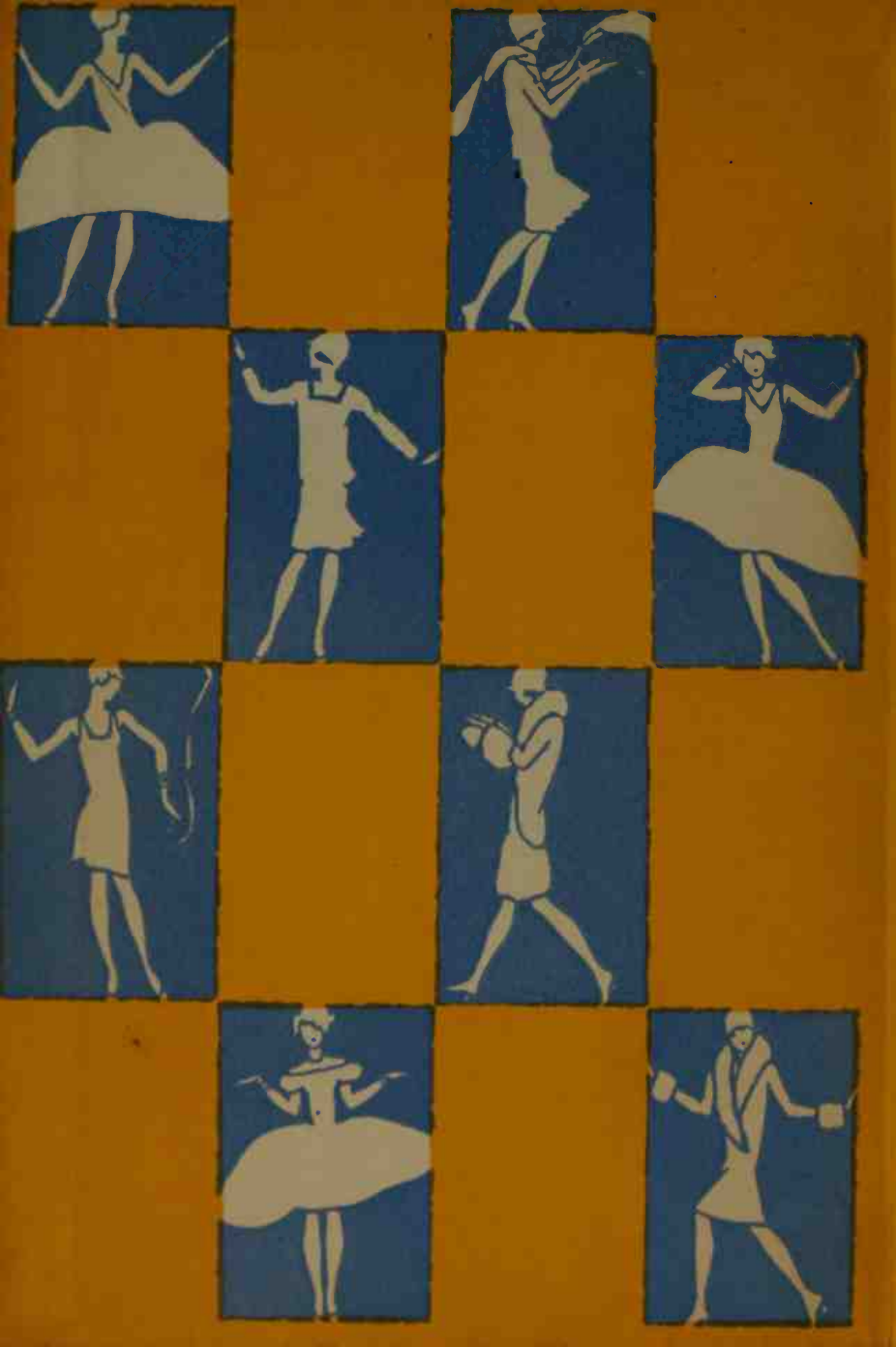
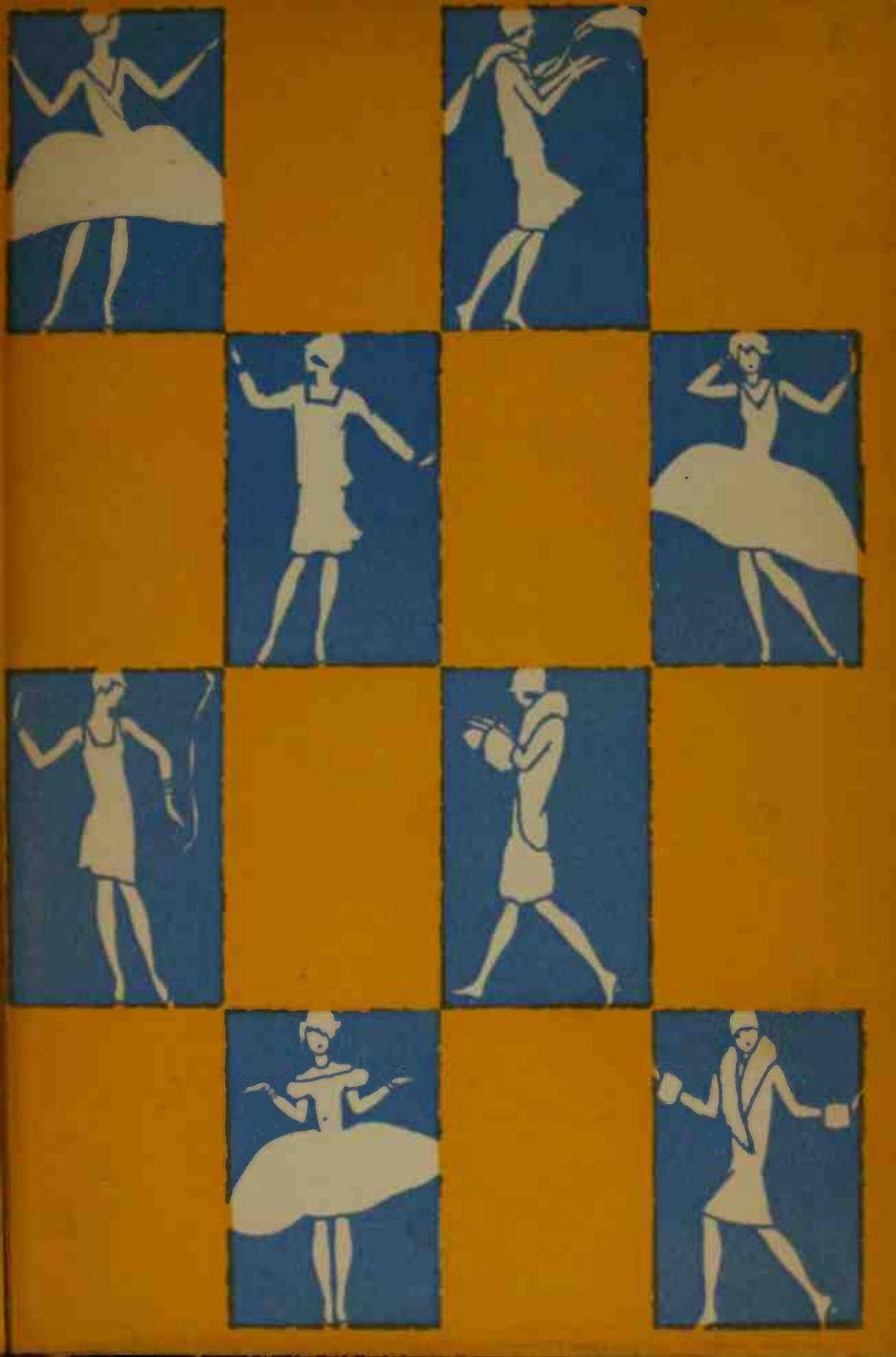
CLAIRE AMBLER

BY

BOOTH TARKINGTON





CLAIRE AMBLER

BOOKS BY BOOTH TARKINGTON

ALICE ADAMS
BEASLEY'S CHRISTMAS PARTY
BEAUTY AND THE JACOBIN
CHERRY
CLAIRE AMBLER
CONQUEST OF CANAAN
GENTLE JULIA
GROWTH
HARLEQUIN AND COLUMBINE
HIS OWN PEOPLE
IN THE ARENA
LOOKING FORWARD AND OTHERS
MONSIEUR BEAUCAIRE
PENROD
PENROD AND SAM
RAMSEY MILHOLLAND
SEVENTEEN
THE BEAUTIFUL LADY
THE FASCINATING STRANGER AND OTHER STORIES
THE FLIRT
THE GENTLEMAN FROM INDIANA
THE GUEST OF QUESNAY
THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS
THE MAN FROM HOME
THE MIDLANDER
THE PLUTOCRAT
THE TURMOIL
THE TWO VANREVELS
WOMEN

CLAIRE AMBLER

BY

BOOTH TARKINGTON

GARDEN CITY NEW YORK
DOUBLEDAY, DORAN & COMPANY, INC.
1928

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES AT THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS, GARDEN CITY N. Y.

FIRST EDITION

TO

J. N. F. AND H. S. F.

CONTENTS

PART I

PAGE

THE BIRTH OF THOUGHT 1

PART II

RAONA 57

PART III

"TWENTY-FIVE!" 201

PART I

THE BIRTH OF THOUGHT

CLAIRE AMBLER

I

MR. NELSON SMOCK, arriving at his cottage in Maine on Friday afternoon for his weekly recuperation from Wall Street, paused in the hall and looked into the living room before going on in search of his wife. His four children, three daughters and a son, were in the room; but none of them paid any attention to him or even seemed aware of his presence.

This was because of their absorbing interest in a girl of eighteen who sat upon a sofa facing the doorway, chattering to them. She was a stranger to him, and his absent-minded definition for her was, "just another of these summer flappers." He meant nothing intolerant; his own daughters probably were listed under that head in the minds of casual observers, he supposed; and he felt no disapproval of the young lady on the sofa, though he did wish that his children might so far break the thraldom in which she held them as to give him at least a greeting.

Only one of them, however, so much as turned a wandering eye in his direction. This was his son, Nelson, a serious sophomore. Young Nelson glanced toward the doorway, and undoubtedly his eye perceived that his father stood there; but with this the youth's perception appeared to stop; there was no evidence that the optic nerve conveyed any information to the brain, and the eye returned with a visible ardour to the young lady upon the sofa. The father was a little disappointed; he felt that he worked hard to keep his children bountifully supplied with all they asked for, and it seemed to him that they might well show enough appreciation to welcome him after his five days of absence. He realized, of course, that it was customary for them to see him return on Friday afternoon; that they were used to both his absence and his presence, as well as to himself and everything he could do for them; whereas, on the other hand, the young lady upon the sofa was a newcomer in their society and evidently appeared to them as a sparkling novelty. Wondering why they thought her important, he looked again at her, but discovered no more than he had before: she seemed indistinguishable from a hundred others.

What he saw was a comely, childlike little face,

pink and thin and piquant, with light-brown hair cut short upon the back of the head, but elsewhere left three or four inches long and waved. As for the rest of her, there was a childlike body in a close, revealing, pale-green silk tunic that left her arms bare from the shoulder and her legs apparently bare from just above the knees down to her sleek white slippers, which had three-inch heels. This latter nudity was only an illusion, however; for thin silk stockings, as near the colour of her skin as possible, almost impalpably protected her; but she was inconsistent enough to seem desirous of more protection. From time to time she mechanically pulled at the small skirt of her tunic to bring it down over the exposed knees—a manifest absurdity, since the skirt, when sat upon, had no such elastic possibilities. Plainly, this was only a gesture and an inherited one, an ancestral memory or instinct alive in the race long after the use for it has gone.

She had other gestures, too—a great many of them; some with arms and hands, some with her shoulders and back, some even with her feet; and all of her constant motion was immature and impulsive, or at least so it seemed to a middle-aged observation from the doorway. Yet she was not lacking in an April-like young grace nor in a youthful shapeliness; but that

was all the owner of the cottage could see—except the cigarette airily waved in her thin young hand as she chattered. He was not favourably impressed by the cigarette; but his daughters were smoking, too; and he knew he had nothing useful to say, or even to think, about that. As for the young creature's chatter, he could make nothing of it at all; so he gave up this momentary problem and went on in search of his wife. When he found her, not five minutes later, in a garden behind the house, the picture of the girl on the sofa was already merged in his mind with dozens of other new memories, all insignificant, and he did not even ask who she was.

So lightly did the man over fifty almost instantly set aside as trivial what had become the most important thing in the life of his only and treasured son. Young Nelson sat upon a stool and looked humbly up to a beglamoured and honoured sofa that was to him the seat of all beauty, grace, and wit made incarnate and gloriously visible. For three roseate days he had known the incomparable damsel, Claire Ambler, and although both of them had at first been formal, not calling each other by their first names until their acquaintance was well along toward half an hour old, Nelson was sure, by the morning of the third day,

that he had fallen in love at sight. Now that it was afternoon and he had been for hours aware of his passion, he saw only wonders before him, with no imperfection anywhere.

In this he bore some resemblance to the girl upon the sofa; for she saw no imperfection in herself. Yet no one thought her egotistical; she often spoke of her faults, though without naming them. On the other hand, she saw no definite perfections in herself; in fact, she had no appraisement of herself either the one way or the other, and it may truly be said that she did not think about herself. Probably it would be as true to say that neither did she think about other people, nor about anything. She had feelings that she believed to be thoughts; she had likes and dislikes that she believed to be thoughts; she had impulses she believed to be thoughts; her mind was full of shifting and flying pictures that she believed to be thoughts; it was also full of echoes of what she had heard and read, and these she usually believed to be thoughts original with her. Words were fluent upon her lips without her knowing or wondering how they got there; yet she was sure they expressed truths and she easily became angry, or grieved, if they were challenged.

She knew what she did, but not why she did it; though she was ready with reasons, and could even less well bear a challenge to her conduct than one to her words. Thus, at seventeen, when she had her long and beautiful tresses shorn away, she was irritated with her mother for lamenting. Her hair was cut off, Claire said, because ridding herself of such a burden was "sensible"; and she believed this, not knowing that she bore the civilized disfigurement merely because it was borne by other maidens of the tribe, as mechanical and unwitting as herself. Again, she had been irritated with her father when he questioned the scantiness of her skirt; for this brevity, too, was "sensible," she said, being once more unaware that she had no motive except to follow the fashion of her kind, and did but manifest a mob contagion.

It seemed to her a long, long time since she had been a child, so long that she now had little interest in children—not much more than she had in old people—and both children and old people, like workingmen in flivvers, she felt, belonged to the duller and rather annoying classes. The only interesting persons in the world were of about her own age; in fact they were the only people who seemed to her actually alive; and yet even they were not wholly

alive in the full sense that she herself was. That is to say, the universe consisted of herself and of impressions made upon her. All other people, varying dimnesses and brightnesses, belonged among the impressions. There were tombstones in the cemeteries just as there were names and dates in books of history; but there could have been no actual life, such as she knew in herself, until she came upon the earth. All had been darkness until her perceptions began to inform her that she was alive, and even her own childhood now seemed shadowy. Full, broad light had not shone until a comparatively recent time, when she was about sixteen. And at that, all parts of the earth, except the spot where she was, had still but a vague illumination. She did not really believe that the sun was radiant over China while she slept.

To honest young Nelson, worshipping her, she seemed a living being, indeed; but to her Nelson was a pleasantly coloured shape that made more or less agreeable noises. His present expression, however, was entirely agreeable to her, and she was in a degree aware of its yearning significance. She was not wholly aware of what it meant, however, because she did not realize what his feeling meant to Nelson himself; she had no concern with that, nor, indeed, had she

any perception of it. She was aware only that it proved how effective her attraction was; it would be useful to her at dances and elsewhere, and she hoped to produce similar expressions upon the faces of other boys. Already she had experience in the art of making them wear this look, and although it was a look not always becoming to them and sometimes made them obviously uncomfortable, it seemed to be, on the whole, the principal thing for which Nature had intended them.

II

NELSON'S father had failed to comprehend the interest of the group of young people in what he thought of as the girlish chatter from the sofa. It seemed to him that just as she looked like any other "summer flapper," so also did she chatter like any other little creature of her kind; and in this he had no perception of how "original" and special an individual his children and their friends were finding her. This was to be her first season here; but she had spent summers at other resorts, and was giving them a lively account of the important people of these places. She had intimately known several celebrities of the first water—one of them, indeed, was a captain at Nelson's university—and so, to these listeners, she spoke of grandees of their own world. If Mr. Smock and some of his contemporaries had occupied the living room and young Nelson had come in to find them listening to an elderly stranger gossiping briskly of important financiers, the boy would have thought the session as dismal as it was inexplicable, and per-

haps might have wondered how old men all contrived to look so much alike. He had never in his life seen a girl in the least like Claire Ambler, he was sure; never had he heard a voice so golden; never had he met a woman with so large an experience of the world; never had he been dazzled by so much brilliancy of mind.

He tried to express his bedazzlement as he walked home with her to her cottage in the late afternoon sunshine. "You cert'n'y gave us all a good time," he said seriously. "I couldn't begin to tell you the kick I got out of it myself."

"How?" she asked.

"Well, I don't know; but anyhow I did. It's kind of like something new coming into our lives here, or something like that. I mean the way you talk; or what I mean, I mean the way you say things. You got a way of saying things that's kind of got a kick in it. Anyhow, for me it has, I mean."

She looked at him gravely, seeming much interested; but for a time made no response; and, at intervals bumping into each other slightly, they walked slowly on over the uneven country road.

"I mean it," he said. "Honest, I really do mean it. I mean there's lots of kick in what you say."

She pulled a leaf from a hedge, put the stem between her lips, frowned as in perplexity; then asked: "How do you mean?"

"Well," he said, "I mean there is. I don't mean it's only in the way you say what you say; there's more to it than that. F'r instance, when you say something, you say it in a way that's got a kick in it; but I mean what you got to say's got a kick in it too. You see what I mean?"

"I don't know," she said thoughtfully, and gave him a meek glance. "Do you mean you don't like the way I say things, Nelson?"

"No, no, no!" he protested, troubled to have given her this harsh impression. "I mean just the opposite. I mean I like it so much I get a big kick out of it. Honestly."

"Honestly?" she repeated; and the word seemed important to her. "Honestly, Nelson?"

He was distressed and also a little aggrieved by what might have implied a doubt of him. "I don't know what cause I've ever given you," he said, "not to believe in my sincerity."

"But I didn't mean that, Nelson. I was only trying to get at just what you meant."

"I see," he returned, mollified. "I wouldn't like

to think you doubted my sincerity, because I think if you aren't sincere you just about as well mightn't be anything at all. Don't you believe in sincerity, Claire?"

"Indeed, I do. If one isn't genuine, then what *is* one?"

"There!" he exclaimed. "That's what I mean. I mean when you say things like that. I mean that's when I get a kick out of the way you say 'em and out of what you're saying too. Don't you understand what I mean, Claire?"

Strangely enough, she still seemed to be a little uncertain. "I didn't talk too much at your cottage, did I? Of course, as it was the first time I've been there, and just meeting your sisters, perhaps you think I——"

"No, no!" Nelson interrupted earnestly. "They were nuts over you, absolutely nuts! I knew they would be. You're altogether differ'nt from the rest o' these girls around here, Claire, and that's why."

"That's why what, Nelson?"

"It's why they're so nuts over you," he explained. "What I mean, I mean, well, you've had so much more experience of life than they have. You've been around lots more places, and about all *they* ever been

is just this one old place—and home, of course, and school, and maybe a trip abroad or somewheres. But what I mean about you, Claire, it wouldn't do 'em any good, prob'ly, if they *had* been around like you have. What I mean, they wouldn't know how to take in things the way you have. The trouble with them is they wouldn't know how to. You see what I mean, don't you, Claire?"

"I'm not exactly sure," she said. "But I suppose prob'ly that *is* the trouble with a certain amount of people. Do you know what I believe is the trouble with most people?"

"What is?" he asked solicitously, almost breathlessly; for her tone was deeply serious, and he felt that matters of grave import were before them. "I've often thought about it; but I never did get it worked out in my mind to suit me just right. You can see that most people *have* got something the matter with 'em; but you can't tell exactly what it is. What do you believe it is, Claire?"

"Well, I've thought about it a great deal, too," she said. "I used to feel it was a question there'd never be any answer to; and sometimes it would make me —oh, I used to get absolutely morbid about it!"

"Did you?" he said gently, touched by the depth

of her conscientiousness. "I never got that way about it myself, prob'ly because I haven't got a deep enough nature. You don't any more, do you Claire?"

