheeks with those long-withered damasks in the Moat garden, with which they used to vie in bloomy vividness. But even yet he does not treat her quite as if she were really and veritably living; he has not yet got back his conventional manners.

"I thought you were dead," he says, his voice not even yet raised to its ordinary key, some vague awe still subduing it.

It must be a trick of his excited imagination that makes it seem to him as if she said under her breath, "So I am!"

But before he has had time to do more than distrust the testimony of his ears, Mrs. Le Marchant strikes in quickly —

"We cannot help what Mr. Burgoyne thinks," says she, with a constrained laugh; "but you are not dead, are you, Elizabeth? We are neither of us dead; on the contrary, we are very much alive. Who can help being alive in this heavenly place? And you? When did you come? What hotel are you at? Have you been here long? Do you make a long stay?"

She pours out her questions with such torrent-force and rapidity, as gives to her auditor the conviction that it is her aim to have a monopoly of them.

After one look of unbounded astonishment at his companion's onslaught, Byng has withdrawn to a discreet distance.

"You never mentioned her when I met you in Oxford," says Burgoyne, disregarding her trivial and conventional questions, and turning his eyes away with difficulty from his old playfellow.

Mrs. Le Marchant laughs again, still constrainedly.

"Probably you never asked after her."

"I was afraid," he says solemnly; "after ten years one is afraid; and as you did not mention her – you know you mentioned all the others – I thought you had lost her!"

A sort of slight shiver passes over the woman's frame.

"No, thank God! No!"

During the foregoing little dialogue about herself, Elizabeth has stood with her eyes on the ground; but at the end of it she lifts them to smile lovingly at her mother. They are very pretty eyes still, but surely they seem to have cried a good deal; and now that the hurrying blood has left her cheek again, Burgoyne sees that she looks more nearly her age than he had imagined at the first glance. He has not heard her voice yet; she has not spoken, unless that first shaken whisper – so much more likely to be the freak of his own heated fancy – could count for speech. He must hear her tones. Do they keep an echo of the other world, as he still imagines that he sees a shade from it lying lingeringly across her face?

"Do you ever climb apple-trees now?" he asks abruptly. She starts slightly, and again, though with a weaker red wave, her rather thin cheeks grow tinged.

"Did I ever climb them?" she says, with a bewildered look, and speaking in a somewhat tremulous voice. "Yes" – slowly, as if with an effort of memory – "I believe I did."

"You have forgotten all about it?" cries Jim, in an accent of absurdly disproportioned disappointment. "Have you forgotten the kangaroo too? have you forgotten everything?"

Perhaps she is putting her memory to the same strain as he had done his in the case of her mother's name on the occasion of their Oxford meeting. At all events, she leaves the question unanswered, and the elder woman again hurries to her help against this persistent claimant of reminiscences.

"You must not expect us all to have such memories as you have," she says with a touch of friendliness in her look.

"I must own that I too had quite forgotten the kangaroo; and so I fear had Robert, until you reminded us of it in Mesopotamia."

"How is Mr. Le Marchant?" inquires Jim, thus reminded to put his tardy query – "is he with you?"

"No, he is not very fond of being abroad; it is not" – smiling – "'dear abroad' to him, but I think that he will very likely come out to Florence to fetch us."

"You are going to Florence?" cries the young man eagerly. "So am I! oh, hurrah! then we shall often meet."

But the touch of friendliness, whose advent he had hailed so joyfully, has vanished out of Mrs. Le Marchant's voice, or, at least, is overlaid with a species of stiffness, as she answers distantly, "We do not intend to go out at all in Florence – I mean into society."

"But I am not society," replies he, chilled, yet resolute. "I wish" – glancing rather wistfully from one to the other – "that I *could* give you a little of my memory. If I could, you would see that, after being so infinitely good to me at the Moat, you cannot expect me to meet you as total strangers now."

In the sense of ill-usage that fills his breast, the fact of how almost entirely oblivious he had been of the persons before him, during the greater part of the long interval that had parted them, has – such is human nature – quite slipped his recollection. It is brought back to him in some degree with a twinge by Mrs. Le Marchant saying in a relenting tone, and with an accent of remorse, "And you have remembered us all these years?"

He cannot, upon reflection, conscientiously say that he has; but is yet disingenuous enough to allow a speaking silence to imply acquiescence.

"And you are on your way to Florence too?" continues she, mistaking the cause of his dumbness; the tide of compunction evidently setting more strongly towards him, in her womanly heart, at the thought of the entire want of interest she has manifested in the case of one whose long faithfulness to her and her family had deserved a better treatment.

"Yes."

His face clouds so perceptibly as he pronounces this monosyllable, that his interlocutor inquires, with a growing kindness:

"Not on any unpleasant errand, I hope?"

He laughs the uneasy laugh of an Anglo-Saxon obliged to tell, or at all events telling, some intimate detail about himself.

"I am going to see my young woman – the girl I am engaged to."

"Well, that is a pleasant errand, surely?" (smiling).

"*C'est salon!*" replies Jim gloomily. "I have a piece of ill-news to tell her;" then, with a half-shy effort to escape into generalities, "which way do you think that ill-news read best – on paper or *vivâ voce*?"

She shivers a little.

"I do not know. I do not like them either way."

Then, taking out her watch, with the evident determination to be surprised at the lateness of the hour, she cries, "It is actually a quarter to two! Are not you famished, Elizabeth? I am!"

There is such apparent and imminent departure in her eye that Burgoyne feels that there is no time to be lost.

"Have you decided upon your hotel in Florence?" he asks precipitately.

"We have decided against them all," is her answer. "We have taken a little apartment – a poor little *entresol*; but it is such a poor little one, that I should be ashamed to ask any of my friends to come and see me there."

She accompanies the last words, as if to take the sting out of them, with as sweet and friendly a smile as any he remembers in the Devonshire days. But the sting is not taken out, all the same; it lingers, pricking and burning still, after both the tall, thin, black figure, and the slim, little gray one have disappeared.

The moment that this is the case, Byng rejoins his friend; a curiosity and alert interest in his young eyes, which his companion feels no desire to gratify. He is unable, however, to maintain the entire silence he had intended upon the subject, since Byng, after waiting for what, to his impatience, appears a more than decent interval, is constrained to remark —

"Did I hear you tell that lady, when first you spoke to her, that she was dead?"

"I thought she was."

"Had you heard it?"

"No."

"Did you see it in the papers?"

"No."

A pause.

"I wonder why you thought she was dead."

The other makes a rather impatient movement.

"I had no reason – none whatever. It was an idiotic inference."

Byng draws a long breath of satisfaction.

"Well, at all events, I am very glad that she is not."

Jim turns upon him with something of the expression of face worn by Mrs. Sarah Gamp on hearing Mrs. Prig express her belief that it was not by Mrs. Harris that her services would be required. "Why should you be glad of that, Betsy? She is unbeknown to you except by hearing. Why should you be glad?"

As Byng's case is a more aggravated one than Mrs. Prig's, seeing that Elizabeth Le Marchant is 'unbeknown' to him even by hearing, so is the warmth, or rather coldness, with which his friend receives his remark not inferior to that of "Sairey."

"I do not quite see how it affects you. Why are you glad?"

"*Why am I glad?*" replies the younger man, with a lightening eye. "For the same reason that I am glad that Vandyke painted that picture" – pointing to it – "or that Shakespeare wrote *As You Like It*. The world is the richer by them all three."

But to this poetic and flattering analogy, Jim's only answer is a surly "Humph!"

CHAPTER V

"There are no more by-path meadows where you may innocently linger, but the road lies long and straight and dusty to the grave. You may think you had a conscience and believed in God; but what is conscience to a wife?.. To marry is to domesticate the Recording Angel. Once you are married, there is nothing left for you – not even suicide – but to be good."

There is no particular reason why Burgoyne should not impart to his companion what he knows – after all it is not very much – about their two countrywomen. Upon reflection he had told himself this, and conquered a reluctance, that he cannot account for, to mentioning their name; and to relating the story of those shadowy idyllic two months of his life, which form all of it that has ever come into contact with theirs. So that by the time – some thirty-six hours later – when they reach Florence, the younger man is in possession of as much information about the objects of their common interest as it is in the power of the elder one to impart.

To neither of them, meanwhile, is any second glimpse vouchsafed of those objects, eagerly – though with different degrees of overtness in that eagerness – as they both look out for them among the luggage-piles and the tweed-clad English ladies at the station. It had been the intention of Burgoyne that he and his friend should put up at the same hotel as that inhabited by his betrothed and her family; hut, finding that it is full, he orders rooms at the Minerva, and in the fallen dusk of a rather chill spring night, finds himself traversing the short distance from the railway to that hotel.

As he and Byng sit over their coffee after dinner in the *salle à manger*, almost its only tenants at that late hour, the younger man remarks matter-of-factly, as if stating a proposition almost too obvious to be worth uttering —

"I suppose you are off to the Anglo-Américain now."

"I think not," replies Jim slowly; "it is past ten, you see, and they are early people." He adds a moment later, as if suspecting his own excuse of insufficiency, "Mr. Wilson is rather an invalid, and there is also an invalid or semi-invalid sister; I think that I had better not disturb them to-night."

Byng has never been engaged to be married, except in theory, and it is certainly no business of his to blow his friend's flagging ardour into flame, so he contents himself with an acquiescent observation to the effect that the train must have been late. But at all events the next morning finds Burgoyne paying his fiacre at the door of the Anglo-Américain, with the confidence of a person who is certain of finding those he seeks, a confidence justified by the result; for, having followed a waiter across a courtyard, and heard him knock at a door on the ground-floor, that door opens with an instantaneousness which gives the idea of an ear having been pricked to catch the expected rap, and the next moment, the intervening *garçon* having withdrawn, Jim stands face to face with his Amelia. Her features are all alight with pleasure, but her first words are not particularly amorous.

"Would you mind coming into the dining-room? Sybilla is in the drawing-room already this morning. She said she was afraid it was going to be one of her bad days, so I thought" (rather regretfully) "that possibly she would be a little later than usual in coming down; but, on the contrary, she is much earlier."

It is possible that an extremely ardent love may be independent of surroundings; may burn with as fierce a flame, when its owner or victim is seated on a hard horsehair chair beside a dining-room table, in a little dull hotel back room, as when the senses are courted by softly-cushioned lounges, penetrating flower-scents, and cunningly arranged *bric-à-brac*; but perhaps Jim's passion is not of this intense and Spartan quality. At all events a chill steals over him as Amelia leads the way into that small and uncheerful chamber where the Wilson family daily banquet. He is not so lost to all sense of what England and Amelia expect of him as not to take her in his arms and kiss her very kindly and warmly, before they sit down on two hard chairs side by side; and even when they have done so, he still holds her hand, and kisses it now and then. He has a great many things to say to her, but

"out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh" is not invariably true. Sometimes that very abundance clogs the utterance, and, after a ten months' separation, the hinges of even lovers' tongues are apt at first to be somewhat rusty.

"And are you really glad to see me again?" asks the woman – she is scarcely a girl, having the doubtful advantage of being her betrothed's senior by two years. The horsehair chairs are obviously powerless to take the edge off her bliss; and she can scarcely command her voice as she asks the question.

"I decline to answer all such futile inquiries," replies he, smiling not unkindly; but there is no tremor in his voice. "Even if I did not discourage them on principle, I should have no time to answer them to-day; I have so much to say to you that I do not know where to begin."

"After ten months that is not very surprising," rejoins she, with a stifled sigh. There is no sentimental reproach in her words or tone; but in both lurks a note of wistfulness which gives his conscience a prick.

"Of course not! of course not!" he rejoins hastily; "but it is not really ten months – no, surely –"

"Ten months, one week, two days, four hours and a half!"

Against such exactitude of memory what appeal has he? He attempts none, and only thinks with a faint unjust irritation that she might have spared him the odd hours.

"And how are things going? How are you all getting on?" he asks, precipitating himself upon a fresh subject, since he feels prevented by circumstances from saying anything likely to bring him much distinction upon the old one. "Your father?"

"His throat is better" – with an accent of hesitating filial piety, as if there were something else about him that was not better.

"And Sybilla?"

"Oh, poor Sybilla! she has her bad days now and then."

"And, like the early Christians, she resolves to have all things in common. I expect that her family have their bad days too," says Jim dryly.

"Well, we do sometimes," replies Amelia with reluctant admission; "but she really does try to control herself, poor thing; she is hardly ever unbearable now."

"And Cecilia?"

"She is rather in trouble just now; I fear there is no doubt that the man she was engaged to has thrown her over. You never saw him? Oh no! Of course, the affair came on after you left England."

Burgoyne's eyebrows have gone up, and his face has assumed an expression less of surprise than admiration at this piece of news.

"How many does that make? Four? Well, courage! There is luck in odd numbers; perhaps she will land the fifth."

"She will tell you about it herself," says Amelia; "she tells everybody; she likes talking about it – it is very odd, but she does. When you throw me over" – rubbing his hand which she holds, with shy and deprecating caressingness, against her own cheek – "I shall tell nobody; I shall keep my misfortune very dark."

"When I do!" repeats he with laughing emphasis; but to his own ear both the emphasis and the laughter sound flat. This is perhaps the cause why he, a second time, runs away from his subject; or, more probably, he is really in haste to get to the new one. "Meanwhile," he says, his eyes involuntarily dropping to the carpet, as if he had rather not see the effect of his words upon her; "meanwhile, someone has thrown me over."

"You?"

"Yes, me; I did not write it to you, because I do not see much use in putting down bad news in black and white, and even with this little delay, I am afraid," with a dry smile, "that you will have plenty of time to enjoy it."

He pauses for an instant, and she does not hurry him with any teasing questions; but waits, with meek patience, till he feels inclined to go on.

"My aunt is going to be married."

If he has wished that his news shall produce the effect of a torpedo, he has no cause to complain of his want of success. His placid Amelia vaults to her feet.

"Married!" she repeats with a gasp. "Why, she is quite, quite old!"

"She is sixty-five!"

The colour has flooded all Amelia's face; the blazing colour that means not pleasure, but consternation. It is some moments before she can frame her next query.

"And is he? – do you? – has she chosen wisely, I mean?"

Jim laughs again.

"Can one choose wisely at sixty-five? Well, whether she has or no is a matter of opinion; she has chosen the curate of the parish, who, by reason of his extreme juvenility, is still in deacon's orders."

Miss Wilson's limbs are shaking so that she cannot maintain her standing attitude. She sinks down by the dining-table again in her hard chair. It is a very hard chair on which to receive such ill news.

"And cannot you hinder it, cannot you dissuade her?" she asks falteringly.

"I shall not try; poor old woman! After all, she has a right to pursue her own happiness in her own way, only I wish that she had made up her mind twenty years ago; though, to be sure, how could she?" – with another smile – "since, at that time, her bridegroom was not much more than born."

A dead silence supervenes – a silence of shocked stupefaction on the one side, of rather dismal brooding on the other. At length Amelia nerves herself to put a question upon which it seems to her, not very incorrectly, that her whole future hangs. She does it in such a low voice that none but very sharp ears could have caught it. Jim's ears are so; practised as they are in listening for the stealthy tread of wild animals, and for the indescribable sounds of mountain solitudes at night.

"Will it – will it – make a great difference to you?"

Burgoyne lifts his eyes, which have been idly bent on the floor, and looks straight and full at her across the corner of the table.

"It will make all the difference!" he answers slowly.

Poor Amelia is holding her handkerchief in her hand. She lifts it to her mouth and bites a corner of it to hide the quivering of her lips and chin. She does not wish to add to his pain by any breakdown on her own part. But Jim divines the quivering even under the morsel of cambric, and looks away again.

"Her money is almost entirely in her own power," he continues, in an unemotional voice; "and when she announced her marriage to me, she also announced her intention of settling the whole of it upon her – her" – he pauses a second, as if resolved to keep out of his voice the accent of satire and bitterness that pierces through its calm – "her husband."

Amelia has dropped both shielding hand and handkerchief into her lap. She has forgotten her effort to conceal the blankness of her dismay. Unless she conceals the whole of her face, indeed, the attempt would be in vain, since each feature speaks it equally.

"Her whole fortune?" she repeats, almost inaudibly. "All?"

"What, all my pretty chickens and their dam?"

says Jim, oppressed by her overwhelmed look into an artificial and dreary levity, and in not particularly apt quotation. "My dear, do not look so broken-hearted. I am not absolutely destitute; I need not become a sandwich man. I have still got my £800 a year, my very own, which neither man nor mouse, neither curate nor vicar, can take from me. I can still go on rioting upon that; the

question is" – his words coming more slowly, and his tone growing graver – "have I any right to ask you to riot on it too?"

Her hand has gone in feverish haste out to his for answer, and her eyes, into which the tears are welling, look with an intense dumb wistfulness into his; but, for the moment, it remains dumb. There is something painful to Burgoyne in that wistfulness, almost more painful than the telling of that news which has produced it. He looks down upon the tablecloth, and, with his disengaged hand, the one not imprisoned in his betrothed's fond hold, draws patterns with a paper-knife accidentally left there.

"The one thing that I blame her for," he continues, not following up the branch of the subject that his last speech had begun to open up, and speaking with a composure which, to the stricken Amelia, appears to evidence his attainment of the highest pinnacle of manly fortitude, "the only thing I blame her for, is her having hindered my adopting any profession. Poor old woman, it was not malice preense, I know; she had not seen her Jessamey then, probably had not even a prophetic instinct of him, but as things turned out" – stifling a sigh – "it would have been kinder to have put me in the way of earning my own living."

Amelia's head has sunk down upon his hand – he feels her hot tears upon it; but now that the theme has no longer reference to herself, she can speak. She straightens herself, and there is a flash, such as he has very seldom seen there, in her rather colourless orbs.

"It was monstrous of her!" she cries, with the almost exaggerated passion of a usually very self-controlled person. "After having always told you that you were to be her heir!"

"But *had* she told me so?" replies Jim, passing his hand with a perplexed air over his own face. "That is what I have been trying to recall for the last few days. I never remember the time when I did not believe it, so I suppose that someone must have told me so; but I could not swear that she herself had ever put it down in black and white. However," tossing his head back with a gesture as of one who throws off his shoulders a useless burden, "what does that matter now? I am not her heir, I am nobody's heir; we must look facts in the face! Amelia, dear" – in a tone of reluctant tender affection, as of one compelled, yet most unwilling, to give a little child, or some other soft, helpless creature, pain – "we must look facts in the face!" There is something in his voice that makes Amelia's heart stand still; but she attempts no interruption.

"It is very hard for me, dear, after all these" – he pauses a second; he is about to say "weary years' waiting," but his conscience arrests him; to him they have not been weary, so, after a hardly-perceptible break, he goes on – "after all these many years' waiting, to have come to this, is not it?"

He had not calculated on the effect which would be produced by his melancholy words and his caressing tone. She buries her face on his shoulder, sobbing uncontrollably.

"They were not long!" she murmurs brokenly. "Nothing is, nothing can be, long to me as long as I have you, or the hope of you!"

CHAPTER VI

It is, perhaps, fortunate for Amelia that she cannot see the expression of the face which looks out above her prostrate head into space, with a blankness equal to what has been her own, a blankness streaked, as hers was not, with remorse. He would give anything to be able to answer her in her own key, to tell her that, as long as he can keep her, the going or coming of any lesser good hurts him as little as the brushing past his cheek of a summer moth or windblown feather. But when he tries to frame a sentence of this kind, his tongue cleaves to the roof of his mouth. He can only hold her to him in an affectionate clasp, whose dumbness he hopes that she attributes to silencing emotion. She herself indulges in no very prolonged manifestation of her passion. In a few moments she is again sitting up beside him with wiped eyes, none the handsomer, poor soul, for having cried, and listening with a deep attention to an exposition of her lover's position and prospects, which he is at no pains to tinge with a factitious rose colour.

"Have you realized," he says, "that I shall never be better off than I am now? never! *never!* For though of course I shall try to get work, one knows how successful that quest generally is in the case of a man with no special aptitudes, no technical training, and who starts in the race handicapped by being ten years too late!"

But the dismalness of this panorama raises no answering gloom in the young woman's face. She nods her head gently.

"I realize it."

"And this is what I have brought you to, after all these years' waiting," he continues, in a tone of profound regret. "All I can offer you at the end of them is a not particularly genteel poverty, not even a cottage with a double coach-house!" – laughing grimly.

"I do not want a double coach-house, nor even a single one!" replies Amelia stoutly, and laughing too, a little, through returning tears. "Do not you know that I had rather drive a costermonger's barrow with you than go in a coach and six without you!"

This is the highest flight of imagination of which Jim has ever known his matter-of-fact Amelia guilty, and he can pay her his thanks for it only in compunctious kisses. Perhaps it is they, perhaps it is the thought which dictates her next hesitating speech, that bring a light into Amelia's tear-reddened eyes.

"If you will never be better off – " She stops.

"Yes, dear, go on; 'if I shall never be better off' – I certainly never shall; I feel sure that you will be able to put my earnings for the next ten years into your eye, and see none the worse for them!"

"If – you – will – never – be – better – off – " she repeats again, more slowly, and breaking off at the same place.

"Well, dear?"

"If you will never be better off" – this time she finishes her sentence; but it is rendered almost inaudible by the fact of her flushed face and quivering lips being pressed against his breast – "why should we wait any longer?"

Why should we wait any longer? To most persons, granted the usual condition of feeling of a betrothed couple, this would seem a very natural and legitimate deduction from the premises; but, strange to say, it comes upon Burgoyne with the shock of a surprise. He has been thinking vaguely of his change of fortune as a cause for unlimited delay, perhaps for the rupture of his engagement, never as a reason for its immediate fulfilment.

He gives a sort of breathless gasp, which is happily too low for Amelia with her still hidden face to hear. To be married at once! To sit down for all time to Amelia and £800 a year! To forego for ever the thrilling wandering life; the nights under the northern stars, the stealthy tracking of shy forest creatures; the scarce coarse delicious food, the cold, the fatigue, the hourly peril, that, since its

probable loss is ever in sight, make life so sweetly worth having – all, in short, that goes to make up so many an Englishman's ideal of felicity; that has certainly hitherto gone to make up Jim's. To renounce it all! There is no doubt that the bitterness of this thought comes first; but presently, supplanting it, chasing it away, there follows another, a self-reproachful light flashing over his past eight years, showing him his own selfishness colossal and complete for the first time. In a paroxysm of remorse, he has lifted Amelia's face, and, framing it with his hands, looks searchingly into it.

"I believe," he says in a shaken voice, "that you would have married me eight years ago, on my pittance, if I had asked you!"

No "Yes" was ever written in larger print than that which he read in her patient pale eyes. Even at this instant there darts across him a wish that they were not quite so pale, but he detests himself for it.

"And I never suspected it!" he cries compunctiously. "I give you my word of honour, I never suspected it! I thought you looked upon my poverty in as prohibitory a light as I did myself."

"I do not call it such great poverty," replies Amelia, her practical mind resuming its habitual sway over her emotions. "Of course, it is an income that would require a little management; but if we cut our coat according to our cloth, and did not want to move about too much, we might live either in a not very fashionable part of London, or in some cheap district in the country very comfortably."

Despite his remorse, a cold shiver runs down Burgoyne's spine at the picture that rises, conjured up with too much distinctness by her words, before his mind's eyes; the picture of a snug Bayswater villa, with a picturesque parlour-maid, or the alternative cottage in some dreary Wiltshire or Dorsetshire village, with a shrubbery of three aucuba bushes, and a kitchen-garden of half an acre. It may be that, her frame being in such close proximity to his, she feels the influence of his shiver, and that it suggests her next sentence, which is in a less sanguine key.

"But it would not be fair; it would be asking you to give up too much."

The meek abnegation of her rather worn voice brings his remorse uppermost again on the revolving wheel of his feelings.

"Is not it my turn to give up something?" he asks tenderly; "and besides, it is time for me to settle! I am – I am tired of wandering!"

As this atrocious lie passes his lips, he catches his breath. Tired of the Sierras! Tired of the bivouacs among the dazzling snow! Tired of the august silence of the ever-lasting hills! Heaven forgive him for saying so! Perhaps there is no great air of veracity in his assertion, for she looks at him distrustfully; so distrustfully that he reshapes his phrase: "At least, if I am not, I ought to be!"

But still she gazes at him with a wistful and doubting intentness.

"If I could only believe that that was true!"

"It is true," replies he, evading her look; "at least, true enough for all working purposes; we all know that life is a series of compromises, a balancing of gain and loss. I shall lose something, I do not deny that, but I gain more – I gain *you*!"

"That is such a mighty gain, is it not?" she says with a melancholy smile, as that intuition of the truth which sometimes comes to unloved or tepidly loved women flashes upon her.

"A matter of taste – a mere matter of taste!" rejoins he hurriedly; aware of the unreal ring in his own words, and trying, with all his might, to feel as well as speak light-heartedly.

She shakes her head in a way which tells him how poorly he has succeeded. In a desperate if not very well-judged attempt to convince her of his sincerity, his next speech is uttered.

"Why should not we be married at once? to-morrow? the day after to-morrow? at the Consulate – of course there *is* a Consulate – or the English church; I suppose there are half a dozen English churches. Why not? We have nothing to wait for, and we are both of age!"

He has had no unkindly intention in the last words, but the moment that these are out of his mouth, a glance at Amelia's unblooming face and unyouthful figure tell him that they were not happily chosen. At the first instant that the suggestion of an immediate marriage reaches the hearer's brain, it sends a dart of joy over her features. To be married at once! To put an end for ever to the interminable

waiting, to enter at last – at last upon the possession of the so long deferred Canaan. But in a second, that first bright flash is chased away, and gives place to a look of almost humiliation.

"You must be making fun of me, to suggest such a thing!" she says in a wounded voice; "you know how wildly impossible it would be that I should leave them all – my father – Sybilla – without any preparation."

"Without any preparation!" replies Jim, raising his eyebrows. "Have not you been preparing them for the last eight years?"

He feels a vague unjust irritation with her for opposing his proposition, though deep down in his heart he knows that he would have felt a much greater annoyance had she eagerly closed with it. As she does not answer a question, which the moment that it is uttered he feels to have been rather brutal, he goes on, against his will, in the same sarcastic key:

"I am afraid that you will have to leave them all some day; I am afraid that our Bayswater mansion – by-the-bye, I am sure it will not be a mansion, for I am sure it will not have a back-door – will not be likely to contain all. Your father – Sybilla – Sybilla and her physic bottles take up a good deal of room, do not they?"

It is fortunate for Amelia that she is too preoccupied by the thought of her own next speech to take in the full acerbity of the last remark.

"If you would consent to wait till we get home – father does not mean to stay in Italy beyond the end of next month – we might be married in June; that" (with a pink flush of happiness) "would not be so long to wait."

In a second a sum of the simplest description executes itself in Burgoyne's head. It is now the second week of April; they are to be married in June, he has then eight weeks left. It shocks himself to find that this is the way in which he puts it. All the overt action that he permits himself, however, is to say with a shrug:

"As you will, then, as you will!" adding, since he feels that there is something discourteous even to unchivalry in so bald an acquiescence in his prospective bliss, "Of course, dear, the sooner I get you the better for me!"

No lover could have been overheard giving utterance to a more proper or suitable sentiment; so that it is lucky that this is just the moment that Cecilia chooses for entering.

"Do not be afraid," she says, with a laugh. "I will not stay a minute, but I just wanted to say 'How do you do?' How well you are looking! and how young!" – with an involuntary glance of comparison from him to her sister; a glance of which they are both rather painfully conscious. "Ah!" (sighing) "with all your Rocky Mountain experiences, it is evident that you have been having an easier time than we have!"

"Are you alluding to Sybilla?" asks Jim gravely. "I have no doubt, from what I know of her powers in that line, that she has been extremely trying."

"Yes, partly," replies the girl doubtfully; "but I have had troubles of my own too. I dare say that Amelia has told you, or probably" (with a second and heavier sigh) "you have been more pleasantly employed."

"Amelia did hint at some disaster," replies Jim, struggling to conceal the rather grim smile which is curving his mouth, a feat the more difficult since he has no moustache to aid him; "but I have been waiting to hear all the details from yourself."

"I know that you are apt to think I fancy things," says Cecilia, sitting down on a third hard chair, "but there could be no fancy in this case; I am sure I was as much engaged as any girl ever was. I had chosen the drawing-room paper and bought the dining-room grate!"

"That is further than we ever got, is not it, Amelia?" says Jim, breaking, at the relation of this prosaic fact, into the laugh he has been with difficulty swallowing; "but, Cis, if I were you, I should keep the grate; one does not know how soon its services may be required again!"

"It is all very well for you to joke," returns Cecilia, with an offended air; "it may be play to you, but it is –"

"Not death, not quite death to you!" interrupts Burgoyne, glancing with an expressive smile at her buxom outline. "I think you will live to fight another day, will not you? But I really am extremely sorry; tell me all about it."

"He was perfectly right when we left England," says Cecilia, mollified at once, and apparently relieved by the invitation to unbosom herself of her woes; "nobody could have been more so; he came to see us off at Folkestone, and the tears were in his eyes; they were really, it was not my imagination, was it, Amelia? And at first he wrote all right, and said all the usual things; but then his letters gradually grew fewer and fewer, and after I had written and telegraphed a great many times – I do not know how many times I did not telegraph to ask whether he was ill, and you know how expensive foreign telegrams are – he sent me a few lines, oh, such cruel lines, were not they, Amelia? to say that, on reflection, he feared that the feeling he had for me was not such as to justify his entering on so sacred an engagement as marriage with me; but he ought to have thought of that before, ought not he?"

"Undoubtedly!"

"I will never engage myself to a clergyman again," says Cecilia pensively.

Burgoyne's thoughts have strayed at the mention of the cloth of his sister-in-law elect's truant admirer, to that member of the same profession who has lately robbed him of his heritage, and he replies with a good deal of feeling:

"They do play one dirty turns now and then, do not they? Yes, Cis, stick to laymen for the future!"

Cecilia receives this counsel with a melancholy sigh, fixing her large eyes on the carpet, but presently resumes the conversation in a livelier key.

"Let us talk about something pleasanter," she says. "Had you a good journey? Do you like your travelling companion? Why did not you bring him with you? Is he nice?"