"No," she said. "Not about that, anyhow, because I'm older now and I think I've worked out the answer."

"Have you? How?"

"Well, princip'ly by observation."

"I think that's wonderful," he said. "What was the answer, Claire?"

"Well, it's this," she said, and they walked more slowly. "I believe the trouble with most people is, they never think."

"You mean——"

"Yes," she said. "I just don't understand their not doing it; but if you turn over the people you know in your mind, how many of them can you find that ever really think?"

Nelson became emphatic, as in a great enlightenment. "By golly, I believe you're right! I believe you've got it worked out—that *is* the trouble with most people. They *don't* think."

"It's so strange," Claire murmured, a little sadly. "You'd think they *would* think——"

"But they don't," Nelson said. "That's the trouble with 'em; they don't think."

At this she appealed to him, as to a superior wisdom. "Why is it, Nelson? I've wondered so much about that. You're a man, and you ought to be able to tell me. Why is it they don't think?"

"Well, I suppose it's prob'ly because they won't take the trouble to. Either that, or maybe because they simply don't know how."

"I believe you're right," she returned, and she gave him a quick little glance of deferential appreciation. "I think that's rather a wonderful idea, Nelson. Only a person that does think could work out an explanation like that."

Nelson's colour heightened, he was so pleased to believe her kind opinion of him warranted. It seemed to him that this was a beautiful walk he was taking in delicious air and sunshine with a companion who understood with him the deeper things of life, the things that he really cared for. "The way I look at it is simply this," he said. "The trouble with most people is they don't even realize there *is* such a thing as thinking. So—well, when you get with a person that does think, well, you get a kick out of it."

"Yes," she agreed thoughtfully. "I think that's true."

"Of course it's true," he said; and he went on: "That's what I meant about the way you were talking, up at the cottage. I knew you were a girl that does think, and you don't often meet with one that does, because what do the ordinary run of 'em care for? What do they talk about? Why, nothing but what they *do* talk about—just all this and that, till you get absolutely sick of listening to 'em. All in the world they got to go on is simply their sex appeal, and in the long run what does that amount to? All you got to do is analyze it to see it doesn't amount to anything more than just a part of their maternity instinct, and you get awful tired of it. What I mean, you take two people that got more than mere sex appeal, and suppose they meet in a place like this, the way I've met you here, Claire, well, I mean there ought to be a pretty good kick in it." He paused, and then, with increased earnestness, he added, "I don't care for *anything* that hasn't got a kick in it. Do you feel that way, too, Claire?"

She inclined her head gravely, assenting. "Yes; I think life isn't worth living, practic'ly, unless you get a kick out of it."

"I knew you'd feel that way," Nelson said in a low voice. "I knew you would." Then, emotional after the confirmation of this affinity between them, he walked on in silence, believing that she shared his feeling.

But here he pathetically failed in comprehension of his new friend. Claire was wondering which of two dresses she would wear that evening to a dance at the Beach Club; all the way from Nelson's cottage, she had been trying to decide between them; she was only secondarily aware of Nelson, though she had seemed to be giving him a stirred attention. Her share of the conversation had been not much more than the repetition of a familiar formula, yet he found it anything but mechanical. For in this she was exercising an art possessed and habitually practised by most of her sex. Nelson's own mother used a variation of it frequently, at breakfast, when she gave a perfect response to her husband's discourse without listening to it or disturbing in the least the housewifely planning that then always occupied her mind.

Without speaking again, the two young people reached the driveway gate of the house Claire's father had leased for the summer; and here they paused. "Well——" Nelson said, a little huskily, for his emo-

tion had not subsided but increased. "I suppose we couldn't go on a little way farther? Prob'ly you want to go in?"

"Want to?" she echoed, and, as she wished to look over the two dresses before making a choice between them, she decided against any prolongation of their walk. "I don't know why you should put it that way, Nelson," she said. "One doesn't always do what one wants to."

"But it isn't near dinnertime yet. If you do want to, I don't see why——"

"Men never see why," she said gently. "Because they can do what they like with their own time, they always think a girl can."

He sighed. Her tone implied important duties that could not honourably be evaded, no matter what her desires might be; and he understood that her strong inclination was to extend their walk. "Well," he said, "I wish you could; but if you can't——" He leaned against one of the pillars of rough stone that served as gate-posts. "Anyhow, I'm glad we've had this talk. There's not many girls I'd care to talk to the way I do to you, Claire, because they wouldn't understand. In the first place, what I mean, I *wouldn't* talk to 'em the way I been talking to you, and in the

second place, if I did, they wouldn't understand what I mean."

"Oh, yes, they would," she said generously. "Plenty of them would, Nelson. You mustn't be so cynical."

"I'm not exactly cynical," he returned, much pleased. "But it's true. I don't know another girl here that I'd talk to like this or that'd understand what I mean if I did."

"Oh, Nelson! Not one?"

"Not a single one."

"Well, I do," she said. "Anyhow, if there aren't any around here I've known girls other places that would."

He conceded a little. "Well, maybe there are girls other places that would; but anyhow you're the only one here. That's the reason I wanted to say something about—about——" He hesitated; then went on: "Well, what I mean: You take two people that are the only two people that understand each other in a place like this, and that really care about the same things that the others don't care about, well, what I mean, I think two people like that, if they were at a dance like to-night f'r instance—and knew they cared about the same things the way we do—well, we

could walk down to the rocks and sit there most of the time, if you'd like to. I hope you'd like to as much as I would, Claire. Would you?"

His tone was wistful, yet not without confidence in a favourable reply, for Nelson felt that a definite and exquisite tie had been established between them. He was surprised and troubled, therefore, when she did not immediately reply to his question; and after a few moments he repeated it, a little huskily. "You would, wouldn't you, Claire?"

Still she hesitated. That evening was to mark her first appearance before a general collection of the younger summer inhabitants of the place, and her ambition was by no means limited to the capture of an individual. She wished Nelson to be an ardent suitor for her favour, and by his ardour an incitement to competition—in fact, a herald or advertiser for her; and she hoped to be kept too busy, even this first evening, to leave the dancing floor at all. But as the most useful diplomatic reply to his question was difficult, she fell back upon a repetition of something she had just used.

"Girls can't always do what they want to, Nelson."

"What?" He was puzzled. "Why, you could go

down to the rocks with me if you wanted to, couldn't you?"

"Not to-night, I'm afraid."

"But you could!"

She shook her head sadly. "No—not if I'd promised my mother."

"But why should she——"

"She's old-fashioned, Nelson."

"Oh, dear me!" he said, much depressed. "But anyhow——"

"Anyhow we'll see a lot of each other," she interrupted cheeringly, and she gave him a swift, bright look that lifted him to a state of adequate consolation. "Gracious!" she cried. "If you knew all I have to do!" And with that, she said, "G'by!" and flitted lightly up the driveway, while he stood gazing after her in precisely the fond condition she wished. She would see him again, she knew, in about four hours; and she now economically put him out of her conscious thought just as a cook who has set a dish in the oven to bake for some similar length of time, puts it out of her mind and turns to other matters. She went briskly to the selection of her dress, while young Nelson, having watched her out of sight, reverently picked a leaf from the ivy that climbed one of the

gateway pillars, and then walked slowly homeward, sighing dreamily. He had lived a long time, he felt, much of it occupied with dreary illusions; and at last he was not only in love, but had found a nature that corresponded to his own. The great harmony had been established between them: she cared for the same things that he did.

III

HE WAS all the more in a sighing condition because of Claire's devotion to the tasks that called her indoors. He understood them to be useful and altruistic—perhaps aiding her mother with household management, possibly performing secretarial duties for her father; at any rate, something better than the occupations of his sisters, who never did anything, he was convinced, except for themselves. Everything about this girl was beautifully admirable; hers was a deeper nature than that of other girls; and she was so conscientious that she wouldn't even break a promise unreasonably extorted by the old-fashioned prejudices of her mother. Nelson recognized a noble loyalty; but he was a little gloomy about it, too. He had a foreboding of rivalry; there were three or four dashing contemporaries of his whom Claire had not met; and it was partly with them in mind that he had suggested the departure to the rocks. In particular, he felt an uneasiness about the effect upon her of two of his close friends.

Platter Thomas and Bill Reek were "all right among men," Nelson thought; but he did not like their manners with girls. Platter and Bill were too informal; they were boisterous, coarse-grained, off-hand; and they were incapable of making fine distinctions; they would not understand that Claire Ambler wasn't the kind of person one slaps on the back. He had seen Platter and Bill presented to a girl on the beach and immediately take her into the surf and hold her under water as a means of establishing, without intermediate tediums, a proper camaraderie. The fact that girls seemed to be flattered by the attentions of the boorish pair, Nelson attributed to a swift and commodious motorboat, their joint property. The motorboat would not dazzle a girl who had seen so much of the world as Claire had, he thought; and yet her very conscientiousness might prevent her from declining invitations. Moreover, Platter and Bill would be certain to tell her about the boat as soon as they met her;—they never failed to drag in an apparently casual mention of it, and he had a premonition that he was going to find them annoying.

Herein he was a true prophet; they were so annoying, in fact, that he spoke of them to Claire before

the evening was half over, and he showed feeling: "I s'pose they been bragging to you about that old tub o' theirs," he said severely, as he danced with her. "They never meet anybody new they don't begin right away to blah-blah about it. I hope you didn't flatter 'em by seeming to take any interest in it—I mean after this afternoon."

"After this afternoon, Nelson?" she asked vaguely.

"Yes," he said. "You know. I mean our caring for the same things. You know."

"Oh, yes," she returned quickly. "Of course."

"You meant it, didn't you, Claire?"

"Meant what?"

"Well—you know. I mean about our caring for the same things. Didn't you——?"

"Yes, Nelson."

"Well, since we found that out, don't you think it makes a difference? What I mean: when two people care for the same things, why, I shouldn't think one of 'em would seem so excited about meeting a lot of new men, and look in their eyes, and seem so eager and pleased when they cut in when we're dancing together and everything like that. What I mean: if I didn't remember this afternoon, the way you been

behaving to-night I wouldn't even know we *did* care for the same things."

"But we do, Nelson."

"Well, then," he said reproachfully, "I think you might act more like it, Claire. The way you been acting to-night I wouldn't know whether you cared for the same things or just never thought about anything in the world except mere sex appeal. You haven't promised you'll go out in their old boat with 'em yet, have you?"

"Promised who?"

"Platter Thomas and Bill Reek."

"Which ones are they, Nelson? I've met so many and I get their names mixed up."

At this he was relieved. "Well, I'm glad you do," he said. "So you haven't."

"Haven't what?"

"Haven't said you'd go out in their boat."

"Let me see." A slight frown, as of perplexity, appeared upon her pretty brow. "There were three boys who asked me to motor with them, and one to go canoeing——"

"What!" Nelson interrupted. "You didn't——"

"Oh, yes," she said, remembering. "And there were two that talked about motorboating. One

wanted me to go to-morrow morning and the other in the afternoon."

"Listen!" Nelson said. "You didn't promise you would, did you?"

Surprised, she looked up at his flushed and troubled face. "Well, they all seem so nice and cordial——"

"All?" he gasped. "All! D'you mean you're going to do what *all* of 'em asked you to? After this afternoon?"

"But you don't want me to snub people, do you, Nelson? Just when they're anxious to be friendly and make me feel at home in a strange place?"

"Listen!" he said. "You mean you told *all* of 'em you *would?*"

"But what else could I do, Nelson?"

Nelson looked desperate. "You did, then! After this afternoon! You said we care for the same things and then you go ahead and get yourself all dated up like this!"

"But Nelson——"

"It's terrible," he said. "It's a terrible thing."

"But we do care for the same things, Nelson, don't you believe it?"

"Well, then, if we do, what makes you go and date yourself up for all this——"

But here he was unpleasantly interrupted. A muscular hand descended heartily upon his shoulder; Mr. Platter Thomas was "cutting in," and claimed the lady for his partner in the dance. Nelson was left with a sense of injury and no answer to an incomplete question. The sense of injury seemed to be located at first at a point in his lower throat; later, it spread to his chest, and then progressing rapidly, saturated his whole person. Breathing heavily, he determined to "cut in" himself, and insist upon a direct reply; but in this resolve he was anticipated by competitors. Indeed, he was thrice forestalled; and, when his chance came again, he had no more than said, "Listen! If we do care for the same things——" before another brisk slap on the shoulder warned him that his time was over.

He was unfortunate; he had bestowed his affections upon one who almost instantaneously became the outstanding belle of that sector of the New England coast. Claire was seldom able to dance more than the full length of the room without a change of partners, and, from Nelson's point of view, the worst thing about this was her visible enjoyment of an odious popularity. Flushed, laughing, radiant, she turned sparkling eyes to every new applicant, even

though he might be one of the mere loutish hobbledehoys of sixteen who cluttered the floor instead of being kept at home and sent to bed, as they should have been, Nelson thought.

"Pups!" he muttered, watching two of these pursuing to "cut in," while a third danced rapidly away with her, evading them and evading Nelson too. "Pups!" And he said worse of them: "Mere filthy pups!"

For gradually, as the evening wore away, his disposition became soured. Whenever he was able to dance with her for more than a moment, he tried to obtain an answer to his question. "Claire, after this afternoon——" he would begin, and once that was as far as he got with it. Again, later, he said, "But if we *do* care for the same things, Claire——" and as she interrupted him there to say, "But you know we do, Nelson," he found only time to add, "Then why don't you act more like it?" She was not put to the trouble of a reply, as the noisy young Mr. Reek intervened.

True, as Nelson stood against the wall while she danced by with others, she would often give him a lovely, wistful glance. "Don't you *know* we care for the same things?" this tender quick look seemed

to say. But he had begun to doubt her seriously, and at last, stung by a little mistake of hers, he decided to hold himself aloof. This mistake was of no great importance, except to Nelson; she was so careless as not to observe until too late that he was standing beside his former friend, Mr. Thomas, and as she danced by them, she flashed to Platter one of those lovely little glances identically wistful. For an instant Nelson thought himself the recipient; then the fatuous expression of Platter and Claire's slight confusion were together all too enlightening.

Immediately Nelson became more completely than ever a mechanism. That is to say, of course, he was like any other human being under the impulsion of strong feelings, a stoked engine compelled to motion. The metal engine will move as long as the fuel lasts; the engine of human appearance will move as long as the feeling lasts; and the difference is that the metal engine is (except for accident) guided by human intelligence while the human engine is not. Nevertheless, just as rails are provided for the metal engine, so are there tracks that the human engine must follow—tracks thus travelled for thousands of years by the mechanical humans stoked by common emotions. To Nelson it appeared that of his own

choice he became haughty and indifferent to Claire; he believed that he selected this manner himself; for he had no means of knowing that this and his subsequent performances, as well, were only the operations of a machine running inevitably along over tracks so worn that they are among the most ancient.

Thus, running smoothly on rails—though in his own belief the way was rough and painful—he danced no more that night with Claire, nor so much as looked at her, nor bade her even the most frigid or careless good-night, nor any good-night at all; but in his own mind said farewell to her definitely and for ever. He would have nothing more to do with a girl who had only pretended to care for the same things that he did; and, to make her fully aware of his indifference to her, on the following morning, he risked his life.

IV

ALMOST any body of water with a depth of a few feet, even an inland creek, will afford the means to those desirous of taking such a risk; but an ocean is unquestionably the handiest thing for the purpose. The North Atlantic, in particular, offers opportunity during the glassiest calm of a summer day as well as when distorted by winter tumults; it is necessary only to reduce to the proper degree the staunchness of the craft in which one goes to sea. Upon this point there have been arguments; many coastwise seafarers holding that no canoe whatever is an appropriate vehicle for these waters; while, on the other hand, there are records of notable ocean voyages made in canoes. But not in such a canoe, all will agree, as that selected by young Nelson for his gesture of indifference to Miss Ambler.

It was a dainty slip of a boat, pretty in pea-green and gold, fourteen feet long, with green-and-white cushions: it belonged to the youngest of Nelson's sisters, and she kept it upon an inlet to be used there

as an adjunct to moonlight and a banjo. Upon its bows, in gold letters, twinkled the unromantic name, Peanut, never intended for salty incrustations; but salt already dimmed the gold leaf, that morning, when the Peanut spanked itself through the harbour mouth and fantastically stood out to sea. The breeze was from the east, and Nelson knew that Platter Thomas would take the Caliph—the Reek and Thomas motorboat—straight into the breeze, because thus the consequent splashing would be more impressive to a passenger. This was the canoeist's unhesitating cynical conviction, and therefore, desiring to prove to Claire his utter indifference to herself, he paddled straight into the wind and was two miles off shore before the Caliph came in sight.

Of course he expected to show her more than his indifference; he meant her to see a greater man than either of the owners of the Caliph. And here a little mystery is reached. It is difficult to understand why he felt that going to sea in a fourteen-foot canoe proved his indifference to her in particular; though his thought that the voyage would show her his superiority to Platter and Bill is more comprehensible. If she admired daring, his position, compared to that of people in a forty-foot vessel, was admirably peril-

ous; but to explain his feeling that a special indifference to her was thus exhibited, it can only be supposed that she was to understand herself included as a part of his life, and he was certainly proving his indifference to that.

For the morning sea had become lively. That is, it was pleasantly choppy for a forty-foot boat, heavy in mahogany and brass, but rather showily rough for a canoe; and the roughness increased with the freshening breeze. In fact, long before he heard the powerful exhaust of the Caliph behind him, Nelson knew he was committed to the eastward course, which took him always farther off shore; he was committed to it because he didn't dare to turn round. He knew that he couldn't trust the Peanut broadside in the trough, which was growing deeper and deeper, richly green and crested with sparkling white; and, since he had no choice but to go on, though the farther he went the more threatening was the sea, his situation began to present an aspect dishearteningly like the realization of a nightmare. He had intended his gesture to be magnificent, but not suicidal; and now, as more and more it bore the latter appearance, he heard with relief the exhaust of the Caliph growing rapidly louder. The glittering motorboat overhauled

him; then slowed down and came to its lowest speed, moving alongside the Peanut and not ten feet away. Platter Thomas and Claire sat side by side in the control cockpit, and she was laughing merrily.

Nelson, paddling with tired arms, gave them only a cold and hasty side glance; but there was more than one reason for him to keep his eyes strictly ahead.

"Nelson!" Claire called. "You haven't any idea how funny you look! All you need is a pussy cat and plenty of honey wrapped up in a five-pound note! Where on earth'd you find that ridiculous little boat? Oh, *look!*" She grasped her host's arm, and Nelson was well aware of this impulsive friendliness of hers, even though he perceived it with the tail of his eye. "Do see its name?" she cried. "It's called the Peanut." And, thoroughly comprehending that she was the reason for the Peanut's present voyage, she uttered peal on peal of girlish laughter.

Platter Thomas was more serious. "Yes," he said. "A peanut's about all it is too." He addressed Nelson sternly. "Look here; you ought to know a thing like that hasn't got any business outside the harbour. You ought to know that much, anyhow."

Nelson did know that much; he knew it poignantly; but when Claire laughed at him and grasped Platter's

arm, his bitterness became more acute than his anxiety. "Run along!" he said. "That old gas-tub'll blow up if you ever get a back fire. Run along!"

"Look here!" Platter said. "You go on back where you belong. That canoe's about a quarter full o' water right now, and if you stopped heading her up long enough to bail, she'd capsize on you. Haven't you got any sense?"

"Run along," Nelson said. "Run along and play you're a sailor!"

Platter was irritated. "Look out or I will!" he retorted; but, disturbed by his more humane impulses, he made a magnanimous offer. "Listen! On account of your not having any more sense than to come out here on that shingle, I'll let you climb into my after cockpit; and then Claire and I'll take you back inside the harbour, where you belong. You can stay there and pretend you're out in the real ocean and have just as good a time as you think you're having now. Hurry up and climb aboard; I can't fool with you all morning."

"Run along!" Nelson said. "When you want to really learn something about boats come around and ask me; I'll give you beginners' lessons free."

His tone, like Platter's, was not one of good-natured badinage, though it assumed to be that; there was a goading superiority in it, intended to exasperate. Small boys often take this tone with one another; and older boys, even of eighteen or twenty, are so little older that sometimes they use it, too—most frequently, no doubt, in the presence of a courted, pretty young creature like Claire. Nelson and Platter were really insulting each other, though affecting to engage in casual raillery.