"At all events, he is not a clergyman," replies Jim, with a rather malicious smile; "but no, my dear, do not let your thoughts turn in that direction! You must look at him as poor women look at diamonds!"

"I am sure I do not know what you mean!" replies Cecilia, reddening. "I have not the slightest wish to look at him! I am not in spirits to 'look,' as you call it, at anyone!"

A moment later, she adds, with a suspicion of malice in her tone:

"We are certainly an unlucky family in our loves! I, heartlessly thrown over, and Amelia engaged for eight years!"

Burgoyne smiles. "Amelia is not going to be engaged any longer," he says, putting his arm round his betrothed. "Amelia is going to be married at once!"

CHAPTER VII

It would seem natural that, after so long a separation, Burgoyne should dine and spend the evening with his betrothed; but such is not the case. For this, however, he is not to blame; he is quite prepared to stay with her until she turns him out. Had he not better school himself to domestic habits, since he is so soon to assume them for life? But in consideration for Sybilla he is dismissed undined. It is not that she ever shares the family dinner at their table *à part* in the *salle à manger*, but the thought of their entertaining a guest with a conviviality far greater in her imagination than would be the case in reality, while she herself lies lonely on her couch of suffering, preys upon her spirits so much that her family have to abandon the idea. So, towards sunset, Jim is dismissed. He has no opportunity for any parting endearments to his lady-love, as the whole family are in the room, and it is Cecilia, not Amelia, who volunteers to walk across the hotel courtyard with him, for the advantage of a last word. What that last word is he is not slow to learn.

"You will take us some excursions, will not you?" she says, with a persuasive air, putting her arm through his. "Father is so unenterprising, we have really seen scarcely anything; but you will take us some excursions now, will not you?"

"Are you sure that your spirits are equal to them?" inquires Burgoyne unkindly.

"I do not know about that, I am sure," replies she, growing pink at his tone; "but one must make an exertion sometime, and I think a little distraction would do me good, and so I am sure it would to poor Amelia!"

"Poor Amelia will shortly have the distraction of being married," rejoins the young man, who feels as if he could not repeat the statement of this fact too often to himself and others.

"And I think it would be only civil," continues Cecilia persistently, "in fact, I do not see how you could avoid it, if you invited your friend to join us."

But Jim escapes without having committed himself to this promise, and wanders about the town in the lovely, lowering light; finds himself on the Lung Arno, strolling along with the leisurely loiterers, among whom, for every two soft Tuscan voices, there is a loud metallic Anglo-Saxon one. He watches the carriages rolling back from their drive on the Cascine; the river falling over the weir; the river yellow as Tiber yesterday, and to day shot with blue and green and silver, as it tumbles with a pleasant noise. The houses on either side of the Arno, the domes and roofs, are all clothed in a strange serenity of yellow light; a golden air so transparent and line and crystal clear, so free from the soft blur of mist – lovely too – through which we see objects in our wet green home, that Jim feels as if he could stretch out his hand and touch the hill that backs gold towers and bridges, and see whether it really is made out of one whole amethyst, as it looks. The beauty of the world has always been very much to Burgoyne, though hitherto it has been chiefly in the austerity of her high and desert places that he has bowed the knee before the Universal Mother. This little gold evening city, sunset clad in the colours of the New Jerusalem, lifting her heavenly campanile to as heavenly a sky, is to him a new and wonderful thing. Her loveliness sinks into his soul, and with it a companion sadness as deep. From henceforth the sight of earth's fair shows will be, for the most part, forbidden him. He has always loved to look and adore in silence and alone; henceforth he will never have the right to be alone; henceforth he will never have the right to go anywhere without his wife. Strange and terrible word to which he tries in vain to accustom his mental ears; and, thanks to the narrowness of their means, neither of them will be able to stir from the strait precincts of their pinched home.

He comes back to his hotel, through the Piazza of the Duomo. All the infinite richness of cupola and arch, high up, are still wrapped in the fiery rose cloak of sunset, while below the body of the great church, with all its marbles and traceries and carved wonders, is clad in the sobriety of twilight.

On reaching the Minerva, he finds that Byng has not yet returned, or rather that he has been in and gone out again. He waits dinner half-an-hour for him, and then dines without him; dines in

solitude, since it is not till his cup of coffee is before him, and his cigarette between his lips, that his young friend appears. It is evidently no unpleasant errand that has detained him, for he arrives beaming, and too excited even to perceive the *menu* which a waiter offers him.

"They have arrived!" he cries. Oddly enough it never occurs to Burgoyne to inquire who "they" may be; it seems as much a matter-of-course to him as to the handsome pink and white boy before him, that the pronoun must relate to Elizabeth Le Marchant and her mother.

His only answer, however, is an "Oh!" whose tone is rather more eagerly interested than he could have wished.

"I thought that they could not stay more than another day in Genoa," continues Byng, at length becoming aware of the *menu* at his elbow; but only to wave it impatiently away. "So I thought I would just run down to the station to meet the evening train, the one we came by last night; however, it must have been more punctual than yesterday, for before I reached the station, I met them; I mean they passed me in a fiacre. I only caught a glimpse of her face, but I saw her hand; it was lying on the carriage door like a snow-flake."

"Like my grandmother!" cries Burgoyne in a rage, for which he cannot quite account to himself, at this ingenious and novel simile.

Byng laughs; the laugh of a thoroughly sweet-natured person, who, in addition, has some special cause for good-humour.

"I do not know what colour your grandmother was; but she must have been very unlike most people's if she was like a snow-flake."

Jim's cross mouth unbends into a reluctant smile. It is not the first time that he has discovered how useless, and also impossible, it is to be out of humour with Byng.

"I had a good mind to tell my fiacre man to follow them," continued Byng, in an excited voice; "but, in the first place, I did not know how to say it – really, Jim, we must get up a little of the lingo – and, in the second place, I thought it would perhaps be rather too much in the private detective line."

"I think it would have been extremely gentlemanlike!" rejoins Jim severely.

Byng reddens; but still without losing his temper.

"That is coming it rather strong, is not it? but anyhow, I did not do it." And then, by tacit agreement, they both drop the subject.

During the next three or four days it is not named between them, nor indeed do they see much of each other. Burgoyne spends the greater part of his days with Amelia. Whatever cause for the accusation he may have given during the previous eight years, nobody can say that he neglects her now. He passes long hours at her side, on the same hard chair that had supported him on their first interview, in the little dismal dining-room; going into calculations of house-rent and taxes, drawing up lists of necessary furniture. He even makes a bid for Cecilia's drawing-room grate; but that young lady, whose forecasting mind can look beyond present grief to future sunshine, refuses to part with it. The lovers are not always, however, studying Maple's and Oetzmann's lists. Sometimes Jim varies the diversion by taking his future wife to picture-galleries and churches, to the Uffizi, the Accademia, San Lorenzo. It is doubtful whether Amelia enjoys these excursions as much as she does the selection of bedsteads and saucepans, her pleasure being in some degree marred by a feverish anxiety to say what she thinks her lover expects of her as they stand before each immortal canvas. In her heart she thinks the great statues in the Medici Chapel frightful, a heresy in which she is kept in countenance by no less a light than George Eliot, who in one of her letters dares to say of them, "they remained to us as affected and exaggerated in the original, as in copies and casts." To Amelia many of the frescoes appear lamentably washed out, nor are her efforts to hide these sentiments attended with any conspicuous success, since nothing is more hopeless than for one utterly destitute of a feeling for works of art to feign it, without having the imposture at once detected.

Burgoyne's mind during these expeditions is a battle-ground for pity and rage; pity at the pathos of his poor love's endeavours; rage at their glaring failure. Cecilia sometimes accompanies the lovers,

but this does not make matters much better. Cecilia devotes but a very cursory notice to the pictures; her attention being almost wholly centred on the visitors, and on finding resemblances for them among the inhabitants of her own village at home, for the accuracy of which she appeals at every moment to her sister. Every day she asks Burgoyne to fulfil his promise – a promise which he as punctually assures her that he never made – to introduce his friend to her. He has a strangely strong reluctance to comply with this simple request, which yet, he knows, will have to be complied with some day. When Amelia is his wife, Byng will have to know Cecilia, for she will probably spend a great deal of her time with them – make their house a second home, in fact.

And meanwhile Jim is keenly, and for some reason sorely, conscious of the fact that, during the hours in which he is stooping his weary head over catalogues of fenders and fire-irons, carving-knives and fish-slices, blankets and ticking, Byng is searching Florence through her length and breadth for their two countrywomen. It is not indeed necessary to credit his friend with any special quest to account for his wanderings through the "adorable little city," as Henry James most truly calls it, since he is a young man of a wide and alert curiosity, with a large appetite for pleasure both intellectual and the reverse. Jim, whose acquaintance with him has chiefly been with his rowdy undergraduate side, bear-fighting, and proctor-defying, is astonished at his almost tremulous appreciation of the Ghirlandajos, the Lorenzo di Credis, the Giotto's, that in a hundred chapels, from a hundred walls, shine down in their mixed glory of naïve piety and blinding colour upon him.

One day the elder man is sitting in his bedroom with a despatch-box and a sheet of paper before him. He is embarked upon a dreary calculation as to what his guns will fetch. He has made up his mind to sell them. Of what further use can they be to him? He will not be allowed to shoot at the Bayswater omnibuses, which will be the only game henceforth within his reach. While he is thus employed upon an occupation akin to, and about as cheerful as, that of Rawdon Crawley before Waterloo, Byng enters.

"You look as if you had a headache, old chap," he says, sitting down upon his friend's bed.

"If you had been going through as many kitchen-ranges as I have this morning, perhaps you would have a headache," replies Jim gravely. "You know that I am going to be married as soon as I get home."

Byng nods; and Burgoyne, while inwardly blessing the tact that spares him any congratulations, takes himself to task for having made the announcement so lugubriously as to render felicitation obviously inapplicable.

"When are you going to introduce me to Miss Wilson?" asks Byng presently. "If you shirk it much longer, I shall think that you are ashamed of me."

Jim glances affectionately, yet not quite comfortably, at his young friend, and the thought dashes across his mind that, in his last remark, the latter has put the saddle on the wrong horse.

"You have so large an acquaintance in Florence already," he says, with some stiffness, "that I did not know that you would care to add to it."

"One cannot have too much of a good thing," replies the other joyously. "You know I love my fellow-creatures; and in this case," he adds civilly, "I do care very much."

Burgoyne's eyes are bent on the paper before him, which contains the melancholy enumeration of his firearms – "A 500 double-barrelled express, by Henry, of Edinburgh; a 450 single-barrelled ditto, by same maker," etc., etc. – as he says slowly:

"I shall be very happy."

His acceptance of the proposition can hardly be called eager; but of this Byng appears unawares.

"When shall it be, then? To-day – this afternoon?"

"No-o-o; not to-day, I think. It has been arranged that we are to go to San Miniato – Amelia, her sister, and I."

"Three of you?" cries Byng, raising his eyebrows. "Then why not four? Why may not I come too?"

There being, in point of fact, no reason why he should not, and Cecilia's morning prayer being still ringing in her future brother-in-law's ears, he gives a dull and lagging assent; so that at about three o'clock the two men present themselves at the door of the Wilsons' apartment at the Anglo-Américain Hotel. That Sybilla is not expecting visitors is evident by the fact that, at the moment of their entrance, she is taking her own temperature – a very favourite relaxation of hers – with a clinical thermometer. She removes the instrument from her mouth without indecent haste, and holds out a languid white hand to Byng.

"So you are going off on a long afternoon's pleasuring?" she says, with a pathetic smile. "I am so glad that neither of my sisters is going to stay at home with me. We invalids must guard against growing selfish, though I think that is perhaps more the danger with *malades imaginaires*; we real ones have learnt our lesson of suffering better, I hope."

"You do not look so very ill," replies Byng, in his sympathetic voice, letting his eyes rest caressingly on the prostrate figure, which has yet no smallest sign of emaciation about it.

"Ah, that is because of my colour," replies Sybilla, with an animation slightly tinged with resentment. "You, too, fall into that common error. My London doctor tells me that there is no such unerring indication of radical delicacy of constitution as a fixed pink colour like mine; the more feverish I am, the deeper it grows. It is very hard" – smiling again sadly – "for one gets no pity!"

"Where is Cecilia?" cries Jim brusquely, and fidgeting in his chair. "Why is not she ready?"

As he speaks, the young lady in question enters – so obviously arrayed for conquest, in so patently new a hat, and such immaculate pale gloves, that across Burgoyne's mind there flashes, in vexed mirth, the recollection of the immortal caution addressed by Major O'Dowd to his friend and comrade, "Moind your oi, Dob, my boy!" Would he not do well to repeat it to his friend?

CHAPTER VIII

They are off now, there being nothing further to retard them, leaving Sybilla *tête-à-tête* with her thermometer. They are off, sociably packed in one fiacre —

"Four precious souls, and all agog
To dash thro' thick and thin."

Not, indeed, that there is much dash about the Florentine cab-horses – saddest among God's many sad creatures – with not a sound leg among them, with staring coats and starting ribs, and poor broken knees; and with their sadness emphasized by the feathers stuck in their tired heads, as if to mock their wretchedness by a sort of melancholy smartness! Sad as they are, it must be owned that they are the only sad things in the cheerful Florentine streets, where no one seems over-busy, where, out of the deep-eaved, green-shuttered houses, people lean, talking to acquaintances on the shadowed pavement below. All the narrow thorough-fares are full of bustling life; but there is no haggard squalor apparently, no dreadful gin-palace gaiety. It does not follow here that a man must be drunk because he sings. And down the strait, colourful streets one looks – down a vista of houses diversely tall, each with its cream-yellow face and its green shutters, varied here and there by the towering bulk of some giant-blocked mountain-palace, through whose grim, barred windows a woman peeps, or a little dog shows his pointed nose – looks to where, in dwindling perspective, the view is closed by a narrow picture of lucent purple hill, Fiesole or Bellosguardo – names to which the tongue cleaves lovingly. Through the gay streets, over bridge and blue Arno, our travellers go; their driver cracking a prodigious whip, and with a tiny red dog, absurdly shaven, and with nothing but a small woolly head and tail left of the original design, seated gravely beside him. Away they go, pleasuring; but pleasure and pleasuring are not always identical.

Burgoyne sits opposite Amelia; and as for Cecilia, it is to be supposed that her heartache is for the moment dulled, since the same carriage-rug covers her knees and those of Byng. Burgoyne does not look at Amelia; nor, though his eyes are fixed upon the passing objects, does he at first see aught of them. His vision is turned inwards, and to his own soul he is mechanically repeating in dismal recitative, "A double-barrelled, central fire, breech-loading gun, by Lancaster; made strong enough at the breech to shoot a spherical bullet."

As for Amelia, her features are not of a build to express any emotion with much brilliancy; but over them lies a deep and brooding content. Amelia has not had much undiluted happiness in her life, but she is exceedingly happy to-day. She is even strangely free from the carking fear which usually assails her, of praising mistakenly, of being enthusiastic in the wrong places, and passing over the right ones unnoticed. If she keep to a vague generality of handsome adjectives, she will surely do well enough, and, on this high holiday that her heart is holding, he cannot be cross to her.