The fact that they did affect at least the air of raillery is an indication that civilization is progressing: two young sprigs, rivals for a maiden's favour in the sixteenth century, would have made no such pretense; daggers would have been tapped, but in spite of our increasing civilization, young rivals still sometimes go to life-and-death lengths; and Nelson deliberately went to that length now. He profoundly desired the security—indeed, the salvation—of the Caliph's after cockpit; he knew that if he rejected it and the motorboat departed, his position would be critical; yet he did reject it. Flopping wildly upon the rushing seas, into which he kept the Peanut headed by only the most watchful effort, he never-

theless successfully concealed his real desperation. "Run along!" he said. "Run along and pretend you're scarin' the jellyfishes to death!"

Platter, stung, looked down upon him darkly. "All right," he said. "Don't blame *me* if you drown!" With that, he slid forward a strip of brass upon the wheel; the Caliph's exhaust again began to roar and the boat slapped forward into the chop. A moment later it was tossing the foam from its risen bows and beginning to speed; Nelson and the Peanut receded quickly as Claire looked back at them.

"Dear me!" she said, still laughing. "He certainly thought he was razzing us, didn't he? How funny he does look—exactly like a grasshopper on a cucumber rind! Such splashing and lurching! You'd almost think he was going to upset."

"He will if he isn't careful," Platter said crossly. "Well, it'd be his own fault. When you offer to help people at sea and they won't take it, you're supposed to let 'em alone; it's a kind of an unwritten law or something; but anyhow he's prob'ly all right. That's his sister's canoe and he ought to know how much it'll stand. He'll turn around and go back as soon as we're out of sight and he can't show off any more."

"I guess so," she returned; then she pointed to

three small black triangles lifted at the moment from the surface of the water. "Aren't those sharks?"

"Yes, they are."

"They're going the other way, aren't they, Platter?"

"Yes, toward shore."

She laughed delightedly. "How thrilling! If they keep on they'll pass right by Nelson. You s'pose he'll see them? You s'pose it'll make him nervous?"

"Do him good if they did," Platter said severely, and then added, with little hope for his former friend's chances of improvement: "But they never do hurt anybody and I guess he knows it."

Here his surmise was correct. To the best of Nelson's information the sharks in these waters had never attacked a living person and were not man-eaters; nevertheless there is a striking difference between knowing such a thing on shore, or on a staunch vessel, and knowing it in a fourteen-foot canoe undecided between swamping and capsizing. For the three sharks did indeed hold their course toward the coast; Nelson did indeed see them; and they did indeed make him nervous, though without doing him the "good" so securely prophesied for him by young Mr. Thomas.

"You get away from here!" Nelson said angrily to the three triangles when they were revealed to his view almost directly ahead of him, and only a few short waves distant.

They continued to approach, placidly sinister.

The Caliph was now so far away that the two figures in the cockpit were indistinguishable. The boat appeared to be no more than a small brown arrowhead, flying upon two little white wings of spume; and Nelson knew that he himself and the Peanut had become invisible to the Caliph. His human loneliness upon the vast water all at once seemed a dreadful thing; and the next moment, when he saw the three dark fins close together and shining wetly in the dip of the wave just beyond the Peanut's bow, uncontrollable panic seized upon him suddenly and completely.

"I told you to get *away* from here!" he shouted fiercely.

Then, forgetting his urgent need to keep his paddle every instant to its proper service, he swept it forward through the air in a gesture threatening the three ominous triangles. The bow of the Peanut immediately swung round into the trough and the little boat, caught upon its side, received a cargo of

water and half capsized, half sank. Nelson went down into the cold salt water, gasping, "Oh, my gosh!"

Mentally, he had an insufferably crowded moment beneath the surface. He felt excruciating annoyance, hatred, and an anguish of revulsion. The annoyance was with his own folly, which he had the pain of realizing fully, under water; the hatred was for Claire; the revulsion was from his own recent dramatic emotions—from all that had led him to offer himself as a drowning breakfast for three sharks.

V

THEN he got his head out of the splashing water and one hand upon the side of the canoe, which was not wholly submerged. It gave him a slight support, enough to sustain him when he paddled with his other hand. The three triangles were not to be seen; but he had no need to fear them, nor indeed, to fear anything; for, on such a day, there are more keen eyes along that coast than landsmen at sea suspect. The waters there are like the Sahara, where Arabs and camels appear miraculously from the vacant expanses of sand. Both sea and sand, where the stranger sees nought else, are incredibly peopled.

A beating in Nelson's ears grew louder and more definite; it was the hard voice of a one-cylinder engine in a lobster fisherman's dory—a dory of the colour of the sea, a dory much the colour of its owner. "I see you when you come out the habbuh," he explained, as he helped Nelson to climb aboard. "'My godfrey mighty!' I says. 'Them summuh

people do lean to fancy ideers about whut's a good vessel to navigate in.' Had my eye on you and wan't surprised what happened. Didn't reckanize you, Nelson. I wun't spread it on you if you tell me why you done it."

"Didn't have any sense," Nelson muttered, so abject was his mood. "Guess I found out I never did have any."

In this he meant more than the rescuer perceived; he meant that he had risked his life to impress a worthless girl for whom he now felt the sharpest distaste, asking of destiny no greater boon than that he should never see her again. He thought of her with something like horror; and after they had emptied the Peanut and taken it in tow, he was glad to leave the scene of his idiocy and to be heading for the sane and undramatic shore. He wished to be far from the path of the Caliph on her return to the harbour.

That fast and hardy motorboat, however, speeding back with almost the accuracy of a bee over her outward course, passed within fifty yards of the spot now so loathsome to Nelson, and made a troublous discovery. The dory owner and Nelson had fished two of the Peanut's cushions out of the water, but could not find the third, nor the paddle so care-

lessly misused by Nelson. The Caliph, higher in the air, and with a greater field of vision, found both. It was Claire who saw the green-and-white cushion.

"Something ahead to the left," she said. "It's just under water; but a little of it sticks out. Let's see what it is."

Platter throttled the engine down, then threw out his clutch; the Caliph lost headway and lay heaving beside the water-logged green-and-white cushion against which bobbed and snuggled a yellow paddle. Platter's mouth opened dismally.

"My goodness!" he exclaimed. "Say!"

"What's the matter?"

"They're his. They're Nelson's."

"But you don't—you don't think——"

Platter swallowed heavily. "I told him he had no business out here in that canoe. I told him he didn't. I told him he hadn't any sense. I told him——"

"Platter! Do you mean he's *drowned?*"

"No," he said. "But—but—well, it begins to look kind of queer."

"Oh!" she gasped. "How awful! How *awful!*"

"It begins to look pretty queer," Platter repeated. "It certn'ly does."

They sat staring incredulously over the side of the boat at the bobbing cushion and paddle; and for a long and disturbing minute neither of them spoke again. Then she put a trembling hand upon his arm. "Ought we—ought we to've made him come with us, Platter?"

"That's what everybody'll say, I guess," he answered huskily. He coughed, and his tone became querulous. "You heard me warn him. You can prove I did. You heard me tell him he had no business to be out here in that——"

"Platter!" she cried, interrupting him, in sharpest distress. "You mean you think if anything's happened they'll blame *us?*"

"I guess they will."

"But why? How could people be so terrible? We didn't have a thing to do with it—not a thing! We *told* him it was dangerous for him to be out here in that canoe; we *begged* him to get in our boat."

"Yes. I know; but they'll say——"

"It's just horrible!" she said, and she began to cry. "We tried to make him come with us, and if something's happened to him it was absolutely his own fault, and if people—if they could be so mean

and cruel—if—if——" Agitation overcame her; she failed of coherency and could get no further with her meaning.

"Well," Platter said presently, "we don't know. Somebody *might* 'a' picked him up." But he gulped as he said it; and he added, "Of course it does begin to look kind of queer."

"And they—they'll blame us?"

For reply, he made an ominous motion with his head, not trusting his voice; and with that, Claire's weeping became an audible sobbing. Platter sat silent, still gazing at the cushion and paddle; but after a time this inaction became intolerable to him. He took a boat hook from its fastenings; and with a little difficulty got the paddle and cushion aboard. Then his passenger asked brokenly, "What you—what you doing that for?"

"We got to," he answered. "We got to take 'em to—to his family."

She protested. "I can't! I just can't! Have we *got* to?"

"Yes," he said doggedly. "We got to." He stared with sombre eyes at the blue coastline; then drawing a long breath, he pushed forward the clutch lever, and slowly advanced the throttle. The Caliph moved

forward with the running seas. "I guess if it's true the whole place'll go sour on us," he said. "They'll treat us like a couple o' murderers all summer." Then he added desperately, "Well, whatever they do, we got to stand it."

"I can't!" she sobbed. "I can't! I can't!"

But she knew that Platter spoke the truth. What awaited them on shore must be borne; and in this realization Claire suffered a sharper pain than any she had yet endured in the whole course of her life. For, though she did not know it and felt that she had lived much and at times suffered much, she had never, hitherto, borne anguish at all. She had endured little achings and some mortification while her teeth were being straightened; she had been through difficulties and discouragements at school; she had wept softly at the funeral of a great-uncle when a quartet sang "Lead, Kindly Light"; but, until to-day, the worst thing that had ever happened to her was a light attack of scarlatina. She had contracted it a week after she "came out," just before the Christmas holidays, and she had wailed piteously to her mother that she was "missing everything!" But though she had no suspicion that her life had been a child's bed of roses, giving her no opportunity to learn anything

worth knowing, she was wholly unprepared to be blamed for the drowning of a troubled suitor. For she knew well enough that it was on her account that he had come out into the open sea in the Peanut.

In justice, it must be said that if Nelson had been less arrogant when the Caliph offered him help, she might have spared more thought than she did for the pathos of his struggles in the water and for the probable grief of his family. But pathos does not attach itself to the memory of an overbearing person; and so her shocked imagination was fully occupied with miserable prophetic pictures of her own shattered summer. The season's career, so triumphantly begun last night, was already a ruin; she would be coldly looked upon; she would be pointed out with harsh disapproval; and, what was sheerly unendurable, for the next week or two—her mother's sense of good taste might insist upon longer—she could not even go to any of the dances. It was conceivable that the young people of this new place, at the outset so cordial, might "drop" her; and, shuddering, she faced a pariah's tragedy.

"Platter!" she moaned. "I can't go back! Turn the boat around. I can't go back!"

"Got to," he said. "We got to go through it."

At that, overcome by the thought of the bitter injustice awaiting her, Claire again sobbed aloud. Platter, occupied with his own apprehensions of injustice, proved to be unsympathetic.

"Hush up!" he said. "Gosh!"

VI

THE Caliph sped into the harbour entrance and swished through the still water to the floats before the clubhouse, where two attendants, dressed like sailors, roped it in its accustomed berth. Nelson, still thoroughly damp, had just landed from the much slower dory; and he paused upon the veranda steps looking down icily upon the arrival of the Caliph. For a moment neither Platter nor Claire saw him, and as she stepped out upon the float Nelson perceived that she had been crying. Moreover, in the cockpit there lay his paddle and the Peanut's cushion, and he understood what must have been their significance to those who discovered them.

His severity was shaken; he saw that she still wept, and that her thin young shoulders were hunched and bowed. Grief was there; was it for him?

Then she saw him, and her startled eyes grew round; a brightness came upon her face. She rushed to him, running over the swaying floats as fast as she could. She seized both of his hands and pressed them

to her breast. "*Nelson!* Oh, thank heaven! Thank heaven!"

"What for?" he asked gruffly; but he was touched. Nay, he wavered. Once more they seemed to care for the same things; once more she seemed adorable.

In her agitation she spoke exactly what she felt and much too straight from the heart. "What *for?*" she cried. "Why, we thought you were drowned and everybody in the whole place would blame us for it! Everybody'd 'a' said I was to blame; I know they would!"

The revelation was complete and so was Nelson's disillusionment. He tried to pull his hands from her; but in the happiness of her great relief she held them but the tighter, and then, in his renewed revulsion he forgot to be a gentleman.

"So that's all you were thinking about! It didn't matter a darn thing about my getting drowned and my father and mother and a few things like that!" He used a terrible word. His great-grandfather, under similar circumstances, might have caused a lady to faint by addressing to her the epithet, "heartless coquette." Nelson's generation has less care of its English. "Leggo my hands," he said. "You Prom-Trotter!"

Staggered, she released him; and then slowly, her

cheeks burning and her eyes fiery with the endured insult, she went through the clubhouse and walked up the dusty hill-road toward her cottage. "Prom-Trotter!" She had lost him, lost the impetus his competition would give the others, and that could be borne; but the rage she felt—like the anguish that preceded it—was intolerable. Anyone passing her would have thought the hill too steep for her, though she could easily have taken it at a run. She had grown pale, and her breast heaved with her tumultuous breathing.

"He dared!" she panted. "He *dared!*"

Again tears were hot upon her eyelids; she clenched her small hands, and bit her tremulous lower lip to keep it still. Self-pity and hatred filled her. "I wish he *had* drowned! I wish those sharks——"

In her mind's eye she saw Nelson struggling in the cold salt sea and the three grim fins approaching hungrily. "Eat him!" she imagined herself saying. "Eat him!" This time, she willingly accepted the responsibility; but she got no comfort out of it. She got no comfort out of anything; she was fiery with anger, yet helpless in a keen misery.

Then a strange thing happened to her. As she imagined Nelson in the water she seemed to see his

scornful eyes looking at her with all the bitterness that was in them just now when he insulted her. Suddenly, and not knowing how it happened, she realized that Nelson was a person, a being like herself, full of himself as she was full of herself. He was not just some impressions made upon her senses, not just something for her to use; he was as much a person, in fact, as she was. Moreover, in this revelation she understood that he had suffered; that she had been nearly the cause of his death; and that to die meant as much to him as to die would mean to her.

She stopped short, looking up blankly at the warm noon sky above the brow of the hill. "Oh, my goodness!" she whispered. "He was right!"

She was dazed, stricken with her bewilderment and her unhappiness; what had happened to her appeared to her as nothing short of tragic. On the contrary, she should have been full of a new delight; for the thing that had just befallen her on the hillside was of a prophetic beauty; it was the beginning of her life as a being independent of her mechanical self. Out of her rage and pain and the hot pressure of old, old instincts and urges, intelligence was being born.

For the first time in her life, she had just had a thought.

PART II

RAONA

VII

AT RAONA, that ancient Mediterranean town on a cliff ledge halfway to the sky, there is one of those romantic hotels that once were monasteries. The pedestrian comes to it by flights of stone steps leading down from sixteenth-century streets; he enters a cloister where there are oleander trees and an old pink-and-white-marble fountain; then he crosses a groined corridor with a pavement of red tiles worn uneven by centuries of monkish treading, and walks out into a sunny garden on the top of a precipice. The garden is murmurous with bees, with the faint swishing of the slow, turquoise sea a thousand feet below, and sometimes, perhaps, with a quiet English voice reading the Odyssey to an invalid drowsing in the tremulous shade of feathered palm trees. Nothing could be more appropriate than such a reading, moreover; for the sea, so far below, is the very water traversed by Odysseus as he sailed nearer to Scylla and Charybdis; and Mr. Eugene Rennie, an American villa-dweller in Raona, coming

into the garden upon a bright March morning in search of an enfeebled English friend of his, was pleased to find him thus entertained by an attendant spinster.

"I mustn't interrupt you, Miss Orbison," the visitor said, as he seated himself upon a painted iron bench beside them. "Really, this is just what I persuaded your brother to come here for. It's gratifying to me to find that on your very first morning you've discovered the exactly proper thing to do. Won't you go on with the reading?"

The invalid protested. He was a long, eager-eyed, brown-haired man whose extreme thinness of body was perceptible even under the heavy rug that enveloped him to the waist. "No," he said. "My sister has had enough of reading this morning, and so have I. Ulysses has been dead a very long time and I have been nearly dead a longer, I think; I'd like to hear something of people who are more alive. Last evening after you brought us up from the station and got us installed in our cells, I contrived to hobble into the refectory for dinner and so had a view of our fellow guests in this extraordinary house of entertainment. It seemed to me I never saw a crew of cosmopolites more provocative to my curiosity. Can they actually

be as interesting as they look, or is it the background? The fact that we sleep in the cells of dead monks, and have tea in their abbot's corridor, may lend an exotic tint to people who would appear commonplace enough elsewhere; but they do seem coloured by romance here. Who in the world are they all, Eugene?"

"Who are they all?" the American repeated, and shook his head. "I drop in here for tea sometimes; but I usually don't know many of the hotel's guests and so I can't tell you definitely much about them—which may be the better for you, my friend."

"The better for me?" the Englishman repeated, a little perplexed. "How 'better'?"

"Because where you have no restraining information you can indulge your fancy. Yonder, for instance—that fat, black-bearded man by the pergola. Why does he wear thick white gloves in the warm sunshine? Since I can't tell you anything about him, you are at liberty to imagine any past for him you like. Obviously, that black-bearded man is a sleeked-up scoundrel who made himself wickedly rich out of Arab slave raids with Tippoo Tib thirty years ago, and it is the simplest thing in the world to see that he keeps his gloves on to conceal a telltale scar."

The invalid laughed. "I should say he wears his white gloves to show the rest of us how fashionable he is. But how about that sort of thing?" A movement of his head directed Rennie's attention toward two dapper young men who had just come into the garden and stood upon an upper terrace, where they paused to look about them. "I think I've seen something unpleasantly like those on the Parisian boulevards at night; and one could imagine a slave-raiding future as well as past for them."

The slight frown on his forehead was repeated upon the brow of his American friend. "I'm afraid one could," Rennie said, and his glance at the two young men showed an increasing disfavour. "That pair I do happen to know." Then, as if to confirm this information, the two dapper young men simultaneously caught sight of him, and, removing their brightly ribboned hats of soft white cloth, saluted him with a quick yet solemn inclination of the body from the waist.

They were thin and rather small, of pallidly swarthy complexions and shining black hair that was like jet shaped into waves. Each had a long and pointed nose, thin cheeks and noticeably glistening eyes, to which each had unnecessarily added the

glitter of a monocle upon a black cord. The English invalid, still frowning, mentioned this adornment. "Monocles! Why in the world do they do it?"

The American laughed. "That's the fault of you Britishers. You carried the monocle over the Continent and even to outflung relics of history like Raona, and the impressionable Latin peoples, at first petrified by it, afterward perceived its advantages as a symbol of distinction. Not everyone can wear a ribbon in his buttonhole; but there are no restrictions upon the single eyeglass. The two Bastoni brothers yonder took them up last year when they began to attend the tea dances at the Salone. That's a species of casino we have here, though we wish we hadn't."

"Is that all they do—dance at the Salone?"

"Almost," Rennie answered. "They come from Cabrania near here, and all I've ever heard of their doing, except dancing and mixing rather nefariously in local politics, is selling their grandmother's jewellery. Now and then, as a great favour and with great secrecy, they sell a brooch or a ring—'family heirlooms'—to ladies they've danced with. They buy the jewellery in Naples, I believe; but they dance exquisitely."

"No doubt," the Englishman said. "They look as

though they cut throats exquisitely too. You speak of them as Latins; but they appear to me as something rather Saracen."

"Yes, probably," Rennie agreed. "It's a mixed blood hereabouts; most of the people have a Saracen mingling by inheritance."

"It seems so," the invalid said; and he grunted. "Wolfish look it gives 'em." He turned his head toward the sea. "I think there are other people here I'd prefer to meditate upon. There, for instance."

He nodded toward the railing that enclosed the garden, and protected absent-minded strollers from walking over the rim of the precipice. It was a scroll of wrought iron, black against the distant hazily twinkling stretches of sea visible from where they sat; and an American girl, slowly crossing the garden, paused and put her small gloved hands upon the railing, leaning over it to look thoughtfully down upon the surf far below her. Standing so, she was a graceful figure, and the Englishman found her charming.

"How prettily she's put herself in the precise centre of the canvas!" he said, for by chance she stood at the end of a short leafy vista, and was thus, to their view, neatly framed in shrubberies and a low arch of vines trained overhead. "She's like a lovely silhouette

imagined by the artist in wrought iron who made the railing. The scrollwork seems to spring from her, carrying on her own delicacies of outline; and with that little green knee-long skirt fluttering against a faded blue sea the colour of a Leonardo background, she's the most appropriate thing I could imagine for a Mediterranean garden on a precipice. Yet how completely she's an American, Eugene! One never mistakes your compatriots for anything else. She has the American profile that the most charming of your young ladies all contrive to obtain—especially the straight little nose that has the piquant effect of turning upward without actually doing it. I suppose, alas, she talks through it?"

"My dear Charles Orbison!" Rennie exclaimed. "How careful you British are never to miss a chance of proving the stubbornness of your race! Early in the nineteenth century you got the legend established among you that we're all Yankees and all talk through our noses; so you'll believe it forever, no matter what your ears tell you. As a matter of fact, the young lady yonder has studied music in Paris; she sings really well, and when she talks doesn't talk through her nose. Neither has she been at the pains to learn how to chirp like a vociferous little bird in

imitation of ladies in your own island. I'm sure Miss Orbison will forgive me."

"Quite," Miss Orbison returned serenely. "It's the most perfect description of my own manner of speech. But since you decline to admit that the pretty young creature yonder talks through her nose, I think you must have been listening to her."

"Yes, a little. She's a Miss Ambler."

"'Amber' instead of 'Ambler' might have been better," Orbison said. "To give the colour of the lights in her hair, I mean. I observe that she's not only an American but an heiress as well."

Rennie laughed. "Of course all American girls abroad are heiresses! Why do you think Miss Ambler particularly one?"

"The monocled Saracens," Orbison explained, with a gesture toward the two Bastoni, who were descending from the upper terrace. "At sight of her they became instantly a trifle more wolfishly glittering. They are coming down upon her—but I must say she doesn't seem averse."

Miss Ambler, in fact, appeared to be delighted. Turning from the sea, she waved her hand toward the two young men, smiled with eager cordiality and

called to them some welcoming words in Italian. That was as far as she got in their own tongue, however; for she fell back upon French as they came nearer her, and in that and some fragments of English, the greeting was completed. Each of the brothers formally kissed the back of her extended hand; then the little group turned to the railing, and the girl began to chatter in phrases from the three languages just employed, though the sound, and not the meaning of what she said, was all that came to the trio looking on.

"Shouldn't you offer a maiden from your own shores a rescue, Eugene?" the Englishman inquired. "That's too nice a little girl to be playing Red Riding Hood so gayly."

"She won't be eaten," his friend rejoined. "She's twenty-one, and as for my offering a rescue, American girls don't encourage rescues on the part of middle-aged strangers—though I'm not wholly a stranger, it's true. Her mother brought letters to me and they've been to dine with me once or twice since they came to Raona three weeks ago. Mrs. Ambler is a widow; the daughter yonder is her only child, and both of them are seeing this part of Europe for the

first time with an eager inexperience I should call quite perfect."

"That may be," Orbison said. "But surely even the most inexperienced mother would make some excuse to call her daughter away from two such young men as that."

"No; she wouldn't," the American returned. "Mrs. Ambler would never call her daughter away."

"You don't mean the mother might encourage your Saracen friends?"

"No: but she wouldn't be at all alarmed about them and probably thinks them 'delightfully foreign.' Besides, she's an American mother and far too well trained ever to call her daughter away."

"I dare say," Orbison murmured discontentedly. "But after all, a girl of twenty-one is still something of a child, and if she has a mother trained not to interfere—well, I hope your patriotic confidence that an American girl is equal to anything may be warranted, Eugene."

He paused, listening to the cheerful sound of Miss Ambler's chatter. She was eagerly hurrying forth upon the air an overcrowding multitude of words, emphasizing most of them, yet breaking them continually with interjected syllables of laughter, and

accompanying them with an almost uninterrupted pantomime of gestures. And this voluble pantomime of hers, as the invalid noted, was not descriptive; her gestures pictured nothing; but were merely motions expressing liveliness, good will, and the desire to be entertaining. "Great heaven!" he said with sudden vehemence. "Wouldn't you give a great deal to know just what's inside that pretty little head of hers? That child's as animated for those two sleeked wolves as if they were young Bayard and young Galahad. Why does she make such a to-do over them? Is it because Americans on foreign shores are helplessly unable to distrust even sinister appearing strangers? Or is it——"

But here he interrupted himself with an exclamation. "Hello! I think she is to be rescued; but surely the rescuer isn't her mother. An Italian, isn't she?"

The lady of whom he spoke had just come into the garden from the hotel, and was descending the steps to the lower terrace, evidently with the purpose of joining Miss Ambler, upon whom the gaze of her dark eyes was fixed. She was a pale woman not young: and though she was dressed all in black, the effect she produced was more graceful and friendly than som-

bre. Her gaze was serious, but smilingly so; and there was even vivacity in the gesture with which she caught both of Miss Ambler's hands in her own, when she reached her.

The Bastoni brothers seemed to become graver and more glistening; but the pale lady apparently had no consciousness whatever of their presence, and, retaining one of Miss Ambler's hands, she at once moved away with her to another part of the garden, engaging her in a busy conversation seemingly of cheerful import. The two Bastoni, thoroughly chilled, stood motionless, gazing after them; and then, with monocles gleaming icily, they turned and walked solemnly back into the hotel.

Rennie chuckled. "They've had to give up the hope of eating Red Riding Hood for this morning, at least."

"Who was that very charming lady, Eugene?" Orbison asked.

"She's called the Princess Liana—a widow. I'll see that you meet her immediately, Charles."

But the invalid, who had leaned forward in his long chair, sank back smiling, and with a gesture of his thin hand, waved away his friend's badinage. "Too late," he said. "As bad a back as mine exempts

one from all but the impersonal fascinations. Why did she rush in where a trained American mother wouldn't, Eugene? Has she an eligible son?"

At that, in appreciation of his friend's perspicacity, Rennie laughed outright. "She has a son, yes—a splendid one. You guessed it like a shot."

"Of course!" Orbison said, and peering through the shrubberies, he could see the Princess Liana and the girl seated upon an iron bench at the other end of the garden. "I believe that pretty little American head is just about the most piquant one I ever saw," he said. "It's not beautiful, perhaps; but it's as flashingly pretty a thing as the world can show. And what's inside it? You needn't laugh at me, you two! What's left for me except to speculate upon such matters? An invalid's place in the world is a seat in the stalls to watch the play and try to comprehend the characters of its people. I have to confess there's one character I see from time to time that always baffles me—it's the young American girl of that kind yonder. To me she's the most mysterious creature the universe has produced. I have a good enough working-idea of Kaffirs; of Arabs, Jews, Bengalese, Afghans, Turkish Beys and Argentine millionaires; I think I know pretty well what goes on in the

mind of a communist girl agitator from Warsaw, or in that of a cabaret dancer from Budapest; but when I look at these slim and lively maidens of your tribe, Eugene, it's as though I were confronting a species from another planet. What does she feel? What thoughts has she?"

"What does anyone feel? What thoughts of our own do we understand?" Rennie suggested. "One has to go to Vienna to find out anything about that; and then what he gets, principally, is an old definition in new words."

"I don't mean I'd be interested in a psychologist's chart of her," the Englishman said grumblingly. "But I do wish I knew what goes on in that young head!"

VIII

THIS Platonic desire of his proved to be not at all an invalid's mere whim; and, to the pleased amusement of his sister, he omitted no opportunity to gratify it. In the afternoons, when the tea tables were set along the walls of the long, dark monkish corridor, Orbison would come hobbling forth from his cell and direct her to find places as near Miss Ambler's as possible; he had the maître d'hôtel change their table in the great refectory to one next to that of Miss Ambler and her mother; and when he was prevented from sitting near the Americans for after-dinner coffee, cordials, and music in the corridor, Miss Orbison accused him of becoming querulous.

"He swears," she informed Mr. Eugene Rennie one morning in the garden, a week after his interruption of the reading of the Odyssey. "Whenever I miss a chance to get him near Miss Ambler he uses the most fearful language he knows, and he knows a great deal."

"I don't," Orbison protested, from his long chair. "I may know it—I mean, I don't use it."

"Dear me!" she cried. "I shouldn't like Mr. Rennie to hear what you said to me last evening when you thought we weren't going to be near enough the young lady for you to listen to her chatter during the after-dinner music. We did finally get near enough, though, Mr. Rennie; and he was so absorbed in listening to her, he didn't even apologize to me. I do wonder what Miss Ambler and her mother think of us, the way we haunt them! Probably they'll expect Charles to propose, in case you introduce him. I really think you'd better do that, Mr. Rennie; I'm sure he's pining to meet her."

"I am not," Orbison said brusquely. "I can listen to her and puzzle about her much better without the pleasure of her acquaintance. She has a pretty voice; but what she *says* with it—good heavens!"

"You don't find it edifying?" his friend inquired.

"My dear man! I don't find it anything! That's the point—I don't find it! I listened to her for an hour last evening and I give you my word nobody in the world could be astute enough to know what she was talking about! The great mystery is, what in the name of a name could she, herself, think she was

talking about? It's impossible; she couldn't tell you, I swear."

"Whom was she talking to?"

"Your two Saracen friends behind their monocles, her mother and a Japanese gentleman they'd picked up somewhere. Of course the mother didn't listen; she embroidered and appeared to be able to detach herself from the daughter's chatter enough to give the music an absent sort of attention. Miss Ambler began to talk with the utmost vivacity before they sat down, and she never stopped. I could only conclude that she was carrying the custom of her own country into foreign parts. Am I correct? In your great democracy is it regarded as the duty of a pretty young lady to be incessantly voluble as the proper entertainment for members of the opposite sex?"

"To a degree, I believe so," Rennie answered gravely. "You found not even the germ of an idea in any of her conversation?"

"'Germ?'" the Englishman exclaimed. "It was full of germs! The trouble seemed to be that all the ideas remained in a germinal state; though she had the air of possessing the most vigorous convictions upon them. She asked one of the Bastoni if he'd ever done any big-game hunting, and without waiting for

his answer, said she had always been 'perfectly wild to see a rhinoceros charge' because they were such 'thrilling' beasts; but she wouldn't care to eat one; then she asked the other Bastoni if he believed in vegetarianism, and told the Japanese gentleman she adored rice, and asked him if there was a Japanese form of Fascismo and what he thought of the League of Nations. She didn't give him any chance to tell her; but said that the League could never deal with the Soviets and she thought perhaps there was something in the idea that religion is the opium of the people. She abhorred every form of 'Victorianism' she said, including Tennyson, and believed that by the time her own children were grown up, 'birth control' would be 'regulated by law.' Immediately upon that, she said she was reading Dante's Inferno 'in the original'; thought its 'medievalism' was 'perfectly rapturous,' and declared her belief that democracy has proved an utter failure and is producing 'no art worth the name,' though there probably is 'some advance in science.' And 'modern interpretive dancing' is an 'advance,' too, she thought; but the world would be really '*so* much more picturesque without steam and electricity!' Altogether, she made me dizzy. The action of her mind makes me

think of a flea upon the open pages of an encyclopedia."

"You spent the whole evening being dizzied by the flea, Charles?"

"No; I didn't have the chance. Your friend, the Principessa Liana, came in and carried her away to some kind of party, as I gathered, at a villa."

"At any rate you've made enough progress toward knowing what's in the 'pretty young head' to discover that Miss Ambler is like a flea."

"You call it progress," Orbison exclaimed, "to be made dizzy! All I've discovered is that listening to an American girl is the last way in the world to find out what are her constituent parts. All I get by listening——"

But his sister interrupted, cautioning him to lower his voice. Two young people had just come down from the upper terrace and were walking slowly, in a deep preoccupation with each other, toward one of the iron benches by the railing. They were Miss Ambler and a slender, tall, dark boy of a manly and serious, yet gentle, appearance. That is to say, in the eyes of the two gentlemen, his seniors, observing him, he seemed to be a boy; but he was twenty-four, and his good looks were of that keen outline, almost

imperial, still seen at its finest, sometimes, as the ancient heritage of a son of northern Italy.

Miss Orbison glanced at him appreciatively. "What a romantic-looking young prince and what pretty looks they're giving each other!" she whispered. "Surely that's the princess's son you said was splendid, Mr. Rennie?" Then, upon his nodding, she turned to Orbison and laughed. "You have before you the very answer to your puzzle, Charles. Isn't it plain that you're looking at what would occupy all the space in any young girl's head, even an American's?"

"No," he said. "Only the space in her heart." And his tone was so gloomy that his sister looked amazed.

"Dear me!" she murmured. "I thought this was to be a purely Platonic investigation. American girls as piquant as this one seem to be high explosives, only to be studied by experienced experts long accustomed to observing them, like Mr. Rennie. Or perhaps I'm mistaken, and Mr. Rennie is himself painfully disturbed by this advent of a Renaissance princeling. Springtime in Raona may be contagious. Are you as stricken as Charles is, Mr. Rennie?"

She spoke in a lowered voice, almost whispering, for Miss Ambler and her romantic companion were

passing close by, just then; and Rennie did not hear the question. He, too, had been amazed by the gloom in the invalid's voice, and sat gazing upon him in delighted surprise. The American knew that in the reluctant opinion of his friend's physicians this was the last springtime Orbison would ever see; but if he could still be depressed by the preoccupation of a pretty girl's heart, it seemed that at least he was so far continuing to be most cheeringly alive.

IX

MR. CHARLES ORBISON might well have been asked if a gentleman wholly mystified by a young lady's mind could be expected to understand her sentimentally; his impulsive diagnosis of what filled the heart of Miss Claire Ambler in Raona was mistaken.

As she sat with Arturo Liana upon the green iron bench looking out upon the classic sea where Greek had fought Greek, and Roman triremes had met Carthaginian galleys, the girl of twenty-one did indeed thrill with romance; but not with a romance particularly concerned with the young gentleman beside her. Neither was the thrill she felt caused by the tremendous history of the spot where she sat, though she knew that in their flesh Plato, the Apostle Paul, Mark Antony, and Cicero had looked upon it; and, in majestic legend, so had Trojan fugitives. Near at hand, upon her right, the groves of the Cyclops climbed the buttresses of the snow-mantled volcano that rose two miles into the air like a god's prodigious tent pitched at the edge of the sea; and,

both left and right, from this ledge above the precipice, her eye commanded vast sweeps of surf-edged coast, haunted in every cove and ravine with antique tragedy. Before her, across the straits that led to Scylla and Charybdis, there shimmered in the haze of distance, like a mountain landscape in a dream, the high, blue-cleft shores of old Calabria; and below her—far, far below the garden—the sea was stained to that brilliancy of turquoise colour Claire found unbelievable even when she looked at it.

Overhead, behind the monastery and the town of Raona, there were other incredibilities. Against the sky rose peak and crag and pinnacle of rock, whereon, "like the lead at the point of a pencil," she thought, were ancient little walled towns and the broken towers of stone Saracen and Norman castles. Necromancy must have got them there, it seemed; for human energy, even in medieval passions of fear, would have been too feeble—though, of all the magic about her, what she thought most necromantic in beauty was the Greek theatre that crowned the skyward lift at the end of the long cliff of Raona.

She had been there, the night before, in the moonlight with Arturo Liana; but the thrill of the romantic she felt then, as now, was not caused by Arturo,

nor was it primarily the work of the epic beauty surrounding her. Two months earlier, in Rome, she had gone to the Palatine Hill to write a letter beginning, "Seated upon a block of marble in the banquet hall of Cæsar," and necessarily the picture suggested to the mind of her correspondent must have had Claire in the foreground with Cæsar somewhat remote. Thus, as she beheld the august and tragic beauty of Raona, her foremost happy thought was, "Here, surrounded by marvels, am *I !*"

What romantically thrilled her, then, was her own presence among the marvels; a thrill by no means unpardonable and not unknown to travellers older than Claire; nor need it be held to her discredit that at times she had the pleasantly tingling impression of herself that she was the central marvel of all. She always knew when people were looking at her, although she was pleasantly accustomed to their doing so. Gentlemen in the Louvre had turned from Velasquez portraits to look at her; and here in Raona, when she walked abroad, she was stared at almost violently. When she passed by them, tourists temporarily forgot this most heroically beautiful of all earthly landscapes; and when she came into the hotel refectory for lunch or dinner she well knew that she

was politely and covertly watched to her seat by every eye in the place. Demure, thoughtful-looking, and apparently unaware, she made no effort to restrain herself from appearing a little more unconsciously graceful for her observers' benefit—it is true that she did a great many things for her observers' benefit. Indeed, it would not be straining the point to say that most of what she did in the way of gesture and look and talk, when observers were present, was for their benefit. In fact, she sometimes did a little of that for her own benefit when she was alone.

But in particular she had been steadily aware of the observation of a gaunt and crippled Englishman; and he would have been astonished to learn that she had never once failed to know when he was looking at her or listening to her. Even more he would have been amazed by the number of things she had done and said because she knew she had his attention; and probably it would have been the climax of his surprise to learn that her recent conversation with the Bastoni and the Japanese gentleman was intended to reveal to him, in some measure, the variety of the treasures of her mind.

Moreover, as she sat upon the green bench by the

garden railing now, with the romantic-looking young Italian beside her, she was really giving a little performance, so to speak, for the Englishman's benefit; though not by the slightest glance in his direction did she seem to take cognizance of him, and she knew that from where he sat he could not hear what she said. But she thought the sound of her voice reached him, and she was careful to keep it musical, just as she kept her posture and gestures graceful, and appeared all the while to be deeply absorbed in the young Liana. Her absorption in him had markedly increased when they came out of the hotel and into the scope of Orbison's view, for Claire had long since discovered her absorbed look was the most becoming expression she knew how to wear.

She wore it now—for its effect upon both gentlemen, of course, but more for its effect upon the one at a distance than for that upon the one at her side; and in this there was an ironical fatality that haunted her. She could never understand it, and often gasped in her hopeless puzzlement over it. No matter what the comparative merits and beauties of any two gentlemen might be, she was forever doomed, so it seemed, to find herself more interested in the one at a distance than in the one at her side.

If they exchanged places her interest perversely changed, too, and her performances helplessly directed themselves at the man who had moved to a distance; he at once became the more attractive to her. "Attractive" was her own word, and may be recorded as the most generously elastic in all her vocabulary; for, although a gentleman at a little distance was more "attractive" to her than one close at hand, it might be said that she was indifferent to no man whom she could possibly contrive to include under that definition. She even sheltered the Bastoni under it, partly because of their monocles, it is true; and her treatment of all "attractive" men seemed to indicate that she felt not only a spontaneous enthusiasm for the least of them but a duty to all of them—the duty, apparently, of offering them a focus for their attention, or, it might be, for their devotion.

Thus, though Arturo Liana, being at her side, was now in her eyes principally a picturesque adjunct of the scene she was playing to the gentleman at a distance, she was far from indifferent to him. On the contrary, she was not only interested in offering him a focus for devotion, but she was honestly interested in something fine and a little mysterious that she perceived in him. "You *are* mysterious," she told him,

remembering how deeply she had often pleased young gentlemen at home by such a charge; and she was laughingly frank enough to mention this now. "I've told boys that before, just to flatter them; but it's really true about you. You're mysterious as thunder."

"I am mysterious?" he repeated; and, although when he spoke English it was usually with an almost undetectable imperfection, he delighted her by adding, "As sunder? How is sunder mysterious?"

She laughed outright and corrected him. "Thunder, not 'sunder.' Can't you say 'thunder'?"

"Is it necessary?"

"Dear me!" she cried. "Isn't anything I ask you to do necessary?"

"Indeed I fear it is," he said seriously, almost ruefully. "Thunder. Is that right? I am as mysterious as sunder—as thunder, I wish to say. How?"

At that she seemed to become serious too. "Well, in the first place you look as if you were keeping some great thought to yourself."

"Am I so bad? You mean an appearance of egotism?"

"No. Not anything like that. What I mean, it's as if you had a high ideal you'd never be willing to

talk about. I mean you look as if you were engaged in a great Cause, or something. Are you?"

"Am I?" He smiled, and then replied with a gallantry in which there was obviously enough genuineness to excuse it: "I am engage' in sitting on a bench with Miss Claire Ambler. With that privilege, how could I be engage' in anything else?"

"There you go!" she protested. "Whenever I try to find out what your mystery is, you say something like that. You always do it, too, when I mention Baron Bastoni or his brother; but maybe that's only because you feel a social difference between you and them."

"Social?" The young man's shoulders, rising slightly, disclaimed the imputation. "There is an English word, 'snob.' Modern Italy believes it is bourgeois to be a snob. We will be brother to any man who is brother to us in what he thinks. I do not care anything social, one way or the other, about the Bastoni. I am not a snob."

"Mr. Rennie told me the other day what you do care about," she said. "You care about Fascismo."

"Yes," he said gravely. "Well?"

"Is that why you hate the Bastoni? Because they

are against it? The baron told me that almost all the people about here are against it."