As to Byng, he is emphatically of the school of divinity taught by Tommy Moore, nor was he ever known, when lacking "the lips that he loved," to fail to make love to "the lips that are near." His taste is too good for him to have chosen Cecilia as a companion; but, since fate has allotted her to him for the afternoon, he finds no difficulty in making the best of her. Nor, to do her justice, is she destitute of charms of a certain kind, though her face has the inevitable air of commonness incident upon a very short nose and a very long upper lip. But she has a good deal of bloom, and of crisp, showy-coloured hair, and a very considerable eye-power. Byng's attachment to the fair sex being of far too stout a quality to be blunted by such trifles as an inch too much or too little of nose or lip, he also, like Amelia, is thoroughly prepared to enjoy himself.

Up the turning Via Galileo they climb, to the Basilica at the top – stock-drive of all tourists – hackneyed as only Yankeedom and Cockneydom, rushing hand in hand through all earth's sacredness,

can hackney. But even hackneying is powerless to take off the freshness to the eye that sees it for the first time, of that view when he beholds the Lily City lying close at his feet, so close that it seems he could throw a stone into her Arno.

They have left their fiacre, and, as naturally happens in a *partie carrée*— more especially when one couple are betrothed lovers — have broken into pairs. Burgoyne leans pensively on the terrace parapet, and his sombre eyes rest on the band of sister hills, joining hands in perpetual watch round valley and town; hills over which, in this late spring, there is more a promise than a performance of that green and many-coloured wealth of verdure and blossom that one associates with Firenze's fair name. But it is a promise that is plainly on the verge of a bounteous fulfilment. Then his look drops slowly to the city herself. In what a little space comparatively does the Florence that is immortal lie! The Duomo, the lily Campanile "made up of dew and sunshine," the Baptistery, Santa Croce, the Palazzo Vecchio; he could compass them in a ten minutes' walk. And around this small nucleus of the undying dead and their work, what a nation of gleaming villas of the polyglot living — a nation of every tongue, and people, and language! All over the hills is the sheen of white walls, the verdure of tended gardens; they stretch away almost to where the Apennines raise their cold white fronts against the sky.

He rouses himself to remember that Amelia is beside him, and that he ought to say something to her. So he makes a rather *banal* observation upon the smallness of the *enceinte* that encloses so much loveliness.

"Yes, is not it tiny?" replies she, with the eager pleasure of having a remark made to her which she cannot go wrong in answering. "Think of London! Why, the whole thing is not as big as South Kensington or Bayswater!"

He shudders. Must the accursed suburb pursue him even here?

"Let us go into the church," he says, in a tone that a little dulls his companion's buoyancy.

She follows him crestfallenly, asking herself whether she has answered amiss here also. She does not trust herself to any comment upon the interior.

Byng and Cecilia are standing before the high altar, from over which a mosaic Madonna stiffly beams upon them; and as the other couple approach them, Burgoyne hears the words "drawing-room grate" issue from his future sister-in-law's lips.

"Bravo, Cis!" he says in a dry aside; "you are getting on nicely! I did not think that you would have reached the drawing-room grate till to-morrow."

To avoid intruding further on her delicate confidences, and also to escape from two Americans, who are nasally twanging Hare and Horner at each other, varied by trips into Baedeker, he passes into a side chapel made famous by one of the loveliest tombs that ever feigned to simulate in marble death's ugliness. The Yankee voices are high and shrill, but they had need to be higher and shriller still before they could break the slumber of him whose resting-place Jim has invaded in his flight from Cecilia and New York. Was ever rest so beautiful as this of the young sleeper? A priest he was, nay cardinal, and youthful and lovely and chaste! and now in how divine a slumber is he lapt! But how should that four hundred years' slumber not be divine, watched by such a gentle Mary-mother as is watching his; smiling as if to tell him that he does well to sleep, that sleep is better than waking, that death is better than life! There is a sunken look about his fair eyelids, as if he had gone through suffering to his rest; and his reposeful hands are thin; but below him, as he lies in his spotless marble tranquillity, upon his sarcophagus, the rose garlands wave in lovely frieze, and the riotous horses rear and plunge in fulness of life.

Burgoyne has not perceived that Amelia did not follow him. She has, in point of fact, remained in the body of the church, immersed in her guide-book, steadily working through the marble screen and pulpit, and still five good minutes off the side chapel, in which her lover stands in so deeply brown a study, that he is not aware of the intrusion upon his solitude of two women, until he is roused with a leap by the voice of one of them addressing — not him, of whose presence she is obviously as unaware as was he of hers, until this moment — but her companion.

"Oh, mother! am I not a fool, at my age, too? but I cannot help it, it makes me cry so!"

Burgoyne does not need the evidence of his eyes. His ears and his startled heart have enough assured him whose are the tears called forth by that indeed most touching effigy at which he himself has been so pensively staring.

The mother's answer is inaudible; and then again comes the voice of Elizabeth Le Marchant, tearful and vibrating.

"You know I have seen so few beautiful things in my life, I shall get used to them presently; it is only sheer happiness that makes me – "

She stops abruptly, having evidently discovered for herself, or been made aware by her mother of his vicinity; and even if she had not done so, he feels that he must lose no time in announcing himself.

"Florence is a place that does make one often choky," he says, eagerly taking the hand which she hesitatingly, and with some confusion, offers him.

It is not quite true; Florence has never made him feel choky; and, if he is experiencing that sensation now, it is certainly not the dead cardinal of Portugal who is giving it to him.

"I am a fool, a perfect fool!" replies Elizabeth, hastily and shamefacedly wiping away her tears.

To give her time to recover herself, and also because he has not yet greeted the girl's mother, Jim turns to her.

"Did not I tell you that we should meet here?"

There is such undisguised joy and triumph in his tone, that perhaps Mrs. Le Marchant has not the heart to dash his elation; at all events, he is conscious in her tone of a less resolute determination to keep him at arm's-length, than on their two last meetings.

"I do not think that I contradicted you," she answers, smiling.

He may steal another look at Elizabeth now. She is not crying any longer. Indeed, despite the real moisture on her cheeks, she strikes him as looking happier than at their last meeting; and though the interval between now and then is too short for any such alteration to have taken place in reality, yet he cannot help imagining that the hollows in those very cheeks are less deep than when they stood together before the great Vandyke in the Brignoli Sala Palace.

"And the *entresol*? is it all your fancy painted it?" he asks quickly, feeling a sort of panic fear, that if he stops putting questions for one minute they will slip out of his grasp again, as they did in the Genoese Palace.

Elizabeth's face breaks into a soft bright smile. She has a dimple in one cheek and not in the other. She must have had it ten years ago; how comes he to have forgotten so sweet and strange a peculiarity?

"It is delightful – perfectly delightful!"

"Large enough to receive your friends in, after all?"

But the moment that the words are out of his mouth, he perceives that he has made a false step, and is somehow treading dangerous ground. Elizabeth's smile goes out, like a light blown into nothingness by a sudden wind.

"We have not many friends," she murmurs; "we – we are not going out at all."

He hastens to change his cue.

"Byng and I are at the Minerva," he says, beginning to talk very fast; "I wonder if, by any chance, you are in our neighbourhood; have I forgotten, or did you never tell me where the *entresol* lies? Where is it, by-the-bye?"

Ensnared by the wily and brazen suddenness of this demand, Miss Le Marchant has evidently no evasion ready, and, after an almost imperceptible pause of hesitation, answers:

"We are at 12 bis, Piazza d'Azeglio."

She is looking doubtfully and half uneasily in his face, as she gives this answer, but he has scarcely time for a flash of self-congratulation at having obtained the information, which he had

never realized the eagerness of his desire for until this moment, before he becomes aware that his interlocutor's eyes are no longer meeting his, but have wandered to some object over his shoulder. What that object is he is not long left in doubt. Whether it is a genuine accident, or one of those spurious ones, of which those who profit by them are the artificers, Jim does not know; and, as he is at the time, and will be when he thinks of the circumstance to the end of his life, too angry to question Byng on the subject, it is pretty certain that he never *will* know; but so it is that at this moment the voice of his *protégé* breaks upon his ear:

"You are not going to give us the slip like this, old chap – oh! I beg your pardon!"

But begging pardon ever so sweetly does not alter the fact that he has rushed, like a bull in a china shop, into the middle of the dialogue. All four look at each other for a second; then, since there is no help for it, Jim presents his disciple, and the next moment the latter has slid into talk with Elizabeth, and she is responding with an ease and freedom from embarrassment such as had never marked her sparse and hardly won utterances to the elder man.

Byng has the advantage of him, as he somewhat bitterly thinks. Byng has no connection with "old times;" those poor old times which she and her mother have so unaccountably taken *en grippe*. He seems suddenly relegated, as by some natural affinity, to the mother. On their two last meetings the eagerness to converse has been all on his side; yet now he has nothing to say to her. It is she who addresses him.

"I hope that you found your young lady flourishing," she says civilly.

He gives a slight inward start, though – as he is thankful to feel – his body is quiet. "His young lady!" Yes, of course he has a young lady! Has there been any danger during the last five minutes of his forgetting that fact? and has Mrs. Le Marchant done him an unnecessary service in recalling it?

"Oh, yes, thanks, she is all right!"

"Is she still in Florence?"

"Yes, she is here; by-the-bye" – looking round with a sudden sense that he ought to have missed her – "what has become of her? Oh, here she is!"

For even while the words are on his lips, Amelia and Cecilia come into sight. Amelia with a shut Baedeker, and the serene look of an easy conscience and a thoroughly performed duty on her amiable face; Cecilia with a something of search and disquiet in her large rolling eye, which would have made him laugh at another time.

A sudden instinct, with which his will has nothing to do, makes him flash a look back at Mrs. Le Marchant, as if to gauge the effect produced upon her by his betrothed; and, following her glance, he finds that it is resting on Cecilia. She thinks that he is engaged to Cecilia. The mistake is intolerable to him, and yet a second's reflection tells him that it is a natural one. In a second he sees his Amelia as she presents herself to a strange eye. Miss Wilson is only thirty-one, but upon her has already come that set solid look of middle age, which overtakes some women before they are well over the borders of youth, and which other women manage to stave off till they are within near hail of forty. Yes; the mistake is quite a natural one. Most people would suppose that the showy Cecilia, still fairly youthful, and with so many obvious and well-produced "points," must be his choice; and yet, as I have said, the idea that anyone should credit him with her ownership is intolerable to him.

"Here she is!" he cries precipitately. "The one to the right side, the other is her sister; may I – may I present them to you?"

Perhaps it is his irritated fancy that dictates the idea, but it seems to him as if he detected a sort of surprise in Mrs. Le Marchant's face, when he effects the introduction he has proposed, and to which she accedes courteously, after a pause of hesitation about as long as had followed his inquiry of Elizabeth as to their address.

Five minutes later they have all sauntered out again on the terrace, and Burgoyne is again leaning on the wall; but this time he has no fear of hearing of Bayswater, for it is Elizabeth who is beside him. Since last he looked at it half an hour ago, a sort of glorification has passed over the

divine view. Down where the river twists through the plain country, there is a light, dainty mist, but the mountains have put on their fullest glory. They are not green, or brown, or purple, or blue; but clad in that ineffable raiment woven by the sun, that defies our weak vocabulary to provide it with a name. A little snow-chain lies on the sun-warmed neck of Morello, and along the tops of the further Apennines, right against the acute blue of the heavens, lies a line of snow, that looks like a fleecy-soft cloud resting from its journeyings on their crests; but it is no cloud, nor is there any speck upon the gigantic complete arch that over-vaults town and valley and radiant mountains. In the folds of these last, the shadows slumber; but over all the city is the great gold glory of spring. The one thing in Florence that frowns among so many smiles is the scowling Pitti, and that, from here, is invisible. Nearer to him, against the azure, stand the solemn flame-shaped cypresses arow, and beside them – as unlike as life to death – a band of quivering poplars, a sort of transparent gold-green in their young spring livery. The air is so clear that one can go nigh to counting the marbles on the Duomo walls. In a more transparent amber light, fuller of joy and gaiety, cannot the saved be dancing around, as in Fra Angelico's divine picture? cannot they be walking in the New Jerusalem of St. John's great dream? Only in the New Jerusalem there are no galled and trembling-kneed fiacre horses.

Elizabeth is sitting on the wall, her light figure – is it possible that it has been in the world only four years less than Amelia's solid one? – half-supported by one small gray hand outspread on the stone; her little fine features all tremulous with emotion, and half a tear gathered again in each sweet eye. As Jim looks at her, a sort of cold covetous gripe pinches his heart.

"What a woman with whom to look at all earth's loveliness – with whom to converse without speech!"

Even as he so thinks, she turns her head towards him, and, drawing in her breath with a long low sigh, says:

"Oh, how glad I am I did not die before to-day!"

Her eyes are turned towards him, and yet, as once before, he realizes that it is not to him that either her look or her thoughts are directed. Both are aimed at an object over his shoulder, and, as before, that object is Byng. Byng, too, has been gazing at the view. There are tears in Byng's eyes also. Stevenson says that some women like a man who cries. Byng cries easily and genuinely, and enjoys it; and, as he is a remarkably fine young man, there is something piquant in the contrast between his wet blue orbs and his shoulders.

As Burgoyne rolls home that afternoon in his fiacre, as before, placed opposite Amelia, his mental vision is no longer fixed upon a "double-barrelled, central fire, breech-loading gun;" it is fixed with a teasing tenacity upon the figure of a smallish woman, perennially looking, through brilliant tears, over his shoulder at somebody else.

CHAPTER IX

"Was it 12, or 12 bis, Piazza d'Azeglio?"

There are no tears in Byng's eyes as he asks this question next morning – asks it of his friend, as the latter sits in the Fumoir, with an English paper in his hands, and a good cigar between his clean-shaven lips. It has struck him several times lately that he will have to give up good cigars, and take to a churchwarden pipe and shag instead. But, so far, the churchwarden and the shag remain in the future.

"12, or 12 bis, Piazza d'Azeglio?" inquires Byng.

"Was *what* 12 or 12 bis?" replies his friend, with a somewhat obviously intentional obtuseness; but Byng is far too thoroughly healthy and happy a young animal this morning to take offence easily.

"I mean Miss Le Marchant's address," he answers, explaining as amiably as if he had not been perfectly aware that it was only "cussedness" that had dictated the query.

There is a slight pause. Burgoyne would like to answer that he does not remember – would like still more to answer that he does not see what business it can be of Byng's; but, since he is not destitute of common-sense, a second's reflection shows him that he has no good reason for either the lie or the incivility, so he replies, pretty calmly, with his eyes still on his leading article:

"I believe Miss Le Marchant said 12 bis."

Having obtained the information he wanted, and finding his companion not conversationally disposed, Byng is moving away again, when he is arrested by Jim's voice, adding to the intelligence he has just given the monosyllable:

"Why?"

"Why what?" asks Byng, returning readily, and laughingly mimicking the intentional obtuseness so lately practised on himself by the other.

"Why did you ask?"

"I am thinking of paying my respects there this afternoon, and I did not want to ring at the wrong bell."

A short silence. Jim's head is partly hidden by his *Galignani*.

"Did Miss or Mrs. Le Marchant ask you to call?"

Byng laughs.

"Both of them are as innocent of it as the babe unborn!"

"You asked yourself then?" (in a snubbing voice).

Byng nods.

"And she said yes?"

The plural pronoun has dropped out of sight, but neither of them perceives it. The younger man shakes his sleek head. Jim lays down his paper with an air of decision.

"If she did not say 'Yes' – if she said 'No,'" he begins, with an accent of severity, "I fail to understand –"

"She did not say 'No,'" interrupts Byng, still half laughing, and yet reddening as well. "She began to say it; but I suppose that I looked so broken-hearted – I am sure I felt it – that she stopped."

As Jim makes no rejoinder, he continues by-and-by:

"After all, she can but send me away. One is always being sent away" (Jim wishes he could think this truer than he does); "but now and again one is not sent, and those are the times that pay for the others! I'll risk it."

There is a hopeful ring in his voice as he ends, and again a pause comes, broken a third time by the younger man.

"Come now, Jim" – looking with a straight and disarming good humour into his friend's overcast countenance – "speak up! Do you know of any cause or impediment why I should not?"

Thus handsomely and fairly appealed to, Burgoyne, who is by nature a just man, begins to put his conscience through her paces as to the real source of his dislike to the idea of his companion's taking advantage of that introduction which he himself has been the means – however unwillingly – of procuring for him. It is true that Byng's mother had adjured him, with tears in her eyes, to preserve her boy from undesirable acquaintances; but can he, Burgoyne, honestly say that he looks upon Elizabeth Le Marchant as an undesirable acquaintance for anyone? The result of his investigations is the discovery of how infinitesimal a share in his motives regard for his young friend's welfare has had. The discovery is no sooner made than he acts upon it.

"My dear boy," he says – and to his credit says it heartily – "I see no earthly reason why you should not go; you could not make nicer friends."

"Then why will not you come too?" asks Byng, with boyish generosity.

The other shakes his head. "They had much rather I stayed away; they have taken me *en grippe*."

"Pooh! Nonsense! You fancy it."

"I think not" – speaking slowly and thoughtfully – "I am not a fanciful person, nor apt to imagine that my acquaintances bother their heads about me one way or another; but when people try their best, in the first instance, to avoid recognising you at all, and on every subsequent occasion endeavour to disappear as soon as you come in sight, it is not a very forced assumption that they are not exactly greedy for your society."

This reasoning is so close that Byng is for the moment silenced; and it is the other who shortly resumes:

"I think it is because I remind them of the past; they have evidently some unpleasant association of ideas with that past. I wonder what it is."

The latter clause is addressed more to himself than to Byng.

"Perhaps some of them have died, or come to grief, and they are afraid of your asking after them," suggests the younger man.

"On the contrary – they are all – one more flourishing than another."

"Well, I would give them one more trial, anyhow; I am sure they would come round. Give them time, and I am sure they would come round!" cries Byng sanguinely; adding, "What could have been pleasanter than Mrs. Le Marchant's manner when you presented her to Miss Wilson?"

The mention of Miss Wilson recalls to Jim the extremely unpleasant moment of that presentation, thus brought back to him – the moment when Amelia had looked so middle-aged, and Cecilia so flashy; recalls to him also the conviction that has been growing upon him since yesterday, of the more than wisdom, the absolute imperative duty on his part, of avoiding a repetition of that comparison which had forced itself upon his notice in the church of San Miniato.

"You had better come," persists Byng still, like a magnanimous child, holding out half his cake to his friend; whether, like the same child, with a semi-hope that it may be refused, or whether, on the other hand, it may have crossed his mind that, where there are two visitees, the chances of a *tête-à-tête* are improved by there being also two visitors.

"My dear boy," returns Jim, this time with a testiness handsomely streaked with irony, "you are really too obliging; but, even if I wished it – which I do not – or even if *they* wished it – which they do *not* – it is in this case quite impossible, as I am engaged to go shopping with Amelia."

Probably the blow is not a knockdown one to Byng; at all events, he bears the rebuff with his habitual healthy good temper, and goes off to put on a smarter tie. Burgoyne, thinking no such improvement in his toilette necessary, strolls away to the Anglo-Américain. It is true that he has covenanted to escort Amelia to the shop for Cantagalli ware, though there is no particular reason why, had he so wished it, the purchase of the dinner-service that is to grace their Bayswater symposia might not have been deferred for twenty-four hours; and indeed, as things turn out, it has to be so deferred.

As he opens the door of the Wilson sitting-room his future father-in-law brushes past him, with evident signs of discomposure all over his clerical figure and spectacled face; and, on entering, he

finds equal, if not superior, marks of upset equanimity on the countenances of the three women that are the room's occupants. Over the wood fire – Sybilla alternately roasts and freezes her family, and this is one of her roasting days – Cecilia is stooping, in evident search for some object that has been committed, or tried to be committed, to the flames. The other two are looking on with an air of vexed interest. Sybilla is the first to address him.

"You have appeared at a not very happy moment," she says, with a sigh; "we have been having a family breeze; it has sent my temperature up nicely! It is 100, 100, Point 2."

The mention of Sybilla's temperature is always enough to put Jim in a rage. It is therefore in no very feeling tone that he returns:

"If it were 1,000, Point 99, I should not be surprised, in this atmosphere! Good Heavens, Cis, are not you hot enough already?"

The young lady thus apostrophised rises, with some precipitation, and with a very heated complexion, from her knees, holding in her hand, however, the object of her quest – a rather charred small parcel, done up in white paper, and with a fragment of white ribbon still adhering here and there to it.

"Father behaves so childishly," she says, with irritated undutifulness.

"You must own that it was enough to provoke him," strikes in Amelia's mild voice.

"What was enough to provoke him? How has he shown his childishness? For Heaven's sake, some of you explain!" cries Jim impatiently, looking from one to the other.

But with this request none of the three appears in any hurry to comply. There is a distinct pause before Cecilia, seeing neither of her seniors shows any signs of relieving her of the burden of explanation, takes that burden upon herself.

"The fact is," she says, setting her little rescued packet on the table beside her, and beginning to fan herself, "that Mr. Dashwood, the man to whom I was engaged, has chosen to marry. I am sure" – with a shrug – "no one has the least desire to deny his perfect right to do so; and this morning there arrived by post a bit of his wedding-cake! I suppose he meant it civilly; but father chose to take it as an insult to himself, and though it was addressed to me, he threw it into the fire. I am very fond of wedding-cake; so, as soon as father's back was turned, I fished it out again!"

Jim laughs, with more vigour perhaps than heartfelt amusement.

"Bravo, Cis! You are a real philosopher! We might all learn a lesson from you."

"What have you done with your nice friend?" asked Sybilla languidly. "Amelia, dear, this *couvre-pied* is slipping off me again. What a sympathetic voice he has! I am sure he has been a great deal with sick people."

"I left him putting on his best tie to go out calling. No, calm yourself, Cecilia, not on you; it is not your turn to-day."

"Whose turn is it then?" asks the girl, with an interest not at all blunted by the mortifying incident of the cake, which, indeed, she has begun to nibble with apparent relish.

Jim hesitates a second – a second during which it strikes him with a shock that he already finds a difficulty in pronouncing Elizabeth Le Marchant's name. He manages to evade the necessity even now by a circumlocution.

"I believe it is the Piazza d'Azeglio upon which that luminary is to shine."

"Is he going to see that lovely creature to whom you introduced me yesterday?" cries Amelia, with good-natured enthusiasm. "I heard her telling him that she lived in the Piazza d'Azeglio. Oh, Jim, how pretty she is! One ought to pay for being allowed to look at her."

Many women, whose plainness is incontestable, are able to be just to their better favoured sisters; but Amelia is more than just – she is lavishly generous.

Burgoyne rewards her with an affectionate look – a look such as would make her swear that, beside Miss Le Marchant, as beside Dumain's fair love,

"Juno but an Ethiop were!"

"She looks as if she had had a history; that always improves a woman's appearance," says Cecilia pensively, holding a fragment of the fateful cake suspended in air, and regarding it with a melancholy eye. "Has she?"

"I never asked her."

"Why did not you go too?" inquires Amelia, judiciously striking in, as is her habit, as often as she perceives that her younger sister is beginning to get too obviously upon her own *fiancé's* nerves; a catastrophe which something in the tone of his last remark tells her – though she does not quite understand why it should – is imminent. "They are old friends of yours, are not they? They may be hurt if they find that a perfect stranger like Mr. Byng is in a greater hurry to visit them than you are."

Before Burgoyne's mental vision rises a picture of Elizabeth's heavenly eye wandering indifferently over the dear old friend's shoulder to find its home in that of the perfect stranger. But he says kindly, and even playfully:

"Why did not I go too? Because I was under the impression that I was engaged to go with another lovely being to choose crockery, was I not? Am I not?"

Amelia's answer is conveyed by a series of nods and winks executed behind her sisters' backs, which he presently understands to imply that she desires a private interview. It is not immediately that he grasps what she is driving at, since dumb-show is often puzzling to the person at whom it is aimed, though clear as day to the dumb-shower. As soon, however, as he masters what her wish is, he hastens to comply with it; and five minutes later finds them *tête-à-tête* in the hideous little dining-room which had been the scene of their reunion, and of many after-meetings.

"I could not say so, of course, before *her*," remarks Miss Wilson, as soon as they are out of earshot, "or she might have insisted upon my going. She is very unselfish sometimes; but the fact is, I do not think I ought to leave Sybilla again to-day. You see, she was alone the whole of yesterday afternoon; and when we came back we found her in a very low way. She had been reading her book of prescriptions – you know the book; all the prescriptions which she has had for the last ten years bound up together – and we rather dread her bringing it out, as she always fancies that she is going to have the disease prescribed for."

"Humph!"

"And, after all, happiness ought not to make one selfish, ought it?" says Amelia, with a gentle sigh of abnegation, as she ruffles her pale-haired head against his coat-sleeve. "I have so much of you now – oh, so much! – not to speak of –"

"Cecilia, of course, is incapacitated by grief?" interrupts Jim brusquely. "She will be going up and down upon the mountains like another unfortunate fair one. But your father? He will be at home, will he not?"

"Yes, he will be at home," replies Amelia, slowly and doubtfully, as if not finding a very satisfactory solution in this suggested arrangement; "but, as you know, it never answers to leave father and Sybilla alone together for long. You see, he does not believe that there is anything the matter with her; he thinks that she is as well as you or I" (a gush of warm feeling towards his father-in-law rushes over Jim's heart); "and though he tries to prevent himself from showing it to her, yet I am afraid, poor dear, that he is not very successful."

Jim laughs.

"And to-day," continues Amelia, "he is naturally a good deal upset about Cecilia and that wedding-cake; it *was* very impertinent to send it – was not it? – though she does not seem to see it. I hope" – with a wistful smile, and a repetition of the fond friction of her head against his sleeve – "that when *you* throw *me* over –"

This is a hypothesis, suggested with perhaps unwise frequency by poor Miss Wilson, which never fails to exasperate Jim.

"If we are going to talk nonsense," he breaks in brusquely, and with no attempt to return or reward her caressing gesture, "I may as well go."

"Go to the Piazza d'Azeglio," says she coaxingly, her spirits raised by the harshness of tone of his interruption of her speech, and half persuading herself that it owes its birth to the supposition being too painful to be faced by him.

He looks at her strangely for a moment, then – "Why do you wish me to go to the Piazza d'Azeglio?" he asks, in a tone that is no longer overtly cross, only constrained and odd. "Why are you driving me there?"

"Because I think you would like it," she answers; "because" – taking his hand and passing her lips, which he feels to be trembling a little, very gently over the back of it – "because all through your life I want you to have exactly what you like, always."

He draws his hand away; not unkindly, but as if shocked at the humility of her action.

"That is so likely," he says mournfully.

CHAPTER X

There is no particular mirth in Burgoyne's mind as he mounts the stone stairs of the house which announces itself as 12 bis, in the commonplace new square of the Piazza d'Azeglio. But yet it is evident that, if he wishes to be in tune with the mood of the family to whom he is going to pay his respects, he must be not only mirthful, but musical. As the door of the *entresol*, to which he is directed by the porter, opens in answer to his ring, bursts of laughter, among which he can plainly detect the voice of Byng, assail his ear, mingled with music, or rather noise of a sort, but what sort his ear, without fuller evidence than is yet before it, is unable to decide. The person who has admitted him is an elderly Englishwoman, whose features at once strike him as familiar – so familiar that it needs scarcely one reaching back of memory's hand to capture the fact of her having filled the office of nurse at the Moat, at the period when the nursery there had been the scene of those frantic romps in which he himself had taken a prominent part, and in which Elizabeth had been to him by turns so able a second, or so vigorous an adversary. He would like to claim acquaintance with her, and, perhaps, if she had made any difficulty as to admitting him, might have screwed up his courage to do so; but as she lets him in without delay or hesitation, he follows her in silence along the passage of a by no means imposing little *entresol* – they are not so well off as they used to be, is his passing thought – is ushered into a small sitting-room, and, entering behind his own name, which has been completely drowned by the din issuing from within, has time, before the consciousness of his own appearance has disturbed it, to take in the details of a group which his entry naturally breaks up. Set slantwise across one angle of the room is an open cottage-piano, and beside it stands Elizabeth, her elbow resting on the top, and all her pensive face convulsed with helpless laughter. Upon the music-stool is seated a large collie dog, supported from behind in an upright position by Byng. Before him is a score of music, from which he is obviously supposed to be playing, as indeed he is doing in a sense – that is to say, he is bringing down first one large paw and then another heavily on the keys, accompanying each crash with a short howl to express the agony inflicted upon his nerves by his own performance. The scene is so entirely different a one from what he had expected: the immoderately laughing Elizabeth has so much more kinship with the sweet hoyden of the Moat than with the pale woman with a history of his two last meetings, that for a second or two Burgoyne stands in the doorway as if stunned. It is not till Mrs. Le Marchant, coming out of an inner room, advances to greet him, that he recovers himself.

"How do you do?" she says, smiling, and with less constraint than he has of late learnt to expect. "Are you fond of music?" (putting, as she speaks, her hands up to her ears). "I hope so! Did you ever hear such a shocking noise?"

"I do not know which I admire most, the vocal or the instrumental part of the performance," replies he, laughing; but even as he speaks both cease.

Elizabeth lifts her elbow from the piano, and Byng removes his hands from under the dog's arms, who at once, joyful and released, jumps down, upsetting his music-stool with the impetus of his descent, and yet immediately, with all a dog's real good-heartedness, begins to swing a handsome tail, to show that he bears no real malice for the odious practical joke that has been played upon him. The clamorous fall of dog and music-stool reveals an object which had been hidden behind both, in the shape of a little boy, in whose behalf, as it darts across Jim's mind, the eccentric concert, for which he has come in, must have been got up.

"Oh, *do* go on!" cries the child shrilly. "Oh, *do* make him do it again! Oh, why do you stop?"

And indeed through the whole of the ensuing conversation this cry recurs at short intervals with the iteration of a guinea-hen. But none of the three performers seems disposed to comply with this request. Two of them sit down decorously on chairs, and the third throws himself upon the floor panting, showing a fine red tongue, and dragging himself luxuriously along on his stomach to show

his relief at his *corvée* being ended. The child has followed Elizabeth, and now stands beside her, tiresomely pulling at her white hands.