"At least," he said a little sadly, "they are agains' me. I am not very popular in Raona, Miss Ambler. In the firs' place, I am *forestiere*—from the north—the people look upon me as a foreigner as much as they do you; only they would think of you kindly in that way, and of me unkindly. In the secon' place, they think I am here to meddle with them; it would not be too much to say they think I am something quite like an intriguer and a spy. The Bastoni have been successful to assist that impression."

"Do you think so?" she asked doubtfully. "They seem so quiet and nice-mannered I can't imagine it. Why should they do such a thing?"

"We are upon opposite sides. You see, I am one of the men who believe Italy is being save' by a leader and his great ideal; and any of us is ready to make a sacrifice to help bring all the people to serve the ideal. The people in the country and villages here are backward and very independent; they don' like it, and the Bastoni wish to get some power out of that. But probably you can hardly tell what I am talking about, Miss Ambler?"

"Oh, yes, I can," she said promptly. "You mean

the Bastoni are trying to keep the Fascisti from getting better organized here, and they think you're doing the organizing; Mr. Rennie told me. But I don't see why anything like that should make a personal feeling, as it does seem to do, between you and the baron and his brother. At home, in America, everybody's either a Republican or a Democrat, and of course they all vote against each other and call each other terrible names. But it doesn't really mean anything—they're just trying to get the farmers excited and fool the public. But even the ones that do the most of it against each other know it's all just a gorgeous bluff and they get together and joke about it. Why couldn't you do that here? It would be so much more comfortable; it seems to me you take things too seriously."

"Perhaps we do," he said; and he smiled, not finding any fault in her complete lack of comprehension. "It would not be easy to explain to a person from a country where everything is so comfortable. I am afraid we are worse than serious; for more than two thousand years we have even been passionate in our politics, and you see that makes it quite a habit."

"Then it seems to me time you got over it."

The young man was not displeased with her for her

flippancy. On the contrary, he gave her a look of appreciation from his fine dark eyes and laughed apologetically. "Well, you see, a habit more than two thousand years old—it is a little difficult to change! Would you consent to teach us, Miss Ambler?"

She instantly returned his glance, and then looked out over the sea. "You wouldn't pay much attention, I'm afraid," she said, with just the right proportions of amusement and wistfulness that she had learned to put into her voice when she wished gentlemen to be interested in finding out what she felt about them.

"No?" he said; and he responded perfectly to the sentimental mechanism she had set in motion. "If you will teach I fear I would pay no attention to anything else."

"Wouldn't you?" she asked, suddenly grave and sweet.

"Never! I never would!"

"Wouldn't you?" she said again, in a low voice. And with that she turned her head and gave him a quick, wondering look, a little startled, that seemed to say, "Will it be you—some day?"

This bit of performing was by no means all spurious —it was a mixture, being partly spontaneous and genuine, in spite of herself, as it always was when she

did it; and yet, of course, it was essentially a forward movement in her instinctive perpetual campaign to be a focus. But having made it, she felt that she had brought matters to a point a little further advanced than was desirable, at least for the time being; so she rose rather abruptly from the bench and leaned upon the precipice railing to gaze down at the sea.

"I think the Blue Grotto they have here is even more wonderful than the one at Capri," she said briskly. "My mother likes the Capresi one and we have the most fearful arguments about it." She turned about, facing him. "Which do you like best, Arturo?"

Arturo's colour had heightened; but now he looked a little mystified: "You didn't say if you would teach me."

She laughed gayly. "Oh, that! How to make people in this country understand not to take politics passionately? Well, I have an uncle at home that tried to be a senator, and he gave a dinner to the man that beat him—they said it was the funniest dinner ever given. Shall I ask Baron Bastoni to give you a dinner, Arturo? Do let me! We'd get that nice Mr. Rennie to be the toastmaster. He's so benevolent and witty——"

She went on chattering while Arturo, who had risen when she did, stood looking at her helplessly and rather plaintively. Within her, she was a little derisive of his dejection. "He's really quite beautiful," she thought; "but he does look almost foolish just now—wanting to go on with it and not knowing how to make me! But that *other* man——" As she stood with her back to the railing, the tail of her eye was taking ardent note of this magnetic other; and suddenly she decided upon a decisive step forward with him. Seeming to perceive for the first time the presence of Mr. Eugene Rennie, she gave him a surprised, sunny little nod; then let her kindled eyes rest for a slow moment upon the man in the long chair. She meant to exchange a first direct look with him—a look permitting him to guess that she hadn't minded his changing his table in the refectory—but Orbison chose this most special of moments to light a cigarette and he was entirely preoccupied in that worthless action.

"Good gracious!" Claire thought emotionally, "Just how slow are you intending to be? I'm not going to stay in Raona all my life! Aren't you ever going to do anything about it?"

X

HER indignation was not lessened as days continued to pass and Mr. Charles Orbison still did nothing about it. Their first words and even their first glance remained yet to be exchanged, and under this strange provocation, Claire's imagination began to be seriously affected. At night she dreamed of him; by day she found herself thinking of him almost unremittently; and presently she realized that she had never before been so continually conscious of any man. She had fantastic thoughts about him; but she had no fear that she was fantastic in her conviction that he, on his part, was still continually observant of her.

Yet this perfectly sound conviction itself increased her fantasies: "Why don't you let me alone?" she said to him, during one of the imaginary conversations she frequently had with him. "I could have a much better time in all this gorgeousness of Raona if you'd just let me alone. The trouble is I can't quit thinking about you until you quit thinking about

me! Don't you see the thing is going too far?" And, indeed, by this time, she suspected that if the Englishman sat upon the bench with her and Arturo Liana looked on from a distance, she might be, for almost the first time in her life, more interested in the man at her side.

In her musings upon his unexampled behaviour, she sometimes murmured her thoughts, or even spoke them aloud; and thus, one afternoon, as she sat with her mother in the ancient cell that had been made into a small salon for them, she said dreamily, "Why doesn't he have Mr. Rennie ask us?"

Mrs. Ambler looked up from her embroidery in surprise. "Why doesn't who have Mr. Rennie ask us what?"

"That Englishman—Mr. Orbison. Why doesn't he have Mr. Rennie ask us to his villa to dine, or for tea, sometime when he's going there himself. I should think he would, since he's so anxious to meet us."

"Claire! What gives you the idea the poor man wants to know us?"

"Poor man?" Claire said sharply. "Why do you call him that?"

"Good gracious! He's a hopeless invalid, isn't he? He's the most tragically shattered——"

"What!" the daughter cried. "Haven't you any eyes? He's the most magnificent-looking human creature I've ever seen!"

"What an idea! Why, he's a walking wreck, child —not that one doesn't feel awfully sorry for him. He just manages to get along with two canes, and he's thin as a shadow. Our *valet de chambre* says there's something the matter with his spine."

"Yes, there is." The colour had heightened in Claire's cheeks, and her eyes shone. "Do you know why? That's from a hand grenade in Flanders. I asked Mr. Rennie and he told me."

Mrs. Ambler nodded sympathetically. "Of course that does help to make him look magnificent, as you say; especially since anyone can see he's probably suffered terribly—and still does, I'm afraid. Yet he seems very much alive—that is, his head does. He has a kind of haggard eagerness very appealing; it's as if he knew he couldn't get much out of life, but did hope to get that little. I didn't realize you were interested in him; it's rather surprising in a girl of your age, especially with such a remarkable young man as Don Arturo hovering about."

"What's my age got to do with it, Mother? Arturo's wonderful, but I've seen others like him."

"Where? Indeed you haven't! He's the most charming young man I ever knew; and I've known more than you have, my dear! Mr. Rennie says he's the finest young man in Italy. His mother is lovely too."

"Yes," Claire said thoughtfully. "But I think she manœuvres a little."

"To make you like him? Well, that's natural, and a great compliment to you too. I think she's far from being mercenary; and her son hasn't a bit of that. No one could look at him for a moment and believe such a thing."

"No," Claire admitted. "It's true. He isn't that sort in the least, and I think he's splendid of course. I only meant I've seen others more like him than I have like Mr. Orbison. I've never seen anybody at all like Mr. Orbison. He's older, too, and that's rather fascinating—particularly when a girl's seen so terribly many fledglings of about her own age."

Mrs. Ambler sighed. "Oh, dear! What makes you think the poor man wants to meet—us? I haven't seen him show the slightest symptom."

"He had his table changed to the one next to ours, didn't he?"

"It's nearer the door and he doesn't have to hobble so far with his two sticks."

"Mother!" Claire exclaimed, and she uttered a sound of pity. "He doesn't mind! He goes on fairly long walks with that dowdy sister of his, in spite of his two sticks. I've about made up my mind to ask Mr. Rennie to——"

"You mustn't," her mother interrupted in alarm. "Claire, please! We don't know Mr. Rennie well enough, and I'm sure he'd understand what you're up to."

"'Up to'?" the girl repeated, with an almost perfect air of wondering incredulity. "Mr. Rennie would understand what I'm 'up to'? What in the world are you talking about?"

"Oh, dear! Whenever you begin to be hypocritical with me, I know there's no chance of doing anything with you."

"Why, yes, there is," Claire said surprisingly. "I won't ask Mr. Rennie; I've just decided not to."

"Then it's because you've decided on something worse. What that poor man and his sister desire is rest and seclusion, and heaven knows he needs it! I think you ought to let him alone."

"Good heavens!" Claire cried, and she laughed a little excitedly. "What on earth do you think I intend to do, Mother?"

Mrs. Ambler's reply was almost too frank. "I think you've just decided on a more picturesque way of meeting poor Mr. Orbison than by asking Mr. Rennie."

"What nonsense!" the daughter exclaimed, as she rose from her chair by a window overlooking the garden. "All I've decided to do is to go up to the Salone for the afternoon tea dance. Arturo hates the place and made a fuss about my going there; but it's perfectly all right. Giuseppe Bastoni will be waiting to take me by the time I get my hat on; the baron's going to meet us there, and they both do dance beautifully. Don't worry about my disturbing poor Mr. Orbison!"

"I might as well not, I suppose," her mother sighed. "Especially since I know now what you've decided to do at the first opportunity—and that you'll probably make the opportunity, yourself!"

Claire was already in the adjoining room, engaged before a mirror. "You wicked person!" she called through the open doorway. "You mean I'll make the opportunity to meet Mr. Orbison in a more pictur-

esque way, don't you? I should think you'd be afraid to put such ideas into my head, especially in the most picturesque place in the world, where one really *ought* to do picturesque things! Of course you understand that if I did anything like that now, after your suggesting it, the whole affair would be absolutely all your fault." And a few moments later, as her mother remained persistently silent, Claire added gayly, speaking loudly in order to be sure that her impudence was understood: "Did you hear what I said? I said 'the whole affair,' Mother. Once you put such things into my head, you never can tell where they'll end!"

XI

THE Salone is one thing not beautiful in Raona, though the gay little modern building is inconspicuous and may be pleasantly approached through a cypress-bordered garden. What should not be in Raona is the interior of the Salone; the manufactured throbbings of a "night club" are misplaced upon the majestic cliff that looked down upon the passing of Odysseus.

Arturo Liana hated the Salone, yet he was there, this afternoon, at a table near the door, and alone. At the opposite end of the room an orchestra of red-coated men produced adroitly suggestive tango music, to which the silent dancers moved with what seemed to Arturo a snaky accuracy. Most of the women were pale under heavily applied artificial complexions that the red lamps failed to make plausible; the men were pale, too, and there was no merriment in this sleek dancing, but, on the contrary, a trancelike gravity—a gravity as of pallid masks covering intricate and sly emotions. Slyness seemed the very air of the place; it

was the key of the music; it was in the curiously revealing dresses of some of the women as well as in their eyes; most of all, Arturo thought, it was in the eyes of that sly enemy of his, Giuseppe Bastoni, with whom Claire Ambler was dancing.

Alone, of all the dancers, the young American girl seemed to be dancing merely to dance and not for the sake of something covert. She laughed and chattered to her partner; her blue eyes, under her silver-gray helmet of silk, were bright with pleasure in the rhythms measured by her feet that moved so lightly in their twinkling slim black slippers. She was gay as a child is gay; and in all this vulpine slyness, she was the only frank and natural young creature. It hurt Arturo to see her there—as he knew she knew it did, which made his hurt the keener; and yet he saw that she could go anywhere and everywhere untouched by what was about her. It was probably an American quality, he thought; but he nevertheless wished that she were not so willing to go anywhere and everywhere, or at least, would be kinder to one adviser in such matters. She had been a little brusque when he advised her, that morning, not to go to the Salone.

However, she unexpectedly atoned for her brusqueness now. She had not seen him when he came in, nor

while she danced; but with the stopping of the music, she and her partner were left just before Arturo's table. She turned and uttered a little cry of pleased surprise.

"Arturo! I didn't dream you'd deign to come here after what you—— How lovely! Wouldn't you like to offer Giuseppe and me some tea at your table?"

Arturo had risen, and he bowed rather ceremoniously. "I should be very glad."

Claire sat down at once; but Bastoni, with a bow more ceremonious than the young Liano's, begged to decline. "I mus' speak wit' my brozzer," he said; and through his monocle there flickered at Arturo a cold glance oddly contemplative. For a moment Claire was puzzled to find herself feeling uncomfortable. There seemed to be, somewhere about her, a tensity that might have consequences; but Arturo stood imperturbable, looking straight before him and not at Bastoni; then he sat down and Bastoni went quietly away.

"I'm afraid he doesn't like it very much," Claire said thoughtfully. "I told him and the baron I didn't want any tea. Well, it won't matter; I'll be nice to them later. Why in the world did you scold me for wanting to come to this interesting place? The music's

really great, and these extraordinary foreign types—I wouldn't have missed it for anything! What's the matter with it?"

"Nothing, as you see it. You only see it as interestingly foreign. There are undercurrents—undercurrents that I know."

"Are there?" Claire laughed as she cast a lively glance about the room. "There's one that I see. Every woman in the place is covertly looking at you and hoping you'll dance with her. Do you see that?"

"No," he said. "But a few of the men are looking at me by no means so flatteringly."

"Are they? Arturo, at your age I should think it would be much more fun to drop politics and just have a great time. You're so serious!"

"I fear so," he said, and shook his head ruefully. "How can I be anything but serious when you behave to me in such a manner that you do?"

"I? Why, I think I'm perfectly heavenly to you!"

"Too much so, indeed! But that is in my own appreciation of you. I spoke of how you behave toward me. You snub me for my advice and you come to this absurd and unworthy place with such people as the Bastoni. Then you immediately drop them when you see me sitting alone here and unhappy—

and I am glad to say that fellow will now be twice as much my enemy as before—and you come to sit with me. But pretty soon you will go and dance with one of those fellows again; so it is all too much up and down!"

"Arturo!" she cried; and she added disingenuously: "I haven't an idea what you're talking about!"

He smiled sadly. "I was so flatter' that you call me 'Arturo'—until I found you call the Bastoni, also, by their firs' names."

"But that's nothing! At home we *all* do that—with everybody."

"Yes, I understand," he said. "That was what remove' my happiness in it. It was only one of the downs that come between the ups. You will let me explain what I mean by the ups and downs? I think you know very well what thoughts I have about you; but I cannot speak clearly of them to you until you let me see they would be agreeable to you. Well, you will not let me find that out. One hour you lif' me up to where I begin to think you will be not displeased if I speak of what I feel; and the next hour, you send me down to where I find nothing but a confusion in my mind. You see, I am a little baffle' and not very happy; it seems to me I have no advantage

over even the Bastoni. So far as I can tell you have this same treatment for any man whatever."

"Good gracious!" Claire exclaimed. "You *are* a serious boy! And you must think I'm a very uninventive sort of person, if I have only the one trick to show all gentlemen! Indeed, I'm *not* the same to the Bastoni that I am to you! They're only fun for me, don't you see? They amuse me because they're so foreign and different—I really let 'em hang around partly to listen to their funny accent. Mother and I scream over them when we're alone! They haven't had the advantage of a year in London that you had, Arturo. I don't think they've ever been out of Raona."

"Oh, yes," he said dryly. "They go to Naples sometime'."

"Well, that doesn't help their English accent much!" Claire laughed. "You don't think I really care anything about them, do you?"

"You came here with them when I begged you not to do it."

"Just for fun, yes," she said, and then, seeming to become serious, she leaned toward him across the small table. "You don't really mind, do you?"

He looked at her steadily. "Will you let me take you back to your hotel now?"

"I couldn't be that rude to them, I'm afraid," she said, and then, as he laughed shortly, and with some bitterness, she said quickly, "Why don't you stay and dance with me too?"

"No," he answered. "I will not dance here, even with you. Later, I think I could offer you something better. There is another orchestra in Raona; it is just of mandolins and violins and guitars, and I am afraid they play rather sentimental music; but they know how, and the sentiment is pure. They are giving a moonlight concert in the Greek theatre to-night. Will you come with me?"

"It sounds lovely," she said; then she thought that if she went with him she would not be where Orbison could watch her in the corridor after dinner. Therefore she began to look conscientious. "I'm afraid my mother expects me not to go out this evening. I'm afraid I really ought to spend it with her; but you could dine with us, couldn't you? Won't you, Arturo? You will, won't you?"

She entreated him in a pretty and coaxing voice; Arturo was pleased to forget the concert, and accept. "You are very kind," he said. "I can hope that to-night will be one of the ups; so I will go now and dream of it. You are about to be ask' to dance again."

The older Bastoni, in fact, was already bowing before her as Arturo spoke; and Claire jumped up gayly; but gave her table companion a soft glance and a little nod, for au revoir, over the baron's shoulder. Arturo, standing, responded formally, and summoned a waiter to bring his account.

"Liana not stay long," the baron remarked. "I did not ever see 'im in our Salone before. 'E iss very —how you say? Severe? Yes. 'E iss severe young mans."

"Oh, no," Claire laughed. "He isn't severe."

"Not?"

"No; he just looked so to-day," she said, and she added thoughtlessly, "It was only because he didn't want me to come here and he was a little cross."

"'E advice you not to come?" Bastoni asked in a casual and commonplace tone. "Wit' my brozzer?"

His voice was so well modulated to the note of a mild and indifferent inquiry, made merely for the sake of saying something, that she failed to perceive a particular significance in his question. Dance music always made her as light-headed as she was light-footed, her mother sometimes told her with no great exaggeration. "Arturo says this is a terrible joint," she laughed. "I think it's huge fun, myself. There

aren't any places like this in Naples, are there?"

"Naple'?" Bastoni said in the same tone of commonplace inquiry. "Liana tell you I go to Naple'?"

"Yes. Don't you?" she asked, a little surprised; and he misinterpreted the slight widening of her eyes —it seemed to him that she was laughing at him secretly. As Eugene Rennie had told his friend in the hotel garden, the Bastoni sometimes sold a ring or a brooch or a necklace to the foreign ladies with whom they danced. The jewel was always represented as an unobtainable antique, a Bastoni heirloom, and after an adroit temptation, the sale was made with the air of indulgent protest. Moreover, the two brothers had hoped to interest Miss Ambler and her mother in the possession of several such heirlooms, though they had even greater hopes than this; but the baron knew that the Neapolitan origin of the jewellery was no longer wholly a secret between him and his brother —the Raonese are devoted gossips, and the truth concerning the Bastoni heirlooms was something of a joke in their cafés. Familiars in Raona, especially Italians, like Liana, might easily know all about it; and the baron guessed that Arturo, for his own purposes, had betrayed him and had warned the American girl. In the morning, evidently, he had begged

her not to go to the Salone; then he had come there himself and told her that the brothers dealt in spurious antique jewellery, made in Naples. Arturo was objectionably dangerous politically; but this personal interference was too much.

"Nossing to see in Naple'," Bastoni said, placidly gliding in the tango. "I sink Tunis more interessing. You been Tunis? Not? Zis fine floor for dance on. You sink so?"

Claire nodded gayly, unaware that she had come in contact with one of the undercurrents Arturo had mentioned. All the while, this afternoon, beneath the surface of her thoughts, she was engaged with an undercurrent of her own; and whatever she said to Arturo or to the Bastoni was but inconsequent prattle, wholly without any fruitful significance, she would have sworn. What preoccupied her, happily, and with the forerunning excitement of the approach to an adventure, was that idea she had so merrily charged her mother with putting into her head. In the most picturesque place in the world an intelligent girl oughtn't to find it difficult to arrange a picturesque way of meeting a disabled gentleman, she thought.