"Bertie has come to spend the day with us," she says, looking explanatorily up at Jim, but speaking with a formality very different, as he feels, from the exuberant ease and mirth that had marked her intercourse with Byng.

Jim had already had a flash of speculation about the child, as to whether he might be a late-come little brother, arrived on the scene at a period subsequent to his own connection with the family; since plainly the span of his small life did not stretch to a decade.

"Bertie is a new friend," he says kindly. "I do not know Bertie."

"His mother, Mrs. Roche, is a cousin of ours; she has a villa on Bellosguardo. Perhaps you know her?"

"I am going to a party at her house on Wednesday," cries Jim, in a tone of eager pleasure at the discovery of this fresh link, and of the vista of probable meetings which it opens up. "I shall meet you there?"

Elizabeth turns her head slightly aside and shakes it as slightly.

"No?"

"We are not going out."

The formula implies mourning, and yet the clothes both of Elizabeth and her mother are unmistakably coloured ones, and give no indication of an even moderately recent loss. But it is so clear that Miss Le Marchant means to add no explanation that he has to change the subject.

"Though Bertie is not an old friend," he says, smiling, "yet I have come across one here to-day – she opened the door to me; I should have liked to shake hands with her, only she looked so haughty – she never used to look haughty at the Moat."

"Do you mean nurse?" she asks.

"Yes, I knew her in an instant; she is not in the least changed, less even" – hesitating a little, as if doubtful whether the stiffness of their new relations warranted a personality – "less even than you."

She snatches a hasty look at him, a look upon which he sees, to his surprise, imprinted a character of almost fear.

"You must be laughing at me," she says, in a voice in which he detects an undoubted tremor; "I am very much changed."

There is such obvious apprehension in her whole manner, that his one thought – after a first flash of astonishment – is to reassure her.

"Of course I was only speaking of externals," he says quickly; "ten years could hardly be expected to leave any of us quite where we were as to our inner selves;" then, seeing her still look flurried, and becoming himself nervous, he adds, rather stupidly, the hackneyed Swinburnian couplet

"Time turns the old days to derision,
Our loves into corpses or wives!"

though I never could see that that was quite a necessary alternative!"

Ere the words are out of his mouth she has risen with precipitation, and begun hurriedly to re-arrange the branches of lilac in a scaldino on the table near her. She is apparently so awkward about it that one odorous white bough falls out on the floor. Before Jim can stoop to pick it up, Byng has rushed to the rescue. In eagerly thanking him, in receiving it back from him, and accepting his services in replacing it among its perfumed brothers, the girl, perhaps involuntarily, turns her back upon her former interlocutor, who sits for a moment staring rather blankly at her, and wondering what sting there could have lurked in his apparently harmless words to drive her away so abruptly. Whatever may have driven her away, there is certainly no doubt as to her being gone. Nor as Jim sees

her moving about the room, followed by Byng, and showing him her treasures – the little wild red and yellow tulips she plucked in the field this morning; the chicken-skin box she bought at Ciampolini's yesterday, and mixing all that she shows with her delicate light laughter – can he buoy himself up with any reasonable hope of her ever, with her own good will, returning. He must be looking more blank than he is conscious of, for Mrs. Le Marchant's voice sounds quite apologetic in his ears, when, having been, like himself, deserted by her companion, she takes a seat near him.

"Elizabeth is so proud of her bargains," she says, glancing with a lenient smile towards her daughter; "she must show them to everybody."

"She never offered to show them to me," replies Jim, rather morosely; then, becoming aware of the almost puerile jealousy evidenced by his last remark, he adds:

"I am afraid I said something that annoyed Miss Le Marchant; I cannot think what it could have been. I told her how wonderfully little changed I thought her in the last ten years; but it could not have been that, could it?"

The mother's eye is still following her child, and, if it were not an absurd assumption, Burgoyne could have fancied that there was a sudden moisture in it.

"She is very sensitive," Mrs. Le Marchant answers slowly; "perhaps it would be safer not to say anything about herself to her."

"Perhaps it would be safer," rejoins Jim, with some ill-humour, "if you were to draw up a list of subjects for me to avoid; I have no wish to play the part of bull in a china shop; and yet I seem to be always doing it; imprimis" (striking the forefinger of his left hand with the right), "imprimis the Moat."

He pauses, as if expecting a disclaimer, but none such comes – "The past generally" (moving on to the second finger and again halting; but with no more result than before). "Yourselves" (reaching the third finger). Still that silence, which, if it mean anything, must mean assent. He looks impatiently in her face, to seek the response which her lips refuse him.

"On your own showing," she says gently, though in a rather troubled voice, "you have the whole field of the present and the future left you; are not they wide enough for you?"

His brows draw together into a painful frown.

"Perhaps I have as little cause to be fond of them as you have of the past."

It is a random shot, a bow drawn at a venture; but it could not have hit more true apparently had it been levelled with the nicest aim.

As her daughter had done before her, Mrs. Le Marchant rises hastily, and leaves him – leaves him to reflect ironically upon how wisely Amelia had acted in insisting upon his visiting these "dear old friends," upon whom the effect of his conversation is so obviously exhilarating.

"I wish I had not come; I wish it was time to go home!"

The small fractious voice that wails the two preceding sentences seems to be Jim's own mouthpiece. It is, in point of fact, the voice of Bertie, who, tired of uttering his unregarded request for the repetition of the concert which had filled him with such delight, has of late been trying the effect of his unassisted powers to bring about the desired consummation, by putting his arms as far as he can round the dog's body, and endeavouring to lug him towards the music-stool. The collie has been enduring this treatment for five minutes – enduring it with an expression of magnanimous patience, which seems to say, that, though it is undoubtedly an unpleasant experience, yet, as it is inflicted upon him by one of his own family, he must of course put up with it, when Elizabeth goes to the rescue. Elizabeth goes alone, since Byng is held in converse by her mother at the other side of the room. Verbal persuasions having entirely failed, she tries to loosen the child's arms; but his grasp, though puny, is obstinate, and the only perceptible result of her endeavours is the utterance by her young friend of the two polite aspirations above recorded.

"He does not want to sing any more to-day," Jim hears her saying in her gentle voice; "you really are hurting him; he is too polite to say so; but you are squeezing him so tight that you really *are* hurting him. Why now" (with a little accent of pain), "you are hurting *me*."

Jim has been looking with a lack-lustre eye out of the open window at the young plane trees exchanging their frowsy buds for infant leaves; at the one Judas tree pranking in its purple blossoms in the Piazza; but at that low complaint he makes one step across the room, and, whipping off Master Bertie alike from long-enduring dog and plaintive woman, stoops over the latter as she sits upon the floor, passing one hand over the other, upon which the child's angry fingers, transferred from his first victim, have left rosy prints of pain.

"I wish I had not come; I wish it was time to go home!" whimpers the little boy.

"Since he is so anxious to go home, I will take him, if you like," says Jim in a stiff voice; "I must be going myself."

She looks up at him from her lowly posture, a charming, half-apologetic, wholly peace-making smile fleeting across her small face, while she still chafes her hand – that little pinched hand which makes him feel so ridiculously tender.

"Are you, too, sorry that you came?" she asks.

The question takes him by surprise. He is not prepared for so friendly and almost intimate a sequel to her short, shy answers, and her abrupt quitting of him. He hesitates how to answer it; and as he hesitates, she rises and stands beside him. It is not easy for a grown person to rise gracefully from a seat on the floor. Jim catches himself thinking with what a roll and a flounder Cecilia would have executed the same manœuvre; but Elizabeth, supple and light, rises as smoothly as an exhalation from a summer meadow.

"If I was rude to you just now," she says, rather tremulously; "if I am ever rude to you in the future, I hope you will understand – I hope you will put it down to the fact that I – I – am very ignorant of – that I know very little of the world."

The two men are gone; so is the child; so is the dog; and Elizabeth is shutting up the piano and removing the score.

"What a noise we made!" she says, smiling at the recollection.

"If you make such a shocking noise again, the signora and the other lodgers will infallibly interfere."

Mrs. Le Marchant has followed her daughter, and now throws one arm about her slight neck, with a gesture of passionate affection.

"If you knew," she says, in a voice of deep and happy agitation, "what it was to me to hear you laugh as you did to-day!"

"I have a good many arrears in that way to make up, have not I, mammy? And so have you too," answers the younger woman, laying her sleek head down caressingly on her mother's shoulder; then, in a changed and restless voice: "Oh, if we could stop that man talking about the Moat! Why does he go on hammering about it?"

"Why indeed?" replies Mrs. Le Marchant with a shrug. "Men are so thick-skinned; but it is rather touching, his having remembered us all these years, is not it? For my part, I had almost entirely forgotten his existence – had not you?"

"Absolutely!" replies Elizabeth, with emphasis; "and if he will only let me, I am more than willing to forget it over again. Oh, mammy" (turning her face round, and burying it on her mother's breast), "why can't we forget everything? begin everything afresh from now – this delightful *now*?"

CHAPTER XI

A reconciliation is seldom effected without some price being paid for it. Jim's with Elizabeth, if it can be called such, is bought at the cost of a small sacrifice of principle on his part. No later than this morning he had laid it down as a Median rule that he should avoid opportunities of finding himself in Miss Le Marchant's company; and yet, not only has he spent the major part of the afternoon in her society, but, as he walks away from her door, he finds that he has engaged himself to help Byng, on no distant day, in doing the honours of the Certosa Monastery to her and her mother. On reflection, he cannot quite explain to himself how the arrangement has come about. The proposal certainly did not originate with him, and still less with the two ladies so strangely shy of all society. The three have somehow been swept into it by Byng, who, either with the noblest altruism, or because he feels justly confident that he has no cause for jealousy of his friend (Jim's cynical reflection is that the latter is the much more probable reason), has insisted on drawing him into the project.

Jim Burgoyne is not a man whom, as a rule, it is easy either to wile or cudgel into any course that does not recommend itself to his own judgment or taste – a fact of which he himself is perfectly aware, and which makes him remorsefully acknowledge that there must indeed have been a traitor in the citadel of his own heart before he could have so weakly yielded at the first push to what his reason sincerely disapproves. But yet it is not true that remorse is the leading feature of his thoughts, as he walks silently beside his friend down the Via di Servi. It ought to be, perhaps; but it is not. The picture that holds the foreground of his memory is that of Elizabeth sitting on the floor, and sending him peace-offerings from her pathetic eyes and across her sensitive lips. It was very sweet of her to think it necessary to make him amends at all for her trifling incivility, and nothing could be sweeter than the manner of it. How gladly would he buy some little rudeness from her every day at such a price! But yet, as he thinks it over, the manner of it, the ground on which she rested her excuse, is surely a strange one. That she should attribute her light lapse from courtesy to want of knowledge of the world comes strangely from the mouth of a woman of six-and-twenty. If it be true – and there was a naïve veracity in lip and eye as she spoke – how is it to be accounted for? Has her mind, has her experience of life, remained absolutely stationary during the last ten years? Her tell-tale face, over which some pensive story is so plainly written, forbids the inference. It is no business of his, of course. Amelia, thank Heaven! has no story; but, oh! if someone would tell him what that history is! And yet, three days later, he voluntarily puts away from himself the opportunity of hearing it.

During those three days he sees no more of her. He does not again seek her out, and accident does not throw her in his way. He buys his Cantagalli dinner-service in company with Amelia; chooses the soup-tureen out of which he is to ladle mutton broth for the inhabitants of Westbourne Grove; he tastes of the wedding-cake that has cost Cecilia so dear, and he avoids Byng. On the third day he can no longer avoid him, since he is to occupy, as on the San Miniato occasion, the fourth seat in the fiacre which conveys himself and the Misses Wilson to the garden-party at the villa in Bellosguardo inhabited by Mrs. Roche, the mother of the amiable Bertie. The Wilsons' acquaintances in Florence are few, and, as far as Burgoyne has at present had the opportunity of judging, evil. It is, therefore, with a proportionate elation that Cecilia dresses for a party at which she will meet the bulk, or at least the cream, of the English society. It is to Byng's good nature that she and her sister owe the introduction to a hostess whose acquaintance is already too large to make her eager for any causeless addition to it; but whose hand has been forced by Byng, in the mistaken idea that he is doing a service to his friend Jim.

They are late in setting off, as Amelia is delayed by the necessity of soothing Sybilla, who has been reduced to bitter tears by a *tête-à-tête* with her father, in which that well-intentioned but incautious gentleman has been betrayed into suggesting to her that she may possibly be suffering from biliousness. The administering of bromide, to calm her nerves under such a shock; the reiterated

assurances that every member of the family except its head realizes the monstrosity of the suggestion, take up so much time that Amelia herself has to reduce to a minimum the moments allotted to her own toilette. She has cried a little with Sybilla, for company partly, and partly out of weariness of spirit. That and hurry have swollen her eyelids, and painted her cheeks with a hard, tired red, so that it is an even more homespun figure and a homelier face than usual, that seat themselves opposite Burgoyne, when at length they get under weigh.

He, Burgoyne, has been impatient of the delay, impatient to set off and to arrive; yet he would be puzzled to say why. He knows, on no less authority than her own word, that he shall not meet Elizabeth; and yet the mere feeling that the mistress of the house to which he is going is of the same blood as she; that he shall see the rude, spoilt child, whose ill-tempered pinch made her utter that low cry of pain, suffice to give a tartness to his tone, as he inquires the cause of her lagging, of the panting, flushed, apologetic Amelia. Byng and Cecilia have been sitting waiting for some time in the *salon*, from which Sybilla has removed her prostrate figure and tear-stained face; but they have been entertaining each other so well – she in paying him a series of marked attentions, and he in civilly and pleasantly accepting them – that the half-hour has not seemed long to either. But the party, in motion at last, has passed the Roman Gate, and is climbing up and up between the high walls, each step giving it a greater vantage ground over the Flower City, before Burgoyne recovers his equanimity.

The spring comes on apace. In the gardens above their heads laurestinus bushes, with all their flowers out (as they are never seen in England, where always the east wind nips half the little round buds before they can expand into blossom), stand in white and green; rosemary trees, covered with gray bloom, hang down; and against the azure of the high heaven purple irides stand up arow. It is one of those days on which one can with bodily eyes see the Great Mother at her quickening work; can see her flushing the apple-boughs, unfolding the fig-leaves, and driving the lusty green blood through the sappy vines. And in the slow creeping of the fiacre up the twisting white road, each turn lays the divine Tuscan city before them in some new aspect of arresting loveliness.

At Florence, one is like Balaam with the Israelites. One is taken to see her from one point after another, each point seeming fairer than the last; but the likeness ends there, for no wish to curse the sweet town could ever arise in even the morosest heart. The hills have put on their summer look of dreamy warmth and distance. Before they have reached the hilltop the boon Italian air has kissed most of the creases out of Jim's temper, and the brick-red from Amelia's cheek-bones. He looks remorsefully from the triumphant beauty around, into the poor, fond face opposite to him – looks at her with a sort of compassion for being so unlovely, mixed with a compunctious admiration and tenderness for her gentle qualities. He may touch her hand without fear of observation, so wholly is Byng enveloped in the mantle of Cecilia's voluble tenderness.

"Have you forgiven me?" he asks, smiling; "I will make any apologies, eat any dirt, say anything, short of allowing that Sybilla is not bilious."

They have reached the villa, and turned out of the dusty highway into a great cool courtyard, that has a Moorish look, with its high arches, over which the Banksia roses tumble in cascades of yellow and white. It seems wrong that the voices which come from the tea-tables under the Loggia should be chattering English or Yankee, instead of cooing that "sweet bastard Latin" that better suits place and day.

The hostess shakes hands absently with Burgoyne, offers his fair charges iced coffee, and then, having discharged her conscience towards them, draws Byng away for an intimate chat. From her hands he passes into those of several other willing matrons and maids, and it seems likely that the party who brought him will see him no more. Amelia, unused to, and unexpectant of attention, is perfectly content to sit silent, sipping her cold coffee; but Cecilia is champing her bit in a way which frightens her future brother-in-law so much that he cowardly takes the opportunity of her looking in another direction to lure his docile *fiancée* on to the broad terrace, whence all the young green glory of the Arno's plain, and the empurpled slopes and dreamful breast of Morello, are to be seen

by the looker's beauty-drunk eye. Upon this terrace many people are walking and sitting in twos and threes, and in one of the little groups Amelia presently discovers a female acquaintance, who at once fastens upon her, and happening to be afflicted with a relative visited by a disorder of something the same nature as Sybilla's, subjects her to a searching and exhaustive catechism as to the nature of her sister's symptoms. Sybilla's symptoms, whether at first or second hand, have invariably the property of driving Jim into desert places; and, in the present instance, seeing no likelihood of an end to the relation of them, he turns impatiently away, and, without much thought of where he is going, follows a steep downward path that ends in a descent of old stone steps, between whose crevices green plants and little hawkweed blow-balls flourish undisturbed, to a large square well, framed by a low broad parapet, with flower-beds set around it, and the whole closed in by rugged stone walls. No one apparently has had the same impulse as he, for, at first, he has the cool solitude to himself. He sits down on the parapet of the still well, and drops in pebbles to see how deep the water is; and anon lifts his idle look to the empty niches in the crumbling wall – niches where once wood-god, or water-nymph, or rural Pan stood in stone, now empty and forsaken. Out of the wall two ilexes grow, and lift themselves against the sapphire arch, which yet is no sapphire, nor of any name that belongs to cold stone; a blue by which all other blues are but feeble colourless ghosts of that divinest tint.

He is roused from the vague reverie into which the cool silence and the brooding beauty around have lulled him, by the sound of approaching voices. He is not to have his well any longer to himself. He looks up with that scarcely latent hostility in his eye with which one regards the sudden intruder into a railway carriage, when – counting on keeping it to one's self for a long night journey – one has diffused limbs and parcels over its whole area. The owners of the voices, having descended, as he had done, the age-worn steps, come into sight. They are both men, and one of them he recognises at once as a Mr. Greenock, a well-known stock figure in Florentine society, a mature bachelor diner-out, a not ill-natured retailer of news, collector of *bons-mots*, and harmless appendage of pretty women. Of the other, at whom he scarcely glances, all he grasps is the fact that he is dressed in clerical attire, and that the first words audible of his speech, as he comes within hearing, is the name of an English county – Devonshire. The answer comes in a tone of keen interest:

"Ah, I thought there must be a screw loose!"

As the new arrivals become aware of the presence of a third person, they pause in their talk; but presently, Mr. Greenock having recognised Jim and greeted him with a friendly nod and a trivial remark upon the splendour of the day, they resume their interrupted theme, standing together a few yards distant from him on the walk – resume it in a rather lower but still perfectly audible key.

"I thought there must be some reason for their shutting themselves up so resolutely," continues Mr. Greenock in the gratified tone of one who has at length solved a long-puzzling riddle. "I thought that there must be a screw loose, in fact; but are you quite sure of it?"

The other gives a sigh and a shrug.

"Unfortunately there can be no doubt on that head; the whole lamentable occurrence took place under my own eyes; the Moat is in my parish."

"Devonshire!" "A screw loose!" "The Moat!" Burgoyne is still sitting on the well-brim; but he no longer sees the lapis vault above, nor the placid dark water below. A sort of horrible mist is swimming before his eyes; it is of Elizabeth Le Marchant that they are speaking. Through that mist he snatches a scared look at the speaker; at him whom but two minutes ago he had glanced at with such a cursory carelessness. Does he recognise him? Alas! yes. Though changed by the acquisition of a bald head and a grizzled beard, he sees him at once to be the man who, at the time of his own acquaintance with the Le Marchant family, had filled the office of vicar of their parish; under whom he had sat on several drowsy summer Sunday mornings, trembling at the boys' perilous antics in the great curtained pew, and laughing inwardly at Elizabeth's mirth-struggling efforts to control them.

"And you say that they never held up their heads again afterwards?" pursues Mr. Greenock in a tone of good-natured compassion, that is yet largely tinged with gratified curiosity.

"They left the neighbourhood at once," returns the clergyman. "Dear me, how time flies! it must be ten years ago now, and I never saw them again until I met the unhappy girl and her mother yesterday, driving in the Via Tornabuoni; but" – lowering his voice a little more – "you will understand that this is strictly *entre nous*; that it must not go any further."

"What do you think I am made of?" cries Mr. Greenock in a burst of generous indignation; "but" – stepping a pace or two nearer to his interlocutor – "I am not quite sure that I have got the details of the story right; would you mind just running it over to me again?"

Jim has been sitting in such a stunned stillness that it is perhaps no wonder that they have forgotten his neighbourhood. At all events, the clergyman is evidently about to comply with his companion's request and recapitulate the tale. If Jim preserves his motionless attitude but five minutes longer, he will be put into possession of that story whose existence he has already heavily conjectured, and the imagining of which has made him often, within the last week or two, turn with nausea from his food, and toss restlessly upon his bed. Without any trouble on his part, without any possible blame attaching to him, he will learn the poor soul's secret. Never! If the devil wish to tempt him with a prospect of success, it must be with a less unhandsome bait. Almost before the two startled scandalmongers have recalled the fact of his existence by the abrupt noise of his departure, he is half-way back to the terrace, that mist still before his eyes, and a singing in his ears.

CHAPTER XII

"A merry going out bringeth often a mournful return home; and a joyful evening makes many times a sad morning."

The return drive, as it is quicker, being all downhill, so is it a more silent one than that to the villa had been. Byng, indeed, is as gaily willing to be fondled by Cecilia as he was on his way up; but there is a mixture of maidenly reserve and sub-tender reproach in her manner which makes their relations somewhat strained. The afternoon's pleasuring has had a jading effect upon Amelia's spirits, as, after having been sucked dry on the subject of Sybilla's maladies, and afterwards at once shaken off, by her female acquaintance, she has not been fortunate enough to meet with anyone else to exchange talk with, and has sat in disconsolate yet patient loneliness on a stone bench, afraid to stir from the spot where he had left her, lest she might miss her lover, of whom, however, she has unaccountably seen nothing, until when the Angelus is ringing, and the shadows spreading, he has come to give her curt notice, with half-averted face, that the fiacre is at the door. In point of fact, he has been too conscious of the disorder of his features to dare to expose them sooner than he can help to her fond scrutiny. He would give anything to be able to sit beside, instead of opposite to her during their drive home, as a profile is a much less tell-tale and more governable thing than a full face; and he is painfully conscious that as often as she imagines she can do it without being detected by him, she is stealing looks of inquiring anxiety at him. He tries to put her off the scent by spasmodic comments upon the entertainment that they have just quitted; and she does her best to keep up the ball of conversation, since she sees that it is his wish. But in vain. Each forced remark falls still-born, leading to nothing. It is Cecilia who at last succeeds in giving a fillip to the languid talk.

"I did not know that Mrs. Roche was a cousin of your beauty, Miss Le Marchant," she says suddenly, growing tired of her pensive attitude, and addressing herself to Jim.

He starts guiltily. "Did not you?"

He must look odd; for even Cecilia's large and preoccupied cow eyes rest upon him with an expression of surprise.

"I wonder why she was not there to-day."

It is not exactly a question, yet her great shallow orbs do not seem to be going to leave his face until he makes some response. He forces himself to do so.

"I understood Miss Le Marchant to say that they are not going out just now."

"And why are not they, pray?" inquires Cecilia, in an injured voice, as if the retirement from the world of the two ladies in question were a personal injury to herself; "they are not in mourning, all their gowns are coloured ones, and they do not look as if they had bad health – perhaps, however" (after a moment's thoughtful attempt to find a solution) – "perhaps, however, they may have something – one never knows – people have such unexpected diseases nowadays – hysteria, perhaps, or fits."

At this ingenious suggestion Jim is conscious of a writhing motion passing over the stalwart form of Byng beside him. In his own brain, if there is room for anything but the desire to evade Amelia's eyes, is a dim sense of relief at a suggestion so grotesquely wide of the mark as that made by the younger Miss Wilson. In perfect innocence of the effect produced upon her companions by her bright hypothesis, Cecilia goes on to remind her sister of the parallel case of a very handsome girl whom they had once reckoned among their acquaintance, and who was periodically being found by her family with her head under the fender. But Amelia rises but faintly to the reminiscence, and the remainder of the drive is accomplished in a general silence.

The next day is the one which had been fixed upon for the expedition to Certosa. It was only with a very large admixture of wormwood in his prospective pleasure that Jim had ever looked forward to this party, but now he anticipates it with absolute dread. How can he face Elizabeth and her mother, with that ominous phrase of the "screw loose" still ringing in his ears? He feels a traitor towards

them, in that he has, however unwillingly, overheard it. To add to his mental uneasiness is the fact of his having as yet not broken to Amelia his intentions with regard to the disposal of his afternoon. Amelia's eyes have for years had the habit of covertly watching him to read his wishes almost before they rose; but in their gaze yesterday he had, unless misled by his guilty conscience, detected a new quality, a quality of alarm and enlightenment. He will get over the communication of his piece of news as early in the day as may be; so, having finished breakfast before Byng has put in his, as usual, tardy appearance, he takes his hasty way to the Anglo-Américain. He finds the family there in a more placid frame of mind than that which they had presented on one or two of his recent visits. Sybilla is expecting her doctor, on which occasions she always likes to have a more lacy coverlet than usual thrown over her languid feet; a greater efflorescence of pink ribbons about her thin throat, and a disposition of pots of lilies about her wan head. Amelia, active and long-suffering as usual, is moving about in patient execution of her vain and tiresome whimsies. Cecilia sits tranquilly in the window, knitting an elaborate pair of men's woollen gloves, not indeed – to do her justice – for anyone in particular, but with a wise forethought for the accidents and possibilities of life. Since, on this occasion, his sweetheart shows no inclination to draw him away into the dining-room for a *tête-à-tête*, Jim has to take the bull by the horns, and rush into his subject in a more public manner than he had intended. But the one desire to get it over outbalances all minor considerations.

"Amelia," he begins suddenly, and even to himself his voice sounds discourteous and abrupt, "shall you want me this afternoon?"

The moment that the words are out of his mouth it strikes him that the form into which he has thrown his question is more than necessarily untender. She stops in the patting of Sybilla's smart pillows, and perhaps there is something a little abrupt too in her monosyllabic "Why?"

"Because," standing before the fireplace, with his back to the three women, and throwing the words over his shoulder, "because, if you do not, Byng and I were thinking of going to Certosa."

There is a pause. He hears that Cecilia's needles have stopped clicking; her work has dropped into her lap. In another moment she will have proposed to come too. "With the Le Marchants," he goes on, shooting out the fateful words like bullets; "a *partie carrée*."

Still silence behind him. He cannot go on staring for ever at the billets of wood of the unlit fire. He has to turn round and face his companions. The only one of them whose pleasure or displeasure in his announcement he at all heeds – Amelia – is stooping over Sybilla, rearranging in a high, picturesque tier behind the invalid's long back, three cushions, and her face is almost entirely hidden from him by her attitude.

"Of course if it is in the least inconvenient, if you have made any other plans for me – if, in fact, you want me," he continues in a tone that is at once apologetic and dogged.

"But I do not," cries she, answering at last, and with a distinct laugh in her voice, a laugh into whose quality he is not anxious too curiously to inquire. "You must not be so conceited as to think that I always want you! In point of fact, you could not have hit upon a day that suited me better. I am really rather 'throng' to-day, as they say in Yorkshire. I have quite a hundred things to do, and father wants me to help him to correct the proofs of his sermon, the sermon he preached at Mr. Moffat's church on the Holy Innocents' Day. He has been asked to publish it – is not that flattering? Poor father, I believe he will end by being a popular preacher – in fact" (laughing again), "the whole family is going up in the world!"

There is such a forced mirth in her tone that Jim feels much more guiltily uncomfortable than if she had treated him to hysterics or sulks. Nor does his satisfaction with himself increase, when, upon his rising to depart, she runs out of the room after him, to say to him, while her homely face twitches against her will, how much she hopes that he will enjoy himself; how perfectly happy she shall be without him; and how eagerly she shall look forward to hearing all about it from him to-morrow. "It will be almost better than going to Certosa herself," she ends.

But against the unnatural altitude of this last flight of abnegation nature revolts, and, becoming conscious of a break in her voice, she hastily retreats and gets back into the *salon*, in time to see Cecilia shaking her elaborate head, and to hear her remarking with slow emphasis, "Mark my words! There is something odd about those people, and it is not hysteria!"

With spirits sensibly worsened by his interview, Burgoyne returns to the Minerva, and, mounting to Byng's bedroom, finds that young gentleman stretched upon his bed, gloom in his usually jocund eye, and an open letter lying on the floor beside him. But Jim is far too preoccupied to notice anybody's gloom but his own.

"I came to ask at what hour we are to set off this afternoon?" he says with a sort of flat moroseness in his tone.

"We, indeed!" rejoins the other with a groan, and rolling over with a sort of petulance on the bed, dishevelled the neatly-smoothed pillow by burrowing his ruffled head in it – "we!"

There is such a heart-rent woe in the accent with which the last monosyllable is pronounced that for a moment Burgoyne has no other idea but that his young friend, too, has become aware of the "screw loose," has heard, perhaps in detail, that story from before whose ominous opening he himself had fled. The thought sends his heart into his throat, so as to render him incapable of asking an explanation of the other's affliction.

"We!" repeats Byng for the third time, and very indistinctly, as he is now lying entirely on his face.

"Why do you go on saying 'we' in that idiotic way?" asks Jim at last, recovering his voice – recovering it only to employ it in imitating the younger man's accents, in a manner which displays more exasperation than natural talent for mimicry. It is not a politely-worded inquiry, but it has the desired result of acting as a tonic on him at whom it is aimed, making him not only roll over once again, but actually sit up.

"Why do I say *we*?" repeats he, his young eyes looking lamentably out from under the fall of his tumbled hair – "because it is not *we*! it is *you*! You lucky dog, you will have her all to yourself!"

Jim heaves an inaudible sigh of relief. Whatever may be the cause of his companion's enigmatical conduct, it is evidently not what he had feared. There is, however, no evidence of relief or any other mild quality in his next remark.

"If you would talk less like an ass, I should have a better chance of knowing what you are driving at!"

The query seems only to renew and deepen the other's tribulation. He falls back into his former attitude.