XII

WITHOUT a definite plan for converting her idea into action Claire Ambler left everything to the spur of the moment; but she had determined to spur the moment. She therefore made herself befittingly picturesque for dinner that evening, in a beaded dress as shining as pale blue armour, and almost as heavy in spite of its scantness; and she added to this the splendid faded gorgeousness of a fine old Spanish shawl. Thus, when she came into the ancient refectory with Arturo and her mother, she was at least as vivid as she could have cared to be. "Like a florist's window," said Eugene Rennie, who was dining with his English friends. "Flowers, too, can carry that much colour and only make you glad to look at them."

Then, as she reached her table close by, Claire paused before she seated herself and, instead of merely nodding, she prettily made him an odd little curtsy. "Extraordinary child!" he murmured to his two companions. "I think I join you, Charles, in

wondering what goes on in 'that young head.' Something charming evidently. Certainly that impulsive little curtsy was charming."

Claire, also, thought it was charming, and with good reason. Not ten minutes earlier she had made this same impulsive little curtsy—the last of a series—to the mirror in her own room; but she had not reproduced it for Mr. Eugene Rennie's benefit. "Well, did you like it?" she was saying mentally to Orbison, as she began to talk vivaciously to Arturo Liana. "If you didn't, what's the matter with it! Anyhow, though I don't know just what it'll be, I'm going to do something you will like, pretty soon!"

But the opportunity her mother had prophesied she would make was obviously not to be contrived during the hour she sat at dinner; picturesque conjunctions are not easily available at such times. Moreover, when she and Mrs. Ambler and Arturo came out into the long corridor afterward, for coffee, she was disturbed to see nothing of the trio who had occupied the next table and preceded them, by a few minutes, from the refectory. She looked about her blankly; but a little later, when coffee had been brought and Arturo was presenting a lighted match to the end of her cigarette, she caught sight of Orbison

at the other end of the corridor. He was wrapped in a long ulster, with a heavy woollen muffler about his throat, and with his American friend beside him he was hobbling toward the passage that led to the cloister and the great outer gates. This was the first time the invalid had gone forth in the evening, and Claire jumped to a conclusion.

She stared, neglecting the match, though Arturo held it for her until it scorched his fingers. "They must be—they're going up to the Greek theatre!" she said under her breath.

"Who?" her mother inquired.

"What?" Claire said hazily.

"I understood you to say somebody was going up to the Greek theatre."

"Yes," the girl returned quickly. "Everybody is. There's a concert and it's a glorious night—the most wonderful full moon—I saw it from my window even before dinner. Mother, you wouldn't mind, would you?"

"Mind what?" Mrs. Ambler asked, surprised by the unusual stress her daughter put upon this petition. "What do you mean?"

For a moment Claire looked slightly confused, and she glanced hastily at Arturo. "Mother, I know I

ought to stay here with you; of course I practically promised to——"

"Why, no," Mrs. Ambler said. "When did you?"

"This afternoon. I really did mean to spend the evening here with you; but Arturo asked me, and I know he'd like to go. Would you mind if we went to that concert at the Greek theatre?"

"Why, certainly not," the mystified lady returned. "Why should I?"

Claire jumped up instantly. "Get your hat and coat," she said to Arturo. "I won't need more than this shawl. It's the most heavenly night!"

"Heavenly" was a word she repeated as they walked through the stone streets of the old town, and she said it again as they began the ascent of the great ruins of the theatre. "We must go clear up to the top," she said. "Oh, this heavenly place and this heavenly night!"

Other figures were climbing with them, shadowy and murmuring, no one speaking loudly among these gigantic and august relics. "The people are like ghosts of the ancients," Arturo said in a low voice. "They climb so quietly and they are all so dim, they might be the shades of those old, old audiences who came here on such a night two thousand years ago. How

still and mysterious it is! There could be thousands of people here in these tremendous shadows and we would not know it."

"It's heavenly!" she sighed again; and at last they came out upon the stone platform of the huge gallery the Romans had superimposed upon the Greek structure. Here they were at the top of the theatre—upon its crest and upon the crest of precipices, with an incredible world about them, and the sea, shining and soundless, far, far below. Claire looked across the classic strait to the mountains shimmering there in luminous haze, then to left and right at the unending crescents of coastline based with white, twinkling surf and crowned with the diamond-point lights of mountain villages; but, nearer and seeming so close at hand that it was startling, the vast triangular symmetry of the volcano reposed, ivory-coloured, in the sky; and when Claire saw above its snows a faint rosy glow upon the rising masses of smoke, she found her sighing not eloquent enough. "I must do one of two things," she said. "I must either sing or I must cry!"

She said it in a whisper, for although vague groupings of motionless people could be seen here and there among the antique tiers of seats, and upon the heights

of the ruinous gallery corridor, there was a silence over the place. Deep in the shadow, far below, upon the ancient stage where the sonorous measures of Euripides had once been spoken by masked lips, there was a cluster of tiny golden lights, the lamps of the orchestra; and presently these native musicians began to play.

As Arturo said, what they played was sentimental; but it was pure, and they knew how. They were of a race that has music in its heart and art in its fingers; so now this orchestra of a dozen violins and mandolins with half as many 'cellos and guitars and a flute, played old moonlight themes, sonatas, serenades, and gentle nocturnes, but played them so that a listener who had long since tired of them might well have thought he had never heard them played before. The brilliant night was still, save for this music floating up to the motionless, shadowy groups of people on the lofty platform of the open gallery; no other sound could they hear in all the endless space of land and sea revealed to them from that height; and thus the whole world seemed to have been hushed into a spellbound listening.

Claire stood leaning upon a massive and rugged cube of fallen masonry. "I've never known anything

like this before—never!" she whispered to Arturo. "I never thought there could be a moonlight night when the moon wasn't the most beautiful thing in it. To-night it's just a lamp to give illumination. Do you suppose they'll play the Pastorale? I've learned it, and if they play it I'm afraid I couldn't help singing it. I honestly believe I couldn't keep it under!"

She had been in earnest when she said that she must either sing or weep; a song was in her throat, and like those Raonese musicians down by the small golden sparks, she "knew how." Somewhere among the mysterious, still figures of the listeners was the man of whom she so continually found herself thinking—because, perhaps, he thought of her; but just for this while she had forgotten that she deliberately intended a picturesque meeting with him. An overpowering sense of beauty was upon her; wings seemed to flutter ineffably in her breast; and almost unbearably she wanted to sing with the music that came lifting and lifting to the height where she stood.

She was trembling.

"It will be beautiful if you sing," Arturo said. "There is no reason you should not."

Down in the deep semicircular shadow of the amphitheatre they began to play the Pastorale; and

then—at first almost without the listeners' being aware of it—a lovely sound came from no one could say where; it grew clearer, and was heard over all the great space of the theatre, yet was never loud. It seemed a natural part of the beauty of that night—this voice out of the silvered heavens overhead, singing the melody of the Pastorale.

No one except Arturo Liana and the singer herself knew who sang; least of all was she guessed by the man to whom she sang; but she had in store for her the stirring experience of hearing him describe what she had done.

XIII

SHE sat by her open window, breakfasting languidly, when she discovered that he was just below her. His long chair had been placed in the sunshine of the upper terrace beneath the window, though she did not know this until she heard his sister giving him a morning greeting there.

"You don't think you were indiscreet to venture out into the night air, Charles?" Miss Orbison said; and a scraping upon the gravel indicated that she dragged one of the iron chairs with her, and came to sit beside him. "You don't look the worse, I'm sure."

"No. What difference would it make if I did?" he returned, with a short laugh. "When one's certain to be worse before long in any event, what difference is it if one's worse a day or two sooner?"

Miss Orbison protested gently. "Ah, don't say that, Charles!"

"No. Perhaps it's just as well unsaid. It's better to leave the most of what we know about some things

unsaid, of course; so forgive me. At any rate, last night made me glad I'd hung on at least till then. I was no end sorry you hadn't overlooked your cold and come with us."

"Really! It was quite what Mr. Rennie said it would be, then?"

"Quite! You could add something to that, if you cared to."

"Really! What was it like, Charles?"

"I couldn't possibly tell you," he said. "It was one of those things you have to see and hear yourself; you'll get only a feeble water colour of it from me. I think a chap like Beethoven might have put it into music; but I doubt if Robert Browning could have done it in verse."

"Really! It was as impressive as all that?"

"'Impressive,'" he said, and laughed again briefly, in his discontent with her word. "Would you say that of the volcano yonder? Last night I thought it was the tent of Zeus and that the god himself was in bivouac there. We sat where Cicero had sat, I think; and long before him, Plato. It seemed to me I could see processions of all the dead Greeks who had sat in that theatre; they came sweeping up out of the sea and down out of the sky on the shafts of moon-

shine. They were shaped of that light, themselves, and they took their old places in the theatre they must have dearly loved, since they built it upon the most magnificent site in the world. You'd have thought then that only a great chant should have come up to us from the stage; that anything less wouldn't have been bearable. No, it wasn't so. The music was transfigured, translated out of itself into something almost intolerably beautiful. And then, when they played the Pastorale, there came a sweet, carolling voice from the air—a woman's voice singing as a nightingale sings, not singing to be heard, but just out of its own heart—and sang the Pastorale with them. You couldn't tell where she sat or stood, or in what part of the theatre she was; and you didn't want to know: she was doing simply the loveliest thing a human being ever did, and you had no wish to see her or even to learn who she was. What she did, itself, was enough. For me——"

"Yes? For you, Charles?" his sister asked, as he paused.

"For me," he answered, "it was the final loveliness in the hour of greatest sheer beauty I've ever known in my life. One doesn't want to touch such a thing at all."

"No," Miss Orbison said sympathetically. "Of course not, Charles."

But the girl near the window above them held to a different way of thinking; she was not of the age when such a thing is to be left untouched. She sat for a little while, breathing rapidly, her eyes brilliant and her colour deep, in her delight; then, as the sister and brother fell silent, devoting their attention to the landscape, or to reverie, she moved silently out of her chair, and stole to the mirror across the room. Smiling rapturously upon it she let her finger tips rest upon their reflected fellows: "You certainly did something!" she whispered to her counterpart. Then she let her green Chinese wrapper slide down from her, and began to dress.

Before she had quite finished she heard Miss Orbison speaking again, but not from beneath the window; evidently she was at a little distance.

"I'll be back before lunch, Charles," she said. "You can call to one of the gardeners to fetch Agostino if you need anything. You're sure you——"

"Of course," her brother interrupted a little irritably. "I sha'n't need you. I'm not flat on my back, yet. Do go along!"

Miss Orbison went, and Claire stepped noiselessly

to the window. Orbison was reclining just below in the warm full sunshine, with his heavy rug pulled close about him; and no one else was upon the upper terrace or in the pergola that bordered it. Gardeners were at work among the flower beds beyond the terrace; and a group of German travellers stood talking by the railing above the precipice; but at that distance their voices were not heard more loudly here than the droning of the bees among the flowering vines that grew upon the old stone walls of the hotel. Smoke massed itself placidly upon the shoulders of the volcano; hazy cliffs of lilac rose from a pale-blue sea, and the air seemed gilded with the southern morning sunlight. No young heroine of a romantic drama could have wished a stage better set for her entrance.

Claire selected the prettiest pair of patent-leather slippers that she owned, and, seated upon a stool before her dressing table, thoughtfully put them on. "Now where you going to take me?" she whispered excitedly to her feet, when they were thus becomingly encased.

But, as she well knew they would, they took her to the pergola upon the upper terrace. She appeared there a few minutes later, bright-eyed, high-coloured,

altogether charming, with a small red book in her hand; and, after a musing and impersonal glance about her, which appeared to reveal nothing to detain her interest, she seated herself upon a bench beneath the shading vines. She sat in profile to the Englishman, and only a few paces distant from him; she had no doubt of his attention, nor that he knew she was conscious of it. Her lively heart made her aware of its beating; but she turned over the pages of her book with a steady, graceful little hand; and then, with her downcast eyes upon the turning pages, she began to sing the Pastorale in a low, sweet voice, as if little more than humming the melody to herself. Yet she made it clear enough, she was sure.

When she had sung it through, her colour was even higher than before, and she held her book so near to her eyes that she seemed almost to bury her blushing face in it. This was something she had not expected—a moment of fluttering panic—but she bravely lowered the book and slowly turned her head to face him.

Orbison was looking at her intently, with that eagerness in his haggard eyes her mother had said was "as if he knew he couldn't get much out of life but did hope to get that little."

For a long moment they looked at each other; then she rose and went slowly toward him until she stood at his feet.

"I'm glad you liked it, Mr. Orbison," she said. "It was meant for you."

XIV

HE MADE a movement to rid himself of his rug and rise; but she stepped forward quickly. "No—please! May I sit here a little while?"

"Yes—you may," he said, with his short laugh. "On the whole, I think you may!" Then he added, as she took the chair his sister had left beside him, "What were you glad I liked?"

"Don't you know?"

"You were humming the Pastorale. Did you mean that?"

"Yes, Mr. Orbison."

"You were at the Greek theatre last night, I suppose?"

"Why—yes. I was there."

"How did you know I liked it?"

She made a gesture toward the open window above them. "That's my room. I heard you telling your sister."

"I see," he said. "But what did you mean by say-

ing the Pastorale was meant for me? That's what you said, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps you meant your humming it just now was meant for me?"

"Yes—but I meant last night."

"Why, how could that be?" he asked, and he stared at her, seeming puzzled. "I don't know a dozen people in Raona; and certainly not anyone who could sing the Pastorale like that. Most assuredly, I don't know any woman who would be thinking of me when she did it. What do you mean, Miss Ambler?"

Claire stared at him incredulously; then she realized that a free, full voice in the moonlight over a Greek ruin might seem so much a part of the transfiguring night that it would not be recognized when it sang just audibly in the daytime and in another place, even though it sang the same song. The piquant little drama she had just played for him was a failure.

"You American ladies do like to mystify us slower mortals, I've observed," Orbison said. "How could that unknown singer have meant her song for me, Miss Ambler?"

"I——" She hesitated. She had an impulse to burst out at him: "I was your unknown singer! I

guess I ought to know who I sang for, oughtn't I?" The words were almost upon her lips; but she withheld them. "All right, then!" she thought. "You wouldn't see it when I took the trouble to show you, I'm not going to be banal enough to tell you; so you can just find it out for yourself! It gives me a secret that I know and you don't; and that's an advantage over you, anyhow." This was her feeling, and it appeared to imply that she engaged in some form of contest. All her affairs with gentlemen, in fact, seemed to involve this sense of contest, which was so persistent that it could be present even now, when the gentleman was an invalid.

"You don't answer me," he said.

She smiled vaguely. "Well—didn't everyone there last night have the feeling that the song and all the rest of it had a special meaning for himself alone? I'm sure I did. That's what I tried to convey by saying it was meant for you. Every one of us could think so, couldn't we?"

"Dear me!" he said. "I suppose we could if we had the necessary amount of egoism. But when that wonderful lady sang last night I got entirely away from my own egoism for a while. You see it's rather necessary for me to think of myself as little as possi-

ble. I fix my attention upon other things when I can; and that reminds me—I'm in great fear that I owe you an apology."

"Do you? What for?"

"I think you know."

"No; I don't."

"Yes," he said. "I think you do. You see, it happens that I've become merely some broken machinery about ready to be tossed out on the junk pile——"

"Mr. Orbison!" she cried, protesting; and she leaned toward him, her eyes shining. "You haven't any right to speak of yourself like that."

"Haven't I? It's what I am, my dear young lady."

"No! I know how you got your hurt. Heroes aren't broken machinery, Mr. Orbison!"

"Oh, dear me!" he laughed. "You're very old-fashioned. But what I was trying to say is that even when one can't take part in life any longer, one can't help watching it. Life for an invalid becomes a looking on at the lives of others—at least it does for the kind of invalid I've found myself to be. Well, I've been looking on at you, Miss Ambler, and I think I should ask your pardon for it."

"Do you?" She looked at him gravely. "Why?"

"You're very kind," he said. "Nevertheless, I

think I should. Ever since I first saw you one morning here in the garden, I'm afraid you've been the central figure in all my looking-on in Raona. What's more, I've had the feeling that you knew it; that you were entirely conscious of it; and so——"

"Yes, it's true," she interrupted. "Yes, I knew you were watching me—and thinking of me, a little, too, perhaps. Were you?"

"Yes," he said, as a faint colour came into his pale cheeks. "Not thinking of you a little, though. You see as an invalid——"

"As an invalid?" she repeated; and she laughed. "If you did it only as an invalid, perhaps you might owe me an apology, Mr. Orbison! But anyhow, your watching me—so much—and my knowing it—so well—does seem to bring us together as already comfortably intimate, doesn't it?"

"Yes, I hope so."

"Well, then, when you watched me—and thought a little about me—what did you see and what did you think?"

"You'd really like me to tell you?"

"If you think I can stand it—yes."

"Well——" He paused, frowning. "Last night Mr. Rennie and I talked about you all the way to the

Greek theatre—and you know I walk slowly! You see, you mystify me and——"

"No!" she exclaimed. "Isn't that lovely! Do I? How?"

"In every way; but in particular about a detail of your conduct that Mr. Rennie and I were discussing, Miss Ambler."

"Indeed? So you weren't just talking of me; you were discussing me! What was the detail of my conduct you had the debate about?"

He shook his head dubiously. "I'm afraid you won't like it. Mr. Rennie had been dining with the Principessa Liana. The apple of her eye, it appears, is her youngest son, who's spent the last two winters with her here at their villa. I'm afraid the princess doesn't think you've been making Don Arturo very happy, Miss Ambler."

"Doesn't she?" Claire said quickly. "Does she consider that my special privilege?"

"No more than you consider it a special privilege for me to be talking to you about it," he returned. "But you remember you asked me to tell you?"

"Yes. I invited it. Please go on. What else did Mr. Rennie say?"

"He said he feared young Liana was taking things

rather hard. He's a serious youngster, and once or twice I've been a little sorry for him, Miss Ambler."

"You have?" Claire said; and she looked at him darkly. "I suppose you mean when you've seen him with me?"

"No." Orbison shook his head. "When I've seen him not with you. When he's with you he looks anxious; but when he's away from you he looks like Hamlet!"

"Of course you mean you consider me responsible for how he looks. Is the way Arturo looks the reason I mystify you?"

"It's part of it, yes," the invalid answered. "In the first place, one can't easily imagine so splendid-looking a young man as that being allowed to look like Hamlet. One would think——"

"That I'd fairly jump at such a chance!" Claire finished for him, as he hesitated. "I mystify you because I don't jump, I suppose?"

"A little, yes; but there's something more. You meant for me to speak out, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, one always wonders whether or not American girls are as democratic at home as they are abroad. It's the most curious thing—you seem to

think all 'foreigners' equally desirable as acquaintances and escorts if they're able to make what seems to you a presentable appearance. What I could never puzzle out——"

But she interrupted him again, and this time she laughed. "Oh, now I see what you're talking about and I know what you and Mr. Rennie were discussing —and probably what's worrying the Principessa. You mean the baron and his brother, Giuseppe. You're talking about my distressing Arturo by playing around with the two Bastoni, aren't you?"

"I suppose so; yes."

She nodded, laughed again and went on: "You and the princess and Mr. Rennie—and, incidentally, my mother—can't understand how I could waste my time going places with the Bastoni and letting them hang about me here, when there's such a splendid young man as Arturo available. That's it, isn't it? In the first place, you wonder why I don't accept him, and in the second, why I annoy him by seeing something of two men he despises. Well, since that's my mystery, I'll clear it up for you, Mr. Orbison. You've been such an attentive audience, I think I owe it to you. I haven't accepted Don Arturo because he hasn't proposed to me."

"What! But his mother——"

"She didn't tell Mr. Rennie her son had proposed to me, Mr. Orbison."

"But——"

"Oh, dear me!" she cried, and her laughter sounded gayly desperate. "I don't deny he wants to. I haven't let him."

"But that's the same thing, isn't it?"

"No, it isn't. If I'd let him go that far it would mean I intended him to, and I don't. I think that's clear enough on this point, Mr. Orbison. About the Bastoni, the honest truth is that I think they're terribly amusing—I like to dance with 'em and they speak the funniest English I ever heard. Arturo's nice, but he isn't funny—and they are! That's all there is to my mystery, Mr. Orbison."

He stared at her from under deeply frowning eyebrows; and she was amazed to see that he was serious; she had thought he would laugh with her. "You——" he said. "It's astounding! It's like a——" He stopped, frowned even more harshly, and then asked: "Would you care to hear what you remind me of?"

"I'm not sure," she replied. "You don't look as if it were anything very encouraging. But perhaps—since you've begun it——"

"You remind me of a child I saw in Flanders one day. She was a little bright-eyed dancing sort of fairy creature and she'd got hold of some things it amused her to play with. They were new shells, charged with high explosives, and she was having a beautiful, light-hearted, good time with 'em."