"You will hold the white wonder of dear Juliet's hand!" he groans. "No, do not go" (with a sudden and startling change of tone, springing off the bed, as he becomes aware that his friend is making for the door, unable to bear those rhapsodies, whose full distastefulness to their hearer the utterer little conjectures). "I'll tell you! I'll explain. Why are you in such a deuce of a hurry? I cannot go to Certosa because I have just heard from my mother that she is to arrive to-day. She will be here in another hour."

Jim's fingers are already on the door handle, but this piece of news arrests him.

"Your mother? I did not know that she was coming abroad."

"No more did I!"

"It must have been a very sudden thought!"

"Very!"

"What a delightful surprise for you!"

"Delightful!" There is so ludicrous a discrepancy between the adjective and the accent with which it is rendered that Jim bursts into a bitter laugh.

"She would be flattered if she could see your elation at the prospect of meeting her!"

Byng's blood rushes up under his clear smooth skin at his friend's jeer, but he answers, with some dignity:

"I do not think you have any right to imply that I am not always glad to see my mother; I do not deny that, if it had been equally convenient to her, I had rather she should have come twenty-four hours later."

Jim feels ashamed of himself, though, being an Anglo-Saxon, he has far too much false shame to confess it directly, and what he means for an *amende*, when it comes, is of an oblique nature.

"I think far the best plan will be to put off the excursion altogether; I am sure that I am not particularly keen about it."

The indignant red has rapidly died out of Byng's face; his placability being only to be surpassed by his slowness to take offence.

"Is it possible?" he asks in a tone of stupefaction; then, with a sudden tardy recollection of the rosy fetters in which his friend is held by another lady, he adds – "But, of course, you are not – I was forgetting!"

Jim winces.

"As it is your party, you had better send up a note at once to the Piazza d'Azeglio."

"No, do not let us both throw them over!" cries Byng eagerly. "Heaven knows it was hard enough to persuade them to accept in the first instance. If you go we shall at all events keep our communications open; and you – you will say something to her for me?"

"What kind of something?" inquires the older man carpingly. "Am I to tell her only what a fine fellow you are in general, or anything more circumstantial?"

"Tell her – " begins Byng in a rapt voice; but apparently the sight of his companion, who has somewhat ostentatiously pulled out a note-book and pencil, and assumed the patient air of one about to write to dictation, dries the stream of his young eloquence; "tell her —*nothing*."

"Nothing speaks our grief like to speak nothing!"

replies Jim, leaving the room with this quotation on his lips, rather hastily, for fear lest the other should change his mind.

CHAPTER XIII

It is five o'clock, the hour fixed for the expedition to Certosa, and in the *entresol* of 12 bis, Piazza d'Azeglio, Mrs. and Miss Le Marchant are sitting – hatted, gloved, and *en-tout-cas-ed*– in expectation of the arrival of their double escort. Elizabeth's afternoon has, so far, not been a lazy one, as her little cousin Bertie and his dog have again been good enough to pay her a lengthy visit, and the former has insisted upon a repetition of the musical performance of the other day, though with truncated rites. Without the powerful aid of Byng, Elizabeth has found it a task considerably beyond her strength to hold a large collie, poised on his hind-legs, on a music-stool. He has jumped down repeatedly, and now lies on his back – an attitude in which experience has taught him he is less attackable than in any other – sawing the air with his fore-paws, and lifting his lip in a deprecating grin.

"Where is Mr. Byng?" cries Bertie fretfully, baulked in his efforts to make his wily victim resume the perpendicular. "I want Mr. Byng! Why does not Mr. Byng come?"

"Perhaps if you went to the window," suggests Mrs. Le Marchant, in that patiently coaxing voice in which we are wont to address a tiresome child on a visit, instead of the buffet which we should bestow upon it were it resident – "perhaps if you went to the window and looked out, you would see him coming round the corner of the Piazza."

The suggestion is at once accepted, and the child, balancing his fidgety body on a chair, and craning his neck over the window-ledge, is shouting shrill pieces of information as to the passers-by to his friends within the room. Presently he shrieks out in triumph:

"I see him! He is just coming into sight! He is walking so fast! No!" – a moment later, with a changed and disgusted note, as a nearer view corrects the first impression – "it is not he at all! It is only the other one!"

"*Only the other one!*" It is quite impossible that the sound of the child's voice can reach down to the open portal of No. 12 bis, at which Jim has now arrived, and it is also certain that neither of the ladies whom he has come to visit is likely to word her surprise at his having arrived alone with the frank brutality which is confined to the utterances of infancy; and yet Jim, as he presents himself, announced by Annunziata, the hard-featured possessor of a lovely name, is quite as conscious, as if he had overheard the boy's slighting remark, of being "only the other one!"

Before he can begin his apologies, the eager little boy has run up to him.

"Where is Mr. Byng? I want Mr. Byng! Why has not he come? Elizabeth wants Mr. Byng!"

At this last clause Burgoyne is conscious of a dark, hot flush rising to his face, and, partly to hide it, partly to avoid seeing what the effect of his communication may be upon her for whom it is meant, he stoops over the child, addressing his answer to him:

"Mr. Byng is very sorry, very sorry indeed, but he cannot come."

"Cannot come! Why cannot he come?"

"Because he has gone to meet his mammy," replies Jim, trying to speak in a light and playful voice; "she is to arrive unexpectedly in Florence to-day; no good boy would leave his mammy when she had come all the way from England to see him, would he?"

But to this fustian and copy-book generality the young gentleman addressed is too angry to reply.

"It is a great disappointment to Byng; he bid me tell you what a great disappointment it is to him!" says Jim, turning to the two ladies, and looking apologetically from one to the other.

Elizabeth's head is averted; but on her mother's features he sees, or fancies he sees, slight evidences of a feeling not unlike relief.

"It is not of the least consequence," she says cheerfully; "we can go any other day just as well."

Burgoyne's heart sinks. In these last sentences he too surely traces signs of the evasive and would-be-retrograde nature which has all along characterized Mrs. Le Marchant's relations with him.

It has seemed to him that he has been looking forward to the expedition with sensations of almost unmixed dread, and yet, now that he seems to be going to be delivered from it, what he experiences certainly does not come under the head of elation.

"You wish to give up the excursion?" he asks, in a tone which he honestly tries to make as neutral and colourless as he can.

"Well, I thought so – we thought so, did not we, Elizabeth?"

The person thus addressed lifts her head, and all over her features he, eagerly scanning them, sees written a warm acquiescence in her motherly decision, an acquiescence which, as her eyes meet his – his, in which his disappointment is written a good deal more plainly than he is aware – changes slowly and sweetly into indecision.

"I do not know," she answers, her gentle look clouded a little, and yet kindly interrogating his; "if Mr. Burgoyne is willing to burden himself with us; and Bertie must play at being a grown-up gentleman, and help to take care of us! Bertie, will you play at being a grown-up gentleman?"

To this proposition Bertie assents warmly, and begins thrasonically to recount to inattentive ears the high and singular deeds with which he will celebrate his arrival at maturity. But, as Mrs. Le Marchant puts a strenuous veto upon his adoption as escort, and as his nurse appears at the same juncture to fetch him, he and his dog are presently removed; and the other three set off without him.

Burgoyne has chartered a fiacre, with a horse as little lame as is ever to be found in Florence, and in this vehicle they are presently rolling along. None of them are in very exuberant spirits. Burgoyne is as well aware as if her sensitive lips had put the fact into words, that for Elizabeth the pleasure of the outing has evaporated with the absence of Byng, and that it is only the soft-hearted shrinking of a sweet nature from inflicting mortification on a fellow-creature that has set her opposite to him in her white gown. He has never seen her dressed in white before, and says to himself that it was for Byng's sake that she has made herself so summer-fine. But even if it be so, it is not Byng who is profiting by it. It is for him, not Byng, that the large Italian light is glorifying its thin fabric. Lily-pure, snow-clean she looks, sitting under her sunshade; and he sits over against her in a stupid silence. It seems to him as if his only safety were in silence, as if, did he speak at all, he must put into brutal words the brutal questions that are dinging in his head, that seem knocking for utterance against the gate of his set teeth.

"What is the 'screw loose'? How is she an 'unfortunate girl'? Why have they 'never held up their heads since'? Since what?" He looks, in a fierce perplexity, from one to the other of those delicately poised heads, held aloft with such modest dignity. Surely it is beyond the bounds of possibility that any heavily hideous shame or leaden disgrace can ever have weighed upon them! Probably the intensity of his thought has given an intensity to his look, of which he is unaware; for he presently finds the soft veiled voice of Elizabeth – Elizabeth who has hitherto been as mute as himself – addressing him:

"How very grave you look! I wonder what you are thinking of?"

The question, striking in so strangely pat, brings him back with a start. For a second an almost overpowering temptation assails him to tell her what is the object of his thought, to answer her with that whole and naked truth which we can so seldom employ in our intercourse with our fellow-men. But one glance at her innocent face, which has a vague trouble in it, chases the lunatic impulse, though he dallies with the temptation to the extent of saying:

"Would you really like to know? Do you really wish me to tell you?"

He looks at her penetratingly as he puts the question. Before either his eyes or his manner she shrinks.

"Oh, no – no!" she cries with tremulous haste, "of course not! I was only joking. What business have I with your thoughts? I never wish to know people's thoughts; if their looks and words are kind, that is all that concerns me!"

He relapses into silence; but her words, and still more the agitated manner in which they are pronounced, make a vague yet definite addition to the disquiet of his soul.

By setting off at so judiciously late an hour as five o'clock, they have avoided the greater part of the flood of tourists which daily sets towards Certosa, and which they meet, tightly packed in crowded vehicles, sweeping Florence-wards in a choking cloud of white dust; so that on reaching the Certosa Monastery, sitting so grandly on its hilltop, they have the satisfaction of finding that it is temporarily all their own – all their own but for the few white-froked figures and tonsured heads which an economico-democratic Government has left to hint what in its palmy days was the state of that which is now only a Government museum.

A burly monk receives them. He does not look at all a prey to the pensive sorrow one would expect at the desecration of his holy things and the dispersion of his fraternity. Probably, in his slow peasant mind there is room for nothing but self-congratulation at his being one of the few – only fifteen in all – left to end their days in the old home. He leads them stolidly through chapels and refectory – the now too roomy refectory, where the poor remnant of Carthusians dine together only on Sundays – through meagrely furnished cells, in one of which he matter-of-factly lets down the front flap of a cupboard to show what forms his daily dining-table except on the happy Sunday, to which he must look forward so warmly.

"Must not he love Sunday!" cries Elizabeth, with sparkling eyes. "Do not you long to know what they have for dinner on Sundays? Do you think he would mind telling us?"

Elizabeth's spirits are going up like quicksilver. It is evident, despite the delicate melancholy of her face, that she is naturally of an extremely joyous and enjoying nature, and gifted with a freshness of sensation which belongs ordinarily rather to the green age at which Jim first remembers her, than to the mature one which he knows for a certainty that she has now reached. She is filled with such a lively and surprised delight at all the little details of arrangement of the monastic life that he is at last impelled to say to her, something wonderingly:

"But you must have seen hundreds of monasteries before?"

"Not one."

"But there are, or were, such swarms of them all over Italy."

"I dare say. I was never in Italy before."

"Not really?"

She lifts up her hand, and waves it at him with an air of hasty deprecation of further question, growing suddenly grave.

"Don't ask me whether I have been here or there, or whether I have done this or that. I have never been anywhere or done anything."

Her desire for a cessation of all inquiries as to her doings is obviously so earnest that Jim of course complies with it. Once or twice before he has been struck by her strange want of acquaintance with facts and phenomena, which would have come as a matter of course within the range of observation of every woman of her age and station. Against his will, a horrid recollection flashes upon him of a novel he had once read, in which the hero exhibits a singular ignorance of any events or incidents that had occurred within the ten years preceding the opening of the story – an ignorance which towards the end of the third volume was accounted for by its transpiring that he has spent the intervening period in a convict prison! He drives the grotesque and monstrous idea with scourges out of his mind; but it recurs, and recurs to be displaced by another hardly less painful, if in some degree more probable. Can it be possible that the crushing blow which has fallen upon the Le Marchant family, and upon Elizabeth in particular, whitening the mother's hair, and giving that tear-washed look to the daughter's sweet eyes – can it be possible that that heavy stroke was insanity? Can Elizabeth have been out of her mind? Can she have spent in confinement any of that past, from all allusion to which she shies away with a sensitiveness more shrinking than that of

"The tender horns of cockled snails"?

He is so much absorbed in his tormenting speculations about her that for the moment he forgets her bodily presence; and it is only her voice, her soft sane voice, that brings him back to a consciousness of it. They have been led into a *salon*, in which, as their guide tells them, the confraternity used to receive any "personage" that came to visit them. Alas, no personage ever visits the poor frocked remnant now! It is a charming lightsome room, that gives one no monastic idea, with pretty airy fancies of flower-wreaths and arabesques, and dainty dancing figures painted on wall and ceiling and doors. One of these latter is half open, and through it comes an exquisite sudden view of the hills, with their sharp-cut shadows and their sunlit slopes; of shining Florence at their feet, of the laugh of young verdure, and the wedded gloom and glory of cypress and poplar filling the foreground. Upon Elizabeth's small face, turned suddenly towards him, seems reflected some of the ineffable radiance of the Tuscan light.

"When next I dream of heaven," she says, in her tender, vibrating voice, "it will be like this. Do you ever dream of heaven? I often do, and I always wake crying because it is not true; but" – with a joyful change of key – "I will not cry any more without better cause. Since I came here I have found earth beautiful and delightful enough for me!"

He looks back at her, hardly hearing her words, but chiding himself fiercely for the disloyal thought which he has entertained, however unwillingly; the thought that the foul fiend of madness could ever, even temporarily, have defiled the temple of those eyes whence reason and feeling, so sweetly wedded, are shining out upon him, unworthy as he is of their rays.

"Since you came here?" he repeats in a sort of dreamy interrogation; "only since you came here?"

"You must not take me up so sharply!" she cries in a voice of playful remonstrance, in which there is a lilt of young gaiety. "I warn you that I will not be taken up so sharply! I did not say, '*only* since I came here!' I said, 'Since I came here!'"

CHAPTER XIV

Presently they pass into the still, cloistered garden, in whose unmown grass-squares gray-blue flowers are blowing, beside whose walks pale pink peonies are flushing, and round whose well the grave rosemary bushes are set. Through the whole place is an atmosphere of deep peace, of silence, leisure, dignity. It is virtually a *tête-à-tête*, as their tonsured guide, seeing their evident harmlessness, has left them to their own devices; and Mrs. Le Marchant has sat down to rest upon a camp-stool which Elizabeth has been carrying ever since they left the carriage. It has fidgeted Jim to see her burdened with it; for let a man be ever so little in love with a woman, his tendency always is to think her as brittle as spun glass, to believe that any weight, however light, will bruise her arm – any pebble, however tiny, wound her tender foot. He has offered to relieve her of it, but she has refused – playfully at first – telling him she is sure that he will lose it; and afterwards, when he insists, more gravely, though with gentle gratitude, saying that it would never do for her to get into the habit of being waited upon, and that she always carries mammy's things. It is perhaps absurd that a woman of six-and-twenty should speak of her mother as "mammy," yet the homely and childish abbreviation seems to him to come "most fair and featously" from her lips.

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