"Good gracious! I don't believe poor Arturo is very likely to explode, Mr. Orbison."

"No; he's a gentle boy—patient and self-contained, I should say, no matter what he suffers. You don't understand my reference, naturally. There are things beneath the surface in Raona, Miss Ambler. It isn't as if you were playing around with American young men—or British, either. I wonder if you could attach some seriousness to the princess's anxiety for her son. Mr. Rennie does. He told me that Don Arturo was in a position here that possibly involved the element of personal peril and that your playing around, so to speak, might add to it."

"What!" Claire's eyes opened widely; she was indignant. "I think I never heard anything much more absurd in my life! Is that his mother's idea—and Mr. Rennie's—and yours? That in my playing around I play them off against each other?"

"No, no," he said hurriedly. "That wasn't implied —not exactly."

"'Not exactly'!" she exclaimed, her eyes flashing. "That means it was!"

"No. I don't imply it was in your intention; but it might result in the same effect as if it were."

"How?"

"The Bastoni might interpret themselves as in a manner competitors with Don Arturo for your favour. They might believe themselves his rivals."

"Oh!" she cried. "What utter nonsense!"

"So far as your intention is concerned, it is," Orbison said. "I don't doubt it. But Mr. Rennie has an idea that the two brothers do regard themselves somewhat in that light. And since they are young Liana's bitter enemies politically, and the passions of people here are very different from the kind you've known elsewhere, Miss Ambler——"

"Good heavens!" she cried. "What on earth have I to do with all that? Do you think the Bastoni want to marry me? *Both* of them? They've been just ordinarily polite, in their way, like anybody else. I know they're against Don Arturo politically; even our *valet de chambre* talks about that, and says they're

determined not to let Arturo organize Fascismo here; but that's nothing I could have the slightest effect upon, even if I tried. I don't think the Bastoni have a personal feeling about Arturo, anyhow. He was hurt with me yesterday because I went to the Salone with Giuseppe, and then he came there and I soothed him down; but he looked so disapproving that the baron noticed it and spoke of it to me. I told him what was the matter and the baron didn't think anything of it; he began to talk of other things right away. If he felt anything personal he'd have shown it then, because——"

"Pardon me," Orbison interrupted. "You say you 'told him what was the matter.' Do you mean you told him that young Liana had asked you not to go there with them?"

"The baron asked me if Arturo had advised me not to go to the Salone with his brother. Well, Arturo didn't want me to go there with anybody; he hates the place."

"But what did you tell the baron when he asked you that about his brother?"

"Why!—I said 'Yes,' of course."

"You did?"

"But good gracious!" Claire cried. "Why shouldn't

I? I've just told you it didn't make the slightest difference. We were dancing, and I doubt if he even noticed what I said. As a matter of fact, I'm positive he didn't. I'm not wholly an idiot, Mr. Orbison!" She spoke with agitation and there was a smarting threat of tears in her eyes, in spite of her. This was not at all the conversation she had expected to hold with the invalid gentleman when she had bravely left the pergola to speak to him; and she was bewildered, even chagrined. "I really am not an idiot," she said. "I'm not—even though I see you think I am!"

"No, no——"

"You do!" she said huskily, her emotion increasing. "Of course you do! You think I've done harm."

He lifted a thin hand in protest. "No, no! I hope you haven't."

"Ah! That means you do think so! That's what your watching me and thinking about me, ever since you came here, amounts to! I asked you to tell me what you thought of me, and I get what I deserve for being a bold enough idiot to ask you such a question! You've looked me well over and you've decided I'm a fool!"

Distressed, for she spoke passionately, he gently

touched her forearm. "My dear Miss Ambler!" he said. "Don't you remember we began our talk with an apology from me for being so intrusive as to think of you at all?"

She looked at the emaciated fingers placatively just touching her arm; and suddenly the tears that had threatened filled her eyes; but she smiled upon him through them. "You didn't owe me an apology for that," she said. "I've been doing as much thinking about you as you have about me."

He looked startled. "What? No—you mustn't——"

She leaned toward him a little. "I'm not the kind of fool you think I am," she said. "But there are some things nobody can help!"

Then, not permitting a second anti-climax to mar the conclusion of this interview that had begun with one, she jumped up and walked quickly back into the hotel. Emotions varied and conflicting wrung her, yet at the same time thrilled her. They were altogether genuine and far from shallow; but what actually controlled her, in spite of them, was her sense of dramatic effect. Claire's exits were always excellent.

XV

SHE knew that her exits were excellent, even though, unlike her entrances, they had to be made on the spur of the moment. An entrance could always be planned, as she had planned hers this morning. She might have written it for herself: "Enter heroine with red book of poems in her hand, and sings aria, Rupert listening."

In her room, still blushing and with eyes still wet, she sat down to wonder breathlessly how much Orbison would think she had implied by her final words to him; but even in this she was nevertheless conscious of her duality as both an emotional person and a stage director. It was a consciousness that annoyed her; and sometimes, when it became acute, as it did this morning, it almost dismayed her. All her life—even when she was a child—she had seemed to be not one person but two. One was an honest person and the other appeared to be an artist. The honest person did the feeling and most of the thinking; but the artist directed her behaviour and cared about

nothing except picturesque effects. When Claire was nineteen and her father died, she had been truly grief-stricken; but the artist was present at his funeral; and she sometimes remembered with amazement that it was the artist who made her bow her head at the cemetery. This was a recollection she always hurried out of her thoughts, lest the amazement become shame.

"Heaven, please tell me," she said now, in her cell bedroom in Raona. "What's the matter with me? What am I? Can't I ever in my whole life do anything natural?"

For it seemed to her that she was in love with the broken Englishman. "Something about him," as she thought, had roused a depth of feeling she had not known before; his worn, fine face, retaining the haggard outlines of what had been a conspicuous manly beauty, was always before her, whether her actual eyes beheld it or not; the thought of him haunted her with pain and a strange joy; and she wanted him to know it. There had been days when Orbison, lying pallid in his chair in the garden, seemed almost to be dying; and she had wished to go to his side and kneel and say, "Let me die with you, dear." But even that was the picturesque impulse; she knew she would

have knelt gracefully, and that even with the man she loved she could not evade her damnable artist's stage directions.

"I'm terrible!" she moaned to herself; and looked in the mirror. "But maybe it's because of that."

She meant her extraordinary prettiness. Perhaps her duality was caused by her comeliness—girls born to be pretty might be doomed for that very reason, to behave picturesquely. "Ah! If he knew me as I really am," she thought, "he wouldn't care for me; he'd be horrified instead." Then she had a brightening idea. "Probably every other good-looking girl in the world has these same two natures." And now she smiled to the glass. "Except the stupid ones!"

She was not really despondent; she was excited, and happily so. Moreover, in her thought, "If he knew me as I really am he wouldn't care for me," there was a significant assumption, although she did not pause to make it more definite. Nevertheless, it was therein contained: "Not knowing me, he does care for me!"

Yet she had said to him: "You've looked me well over and you've decided I'm a fool!" She had wept when he touched her with his hand, so pitiably thin; but the tears that filled her eyes then were already in

them, because he had insisted upon talking reproachfully to her about Arturo Liana and those foolish Bastoni. That did not distress her now; she had let the Bastoni play around because they were funny and danced well, as she explained; and she was sorry if that had distressed Arturo, but there was no harm in it, she was sure; and since Orbison seemed to wish it, she would snub the Bastoni and be so nice to Arturo that he'd forget. She did not really believe the Englishman thought her a fool because he compared her to a fairy child playing with explosives; and her strong impression was that a girl's picturesqueness suffers no damage by a gentleman's persuading himself that other gentlemen are becoming explosive on her account.

Her eyes, still upon the mirror, grew large and bright with a stirred appreciation: the image before her was of a personage, that wonderful lady who had given him, he said, the final loveliness of the hour of greatest beauty he had known in all his life. Claire had resolved never to tell him that she was the lady, and she was determined to maintain her resolution. Her only problem, therefore, was to think of the best way of letting him find it out for himself.

She had not thought of any way at all when she and her mother went into the refectory for lunch; but she had the pleasure of seeing that his colour heightened—as she was aware her own did—when she nodded to him. Miss Orbison joined him in returning her salutation; Claire murmured her mother's name to them; and, when the meal was finished, the four people walked together out into the garden and together drank their coffee at a table placed beside Orbison's long chair. Mrs. Ambler noticed that it was a relief to him to get back to this chair.

"I should think you'd have luncheon brought to you here outdoors," she said. "The chairs in the refectory are so uncomfortably stiff."

He shook his head and smiled. "No. One clings to ordinary habits, doing what other people do as long as one can. Besides, this really isn't a proper place to eat—not from a porcelain plate, at least; I'm afraid they'd not understand if I asked for vine leaves. Do you know the whole story of Raona, Miss Ambler? Do you know the beginning of it?"

"No," she said, looking at him with a full straight gaze, not lacking in a mysterious gravity. "I don't even know the end of it, Mr. Orbison."

At that, his glance swept away from her quickly, and he pointed down the coast to their left. "The first Greeks landed just there," he said; and he told her of the storm that had driven the mariners back down the strait and forced this landing. She hung upon his story, never looking away from him, while Mrs. Ambler and Miss Orbison produced embroideries and plied their needles, listening, too, in the dreamy manner of sewing ladies. He talked of antique peoples as if they were human and comprehensible, not dried data of a dried historian; and, having one so intently gazing a listener as never before inspired him, he told her of the Greek fighting down the coast, of the coming of the war fleets of Alcibiades, sweeping the sea before them, of the perishing of that navy and of the strange death of Archimedes, and of Plato's sailing back to Athens after his wicked last repartee to the tyrant Dionysius.

"How lovely!" Claire cried at this, and she clasped her hands together, delighted with the ancient witticism. "I always thought Plato must be about the same as the square of the hypotenuse, or metempsychosis—until this afternoon. I'd never have believed there was anybody in the world who could make me wish I'd known him, Mr. Orbison!"

Miss Orbison looked at her watch. "Dear me! It's almost tea-time already. Charles, you do have a silver tongue!"

"I think you mean it's metal because it can be used so long without wearing out," he said; and glancing over his shoulder, he shook his head. "There's a gentleman I fear thinks it must be of iron; I hadn't noticed him. He has the air of a long-suffering poet, waiting a chance to speak to Miss Ambler."

The gentleman was Arturo Liana. He stood by the precipice railing, fiddling pensively with his straw hat and a walking stick, too patiently courteous to interrupt by a closer approach. Claire was not pleased to remember that she had determined to be nice to him; for now, at last, the man at her side had become infinitely more to her than the man at a distance. She gave the invalid a softly reproachful glance eloquent of her meaning: "All right," she said to him, entirely in this ocular demonstration. "I'll obey you and be an angel to him; but it's foolish and drags me miserably away from you."

What she said with her voice was less pathetic, though she sighed as she rose. "I suppose so. Probably wants me to take a walk. Oh, very well!"

She gave the man in the chair another look, one

that meant, "You're doing this!" Then she turned away, and, rearranging her expression to a more welcoming aspect, walked briskly toward Arturo. She did not reach him, however, without being intercepted.

Giuseppe Bastoni rose from the bench where he had been sitting beyond a clustering shrubbery, and stepped forth to stand bowing before her.

"Miss Ambler—you please?"

She stopped. "Yes?"

"I please like to invite you. You will come to dance? Music at Salone nice good zis assternoon. You please enjoy to come?"

"No," she said; and she intended the coldness with which she spoke and looked at him to be observed by the person whose suggestion she thought she was obeying. "No, I believe not."

Giuseppe stared through his monocle. "No? You don't like?"

"Not to-day."

"No? You don't like to come because we go to Naple' sometime, my brozzer an' me?"

"I haven't any idea what you mean," she said. "I must go on; I'm keeping Mr. Liana waiting."

"Oh, yes! Meester Liana!" Giuseppe stood aside,

and bowed deeply. "You don' like keep Meester Liana to wait. Oh, no! Excuse!"

He turned at once and strode out of the garden, while Claire, continuing upon her way to Arturo, glanced brightly back over her shoulder at the man in the long chair.

"You see?" she seemed to ask. "Are you satisfied with me?"

But he did not appear to be satisfied; and she was puzzled. "Good gracious!" she thought. "Isn't there any pleasing you at all?"

Apparently there wasn't, for he frowned heavily; and the unfortunate Arturo paid for it. She was anything but angelic to him during their walk.

XVI

ARTURO complained of this gently as they stood in the cloister for a few moments at parting, upon their return. Twilight had fallen, the air was still; the only sound they heard, except a gurgle of water in the pink marble fountain, was a lonely melody played upon a reed pipe far away and high above them, on a cliff side rising behind the narrow town. It was the Pastorale; and Arturo's sigh was as wistful as the tune.

"You were so kind last night," he said. "It was heaven for me, even before you sang. To-day you drop me over the precipice again. I never can know what I do to displease you."

"Nothing at all, Arturo."

"Then why do you treat me so?"

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed. "It seems to me I treat you pretty well. You saw how I snubbed that poor little Giuseppe Bastoni, merely because you were waiting to speak to me. I thought he made it pretty plain that he was offended, and of course

that's the end of me for both him and his brother. Well, I did that for you, didn't I?"

"But if you did, you seem to resent that you did it," Arturo said. "You have found some fault with everything I have said. If I say, 'It is fine weather,' you say, 'It is bad weather'! When I ask why you believe so, you begin to whistle and you whistle for half an hour!"

"Then don't ask me why I believe it's bad weather. That's simple, isn't it?"

"Ah!" he said. "The sun could be so bright if you would let it! Why can't I please you a little?"

Claire looked at him seriously. "You do."

"I can't think so to-day. Yesterday I could. It is an eternal up-and-down!"

"No," she said. "I like you as well to-day as I did yesterday. I'm always pleased with you, Arturo."

"Is that all?" he asked. "Just 'pleased'? Just you 'like'?"

"Oh, dear!" she said, and she shook her head despairingly. "There it is! Whenever I give you the chance, you say things like that! Don't you see that I spend half my time with you trying to keep you from asking such questions?"

"Yes, I do," he answered. "I am afraid it is what you have wish'."

"What is?"

Arturo looked at her steadily, with dark, sad eyes. "Yes, I think it is true. You have wish' that I should want to ask such questions but that I should not ask them. I think you like men to be in love with you but not to trouble you by telling you. Isn't it true?"

"What!" she cried; but even in her own ears the indignation she put into her voice had a sound somewhat enfeebled. Confronted with so simple yet exact a statement of fact, she was at a loss; and, indeed, she felt both helpless and foolish. She could find nothing better to do than to employ a stencil that she herself knew was too worn with coquettes' usage to be an adequate defence. "I never heard anything so unjust in all my life!"

"Then you do wish me to tell you?"

"To tell me what?" she said impatiently; but in the same instant she understood her mistake and that he would reply, "I love you!" She stepped back from him quickly, her hands fluttering in hasty gestures of negation. "No! I don't mean that; I don't mean to ask you such a question. Arturo, please——"

"Then what I said of you is true."

"Oh, dear me!" And with that, she uttered some little incoherent sounds of petulant distress; then fell back upon another and even more useless stencil: "Arturo, don't you understand?"

"I am afraid so," he said quietly; but there was something in his voice that made her catch her breath. "You needn't be disturbed. I will not say what you fear I would say. I will never say it."

"Arturo——"

"That is all," he said.

Then they stood facing each other, not speaking. Her stencils had not aided her; she knew herself accused but defenseless before the accusation; and helplessly, in her confusion, she found nothing at all to say. She had a sensation as of becoming smaller; and Arturo as he stood before her, slender but vague in the twilight, with tragedy in his dark and gentle eyes, was like a tall judge of her.

The white columns of the cloister and the outlines of the marble fountain, in the wan light, were to remain in her memory as a background like the architectural shapings of a shadowy judgment seat where she had been unable to clear herself of a true charge. But Arturo was an unreproachful judge. Orbison had spoken of him as Hamlet; and just such a sorrowful

dignity invested the young Italian in this parting with the American girl; for a parting it was—a final one. Foreseeing Providence has been kind in not making us, also, foreseeing; and so we do not know what is to remain most keenly in our memories. Claire's thoughts were more annoying than acutely painful and were principally occupied with herself; she no more knew that for years afterward she was unavailingly to remember Arturo Liana as he stood looking at her now in the gray cloister than she knew that this was the last time she would ever see him.

He bowed to her gravely, and left her. "Oh, well——" she murmured; and she sighed a deep sigh, in which naturally a little anger mingled with other emotions; for she could not be put at a disadvantage and remain wholly unresentful. "Well, it's what I get!" she thought, meaning that she had been punished for obeying a too virtuous gentleman's suggestions. Then, going into the long corridor in the interior of the hotel, she discovered this gentleman seated alone at a small tea table where he was lingering with some cold cups and saucers and the end of a cigarette.

She immediately placed herself in a chair opposite

him at the table. "Well, what was the matter?" she asked.

"When, Miss Ambler?"

"When I did what you'd told me I ought to do."

"My dear young lady!" he objected. "I have too many culpabilities of my own; I don't tell people what they ought to do."

"You told me," she said sharply. "Certainly you did. And I do wish you wouldn't call me a 'dear young lady,' Mr. Orbison. You're not my uncle; you're not old enough."

"I'm afraid I am," he said, smiling. "At least I'm afraid I feel so."

"No, you don't," she returned quickly. "You haven't been watching me like an uncle—not a bit—and I haven't been like a niece being watched!"

"I beg your pardon," he said with some awkwardness, and returned to her opening question. "What was the matter when?"

"I think you're evading. You know perfectly you did tell me what you thought I ought to do—what you and Mr. Rennie and Arturo Liana's mother thought I ought to do. You told me this morning and infuriated me. You said that if I had any decency I'd be nice to Arturo and drop the baron and Giuseppe."

"No, I——"

"Yes, you did, absolutely. So I've done it. You saw me freeze Giuseppe Bastoni when I left you this afternoon to join Arturo. You were looking—I saw you were; and I snubbed Giuseppe the worst I know how. He knew I meant it, and he and his brother will understand perfectly that it's permanent. I think he was in a cold rage when I went by him. Then I looked back to see if I had done what I meant to, which was just to please you, and I saw I hadn't. You looked like the *siroc!* Does it make you bitter to have a girl try to please you?"

He did not reply at once; and she took a cigarette from a silver case lying open before him on the table, and lighted it herself, as he seemed unaware. "Well, does it? What was wrong with what I did?"

"I'll tell you," he said thoughtfully. "I didn't propose a line of conduct for you this morning. You said I'd been watching you and asked me what I saw. Among other things, I said I hadn't been able to understand how any girl could give such fellows as the Bastoni any ground for conceiving, however mistakenly, that they were perhaps rivals with so splendid a young man as Arturo Liana. But whatever harm there was in it had been done; I didn't suggest an

attempt to undo it by making those two wolfish creatures more poisonously young Liana's enemies than ever."

"What?" she cried.

"Why, yes," he said calmly. "That was what you must have accomplished. Don't you see it?"

She looked at him almost fiercely. "I did exactly what you as much as told me to. You've just admitted you reproached me with giving the Bastoni a chance to think they were Arturo's rivals. Well, I snubbed Giuseppe, practically in Arturo's presence. Now you attack me for making him his enemy instead of his rival. No, I don't see it!"

"I'll try to make it clearer, Miss Ambler. The truth is, the Bastoni have the reputation of being pretty bad hats. You naturally wouldn't have known that; but there's no doubt of it; and there are quite a number of other bad hats in the place they come from and the villages between Raona and there. You know most of the landowners don't go to their own estates unless they're heavily armed and guarded by the *carabinieri;* it isn't altogether a safe neighbourhood except for foreigners like us—they let us alone because we increase the revenue. Well, the Bastoni know what their own reputation is; and that they're

fairly notorious among the Italians for selling spurious antique jewellery to foreigners and as associates of the other bad hats—and young Liana is an Italian. Don't you see what conclusion this Giuseppe would come to in his mind? You'd formerly been most gracious to him and his brother. Then abruptly, with Liana present, you snub him and go to Liana. Of course he'd think Liana had been saying things about him to you and ruined him with you. That's why I seemed disturbed when you looked back at me. Don't you understand, Miss Ambler?"

Claire's head drooped and so did her eyelids; she slowly crushed her cigarette down into an ash tray upon the table. "You do think I'm a fool," she said in a low voice. "It seems a little unjust when I did only what I thought you wanted me to do. *I* didn't want to do it. Do you think I wanted to go away from you and walk with Arturo? I suppose you'll tell me now that you didn't suggest my being nice to him, either!"

"No," Orbison said. "I didn't."

She looked up slowly. "No?"

"I didn't suggest your doing anything at all," he insisted. "Certainly not that you be 'nice' to a young man obviously suffering on your account—not unless

you meant to accept him. Naturally, if you didn't mean to do that, your being 'nice' to him would only increase his torture."

"Well, then," she said, smiling suddenly. "I've pleased you about that, at least. I was the very devil to him! When we got back from our walk just now we had rather a scene; he virtually denounced me as a trifler. Then he stalked off, and I don't know when he'll be back. That is to say, my being 'nice' to him because you suggested it merely made us both wretched and on that account I'm sure you're pleased with me at last, Mr. Orbison!"

"Pleased with you at last!" he repeated in a tone ironically rueful; and he laughed. "Much you bother yourself whether I'm pleased with you or not!"

"No," she returned. "That won't do." She put her forearms on the table and leaned toward him, keeping her gaze gravely and unwaveringly upon his. "I'm serious; it won't do. You know how much I care to please you and I know you know it."

"I don't," he protested; and as his pallid cheeks once more showed colour in response to words of hers, pain came into his eyes, and he had the look of a man who struggles, but struggles feebly, through lack of strength. "I don't know anything of the kind.

It's nonsense, and you mustn't——" He contrived to utter another laugh. "You are an astonishing young woman, I must say! Is your conception of ethics based solely upon the pleasing of the nearest available man?"

"Go on," she said, not moving, nor letting her eyes fall from his. "'The nearest available man,' you say. Very well—insult me all you please! We both know that pleasing you is all I care about; but something you don't know is that I've already pleased you more than anyone else ever did. *I* know it, though; and do you think that while I have that in my mind I'll ever give up going on trying to please you? Do you?"

He seemed to struggle with an increasing pain. "Upon my word, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do," she said, and her eyes grew brighter; her voice was tremulous but happy. "We both know."

"Indeed I—I——" Stammering, he made an effort to rise from his chair; but he had no strength, and, in difficulties with the table, could not at once get upon his feet. His sister, coming into the corridor at that moment, ran to help him.

"Charles!" she cried. "You might have fallen! Why didn't you ask Miss Ambler to help you?"

Claire answered her, but kept her eyes upon the flushed and panting invalid. "He knew I wouldn't," she said. "Not to help him get away!" And at that the stout and hearty Miss Orbison, after a sharper glance at both of them, looked seriously disturbed.

XVII

CLAIRE was to see this troubled look upon the ruddy face of the English spinster repeated frequently. "What's the matter with that woman?" the girl asked her mother one day in their small salon. "She looked so reliable and solid when they first came here—not that she looked happy, of course, if you caught her off her guard when her brother wasn't looking—but anyhow she hadn't that fretting expression you see about her eyes and mouth so much lately. It can't be because Mr. Orbison's health is worse, because it isn't; he's just the same."

Mrs. Ambler sighed. "I shouldn't think one would need to seek far for the reason a sister would look troubled with a brother in that shattered condition—especially when the brother's as lovely a man as hers is. I've discovered that since we've begun to see so much of them. He is lovely."

"Yes," Claire said absently. "But I meant something different—that expression she's got just lately."

"I haven't noticed it."

"Perhaps she only has it when she looks at me. Mother, you don't think——"

"I don't think what?"

Claire had paused, gazing out of the window dreamily; and her mother repeated the question.

"What is it I don't think?"

"You don't think that sometimes—they avoid us?"

"Good gracious!" Mrs. Ambler exclaimed, highly amused. "They don't get much chance! You've taken pretty good care of that, I must say! We go to the refectory when they do; we come out to the corridor when they do; we go out to the garden with them; we're everywhere that they are, at the same hour and in the same place. If we were a house party of four we couldn't well see more of them, and so how could they avoid us, even if they did want to, poor things!"

"Yes; but that's the point: Do you think they want to?"

"I haven't seen any sign of it. They're always cordial and he's always interesting. Where'd you get the idea?"

Claire shook her head. "I don't know, unless it's that troubled expression she has when she looks at me. Once or twice I've thought she wanted to speak

to me alone—she had that manner—but she doesn't. Then of course there's another thing rather queer."

"What is it?"

"Well—it could hardly be a coincidence."

"What couldn't?"

Claire looked at her mother searchingly. "Have you noticed how much more constantly she's with him than she was at first?"

"Is she?"

"She's with him absolutely all the time he's out of his room. She used to leave him, for an hour or so, quite often; but now she never does. It's as if she didn't want to leave him alone—alone with anybody else. I haven't been alone with him since I don't know how long!"

"My dear child! Why should you be alone with him? It strikes me you say some pretty personal things to him under conditions that might almost be called semi-public! I don't know *much* more you could do if you were alone with him; and the poor man himself looks troubled enough when you do it, as it is!"

"Yes, but——" Claire said dreamily. "Do you think perhaps she has a kind of sisterly jealousy of me?"

"No, I don't," Mrs. Ambler replied with emphasis. "She isn't that type at all. She's a good woman, generous I'm sure; and she thinks of nothing in the world but her brother's welfare. By the way, speaking of welfare, the season here is getting rather late. Don't you think it's about time we were on our way back to Paris, as we planned? We've already been here a month longer than we intended to be when we came."

"Oh, Paris!" the daughter said impatiently. "I don't care if I never see Paris again!"

"We can't stay here into the very hot weather. Nobody does."

"Yes, but——" Claire murmured, and sat frowning. "Surely she can't think that keeping me from ever being alone with him would do his welfare any good. I've told her myself that I'd do anything in the world for him."

"You told her that, Claire?"

"Yes," Claire said, and her softened eyes grew bravely moist, even under her mother's direct gaze. "I told her I'd give my life to be of any use to him. Then why does she——"

Mrs. Ambler, herself troubled, shook her head. "I don't know, Claire."

"I'm sure she believed me. It's true—I would give my life in an instant. Mother, she *must* have believed me!"

This insistence implied a doubt that need not have existed; the Englishwoman had believed her, and at that same hour was forth upon an errand she would otherwise have spared herself. Having left her brother drowsing in his cell, Miss Orbison trudged sturdily through the long stone great street of Raona, passed under the archway of the ancient town gates, and went on for some hundreds of paces beyond the ruined medieval walls. Then she paused at the panelled green doorway of an enclosed garden, and pulled vigorously upon an iron chain. A rusty bell that hung upon a wrought-iron hoop above the door rang as heartily as she seemed to desire.

When the door opened, a swarthy little maid in an old-fashioned Raonese peasant's costume appeared, a brilliant scarf about her dark head, a striped red-and-white shawl over her black bodice, gay embroideries encrusting her long green skirt. She stood smiling and bowing archly in the doorway. "*Buon' giorno, signora.*"

"*Il signore è in casa?*" Miss Orbison asked.

"*Si, signora. Prego!*" Then the little creature,

barefooted, ran up the garden terraces to the white villa above, and disappeared within a Saracen doorway. This was the entrance to the studio, Miss Orbison knew, and by the time she had ascended to it, Eugene Rennie had come out of it to welcome her.

"You're painting?" she asked. "I'm interrupting?"

He would have liked to tell her the truth, which was that he wanted to go on working; but having taken note of her expression, he said that he had finished for the day; and they sat down together upon the wide marble steps of the topmost terrace.

"Something about Charles?" he said.

"Yes."

"He's no worse?"

"Of course every hour he's an hour worse," she said with a tremor in her voice; but she controlled it manfully. "He doesn't look worse, hour by hour—he couldn't well do that—but no matter how he looks, the end of his suffering is always just that much nearer in sight. The pain is never unbearable, and often he's hardly conscious of it—perhaps because he's so used to it. The doctors told me precisely how it would be, and everything's confirmed them; I never doubted they were right. If only that specialist

hadn't told *him!*" She stretched her gloved hands convulsively in her lap, then sighed loudly and relaxed them. "But there! It's done, and we have to make the best of it; but that isn't what I've come to you about."

"You know I'll do anything," Rennie said.

"Yes, I know you will. I'm afraid I'm here to ask you to do something difficult."

"What is it?"

"Do you remember one morning when you and Charles and I were watching Miss Ambler and Don Arturo Liana as they sat by the railing of the hotel garden, and Charles looked so absurdly depressed?"

"Yes; he seemed gloomy about Arturo's filling Miss Ambler's heart. I was delighted."

"I was rather pleased myself, Mr. Rennie. I thought it would be good for him to take a little interest in her, like that."

"Don't you think it has?"

"No," she said. "If it had remained a little interest we'd have been right to be pleased." She shook her head. "It hasn't."

"No?" Rennie looked puzzled. "You don't think he's serious about her?"

"I'm afraid he's dangerously liable to be serious about her."

"'Dangerously,' Miss Orbison? You mean it might be dangerous for him to care for a rather flirtatious and light-headed young creature who doesn't care for him?"

"No. It's because she does care for him."

Rennie looked astonished. "You think she does?"

"She's as much as told me so, and she was in earnest. She cares for him as deeply as it's in her nature to care at her age, I'm quite positive; and that's what is cruelly dangerous for Charles."

"You think he could be really in love with her, do you?"

"He's trying with all his poor broken strength not to be," she answered unhappily. "Do you understand why he tries not to be in love with her? Do you understand why he *mustn't* be, Mr. Rennie?"

"A little—perhaps," he said doubtfully. "But it's the very breath of romance to believe that the happiness found in mutual love makes even tragedy celestial."

Miss Orbison projected an audible sniff from her nostrils. "Yes; it's the 'very breath of romance,'

and it's a wicked nonsense for human beings to believe it enough to act upon it! Don't you see that Charles understands, and that he's trying to save himself?"

"From what?"

"From agony, Mr. Rennie. From an absolutely useless and futile agony. We'll look at it in a plain way—a matter-of-fact way, if you please—without any romance. He'd got through the worst of it when we came here; he'd no chance but to accept, and he was fairly well resigned to it. He'd been through his rebellion and he knew rebellion was no good. Sometimes you could see a little of it left—in his eyes, or in some impatient thing he said; but he'd nevertheless accepted what he knew was absolute and inevitable. He has it fixed in his mind that the end will be in the autumn; October, he thinks—he's spoken of it several times. Well, he'd made himself almost placid about it. He'd loved life in the natural way most of us love it; but after all he felt he hadn't a great deal to live for. The war had shut his career off short; and for people near his heart he had only some friends—and me." She paused for a moment and her stout shoulders stiffened. "Well, a man can bear to die and leave a sister, Mr. Rennie."

Rennie nodded sympathetically. "Yes."

"If he had fallen a little in love with this pretty young thing," she went on, "and if the girl hadn't cared for him, it wouldn't have mattered; it might even have helped him not to mind dying. But for him to see that she adores him—and I'm afraid she does—for him to recognize the fact that he cares for her and to find life offering him what he'd believe a glittering, glorious happiness in almost the moment when he has to be done with life forever—oh!" Miss Orbison cried. "That would be horrible, Mr. Rennie!"

"Yes," Rennie said. "I think it would. The pain would outweigh the happiness."

"'Happiness,' Mr. Rennie? Charles knows it wouldn't be happiness at all; he knows it would be an unspeakable anguish to take this new beautiful thing into his life only to be wrenched from it! He's trying so hard to spare himself that. He can bear dying; but he can't bear dying unbearably! He's doing everything he can to avoid believing that the girl cares for him and that he cares for her. You see, it's her caring that is the peril. If he could believe her what we thought her at first, just a light-hearted young coquette flirting with these queer Raonese

men and handsome boys like Liana, and not seriously troubling her head about *him*, he could still keep his grasp upon the resignation he feels slipping from him. It's she who's getting it away from him. I've done all I could to help him, to give her no opportunities to make him see what he tries so hard not to see. But she makes it more and more clear in spite of me, and in spite of Charles, Mr. Rennie."

"You depict her as pretty brazenly forward, Miss Orbison."

But the sturdy Englishwoman was just. "No," she said. "Those things are different nowadays—customs have changed and anyhow, you see, it's rather chivalrous of her. I don't think she understands much about Charles; she doesn't know his time is so short; but she sees that he's a cripple and wouldn't ask anybody to marry him. She does the courting because of that and because she wants to make the sacrifice. I haven't a doubt she'd eagerly and happily devote her life to nursing him,—indeed I think she'd do anything for him. And she must do something for him, Mr. Rennie. She must!"

"What do you want her to do?" he asked.

Miss Orbison rose. "I want her to let my brother die in peace, Mr. Rennie. Will you ask her? Will you

make it clear to her? I've tried—but I couldn't even begin; I'd have done nothing but cry if I'd tried to go any further with her. Will you do it, Mr. Rennie?"

In return, he asked her a question as serious. "Do you think it's possible for anyone to make such a thing clear to a girl of twenty-one in love?"

Miss Orbison looked up at him desperately. "We've got to *try*, haven't we? Will you try?"

"Yes," he said. "I'll go this afternoon."

XVIII

HE WATCHED her short, strong figure as it descended the long flight of steps that separated his garden terraces and led to the green doorway. When she had gone out, he could see her gray felt hat below the top of the wall as she strode on toward the old gates and the town; and he sighed for her and the stout heart she carried so bravely in her stout body. Then he sighed for himself and the disturbing errand she had set him upon, and went indoors to change his clothes.

When he came forth again, he paused at the top of the steps. The point was high, and commanded the immense sweep of that great crescenting mountain coast. Below him the gray road wound out of the towered and cubed and angled stone masses of the town, and passed toward the vast corrugations of the volcano's buttresses; there were stolid hamlets built of old lava among the convulsive shadows of these harsh slopes; and halfway to the nearest there was a haze of dust upon the road. It was moving toward

Raona, and within it there were glints of glitter and colour. Rennie distinguished the uniforms of mounted *carabinieri*. He stood looking down as they drew nearer, and he saw that two of the *carabinieri* rode in advance of a mule cart, with three others riding upon each side of it and two more just behind. Following them, a dozen or more men joggled along upon mules or donkeys, and a straggling little crowd of barefooted peasants ran in the dust—attendant spectators anxious to miss nothing.

Looking down from above, Rennie could see, upon a mattress in the cart, a bandaged figure; and seated upon a stool beside it, a man in gray linen clothes smoked a cigarette. The American recognized him as a friend of his, a Raonese surgeon. Moreover, beside the driver sat a priest.

Rennie ran down the steps, and, as this cortège passed, he detained one of the runners, a villager whom he knew.

"Luigi! For what reason so much excitement? Who has been hurt?"

Luigi wiped his wet brow with a bare forearm. "An accident," he said, panting. "An accident of a peculiar appearance, it might be thought. This morning some of our people found Don Arturo Liana lying

at the foot of the Salto. The Salto is a very bad little cliff—it is little but wicked, and foreigners should not use that path."

"Liana!" Rennie exclaimed. "Was he badly hurt?"

"Yes, badly. His mother was sent for and she came with the priest, the *carabinieri* and the doctor from Raona, four hours ago. She has gone ahead in her automobile and they are taking him to the hospital in the cart because he must be kept lying down. Don Arturo talked to the *carabinieri* and to the doctor; I heard him myself, through a window. He told them he was walking to a meeting at Castrogirone last night, all alone. Ah! I think he should have been more careful! He said he met some men on the path, but in the darkness he could not tell who they were; he said perhaps they had too much wine. Don Arturo is a brave fellow; I willingly say as much as that for him. He is a foreigner from the North; but he understands the customs of our country and of course he would not tell the *carabinieri* who pushed him off the path."

"So!" Rennie said. "Who *did* push him off the path, Luigi?"

Luigi opened his eyes until they showed an extreme amount of white below and above their topaz

irises. "'Pushed,' signore! Who spoke of any pushing?"

"You did."

"No, no!" Luigi protested. "When a man has such enemies as those belonging to Don Arturo Liana, no one is foolish enough to say the young gentleman was pushed from anywhere! Excuse, signore!"

Rennie let him go and he ran away, his brown bare feet flitting lightly over the gray dust. He had caught up with the ragged end of the procession before it passed through the gates; but the American went more slowly. Inside the town, he walked first to the wine shop of old Onorati, who had the habit of knowing the truth of whatever happened in Raona; but of course Onorati would not speak plainly to a foreigner of Don Arturo's fall from the Salto.

"Some will swear one way; some will swear another," he said. "The only thing it is safe to swear is that Don Arturo ought not to have walked so far alone after the dark!"

"No," Rennie returned dryly. "That is evident."

"Evident? Perhaps. He is in politics."

"So? You think it was political?"

"Who can say? Somewhere there was a whispering——" Onorati stopped, and shook his head.

"Yes? What was the whispering?"

"It could not be true, I am sure; but there was some foolish whispering that Don Arturo had talked a little recklessly of some gentlemen; but I heard nothing that would permit me to guess who the gentlemen are."

"What had he said of them?"

"Nobody knows."

"To whom did he talk?"

Onorati rubbed his right cheek and then his left cheek. "Ah, yes! I remember hearing that it might have been to some foreign ladies at the convent."

By the "convent" he meant the hotel that had been a monastery, and Eugene Rennie, on his way there, stopped halfway down a flight of stone steps, and made a sound as of a dolorous kind of laughter. Then he questioned himself upon this very sound. "Why the devil will a man do that?" he asked himself. "How is it that one is able to see something grotesquely humorous even in a tragedy? In this one, probably because the character of the heroine makes it a tragi-comedy—with the emphasis on the first half of the word, I'm afraid. *Avanti*, then, for my own miserable part in it!"

The concierge informed him that Miss Ambler was

in the garden, and Rennie went there at once to find her. Miss Orbison had just brought her brother out to his chair. He was standing, leaning upon the back of it, and beside him was the American girl. Miss Orbison had paused with an unfolded rug hanging from her hands; and all three of them wore the pained and incredulous look of people who have just heard startling news. This, in fact, was their condition, for the Princess Liana stood facing them.

Rennie halted where he was.

XIX

SHE was naturally a pale woman, of a uniform whiteness of complexion that Rennie, who was an old friend of hers, had never seen varied; but he saw a variation now. Her whole face showed colour; it was flushed to a tint between rose and rust; and she held this emotional face high, too, with her chin lifted and her slim neck straight upon her slim straight body. She was speaking to Claire in a loud voice.

"My son send me," the princess said. "I would not have come myself. They wish' to give him an opiate for his suffering; but he say to me he will not take it if I will not promise to come to speak to you immediately. So I speak to you his message. He wish' me to tell you that what has happen' to him is from politics. He say you mus' not think there was any other cause. He say you might be afraid there was some other reason; he say you mus' not belief so. That is what he send me to tell you and I have told you, Miss Ambler; so now I will go back to him."

"Oh—please!" Claire cried. "Will you let me go with you? Would he let me see him?"

"No!" the princess answered sharply. "You could not see him. What do you think? A man all beaten and crush' wish' to be coquetted with? *I* would not let you see him, Miss Ambler. You have made him unhappy enough and you have done him harm enough; I hope from the deeps of my heart that he will never in his life see you again!"

She turned quickly, and as she walked toward the doorway of the hotel, she came near Rennie. He stepped forward, and she gave him her hand.

"We are not going to let him die," she said. "They have already promise' me that."

"I heard you say Arturo was beaten——"

"He was. When they finish', they threw him down from the Salto. Everyone know' who is responsible. But there will be no court. Arturo has some friends who know very well what to do!"

Then, with a sombre flash of her dark eyes to his troubled blue ones, she went on; and he joined the group at the invalid's chair.

Claire was weeping. "You know it's true!" she said accusingly to Orbison. "Anybody with any intelligence at all knows he wouldn't have sent that

message to me if he'd believed it himself! *She* didn't believe it! She made it plain enough, didn't she? She meant that her son sent me that message because he wanted me not to be so wretched as I would be if I thought I'd been the cause, and to make me understand that my name wouldn't be involved. Didn't she mean just that? She made it plain enough how she hates me, didn't she? Yes! And *you're* making something else pretty plain, Mr. Orbison!"

"I?" Oribson leaned more heavily upon the chair. "What am I making plain?"

Claire came close to him, facing him; she disregarded the others. "You know!" she said. "You've thought from the first I was getting him into trouble. You said so, and you as much as said I was a little fool. You did!"

"No—I——"

"You did!" she said passionately. "You thought it! You've thought all along that I was nothing but a little fool and now you think it's *proved!* That's what you're making plain to me, Mr. Orbison, just as she made it plain how she hates me! Do you think I don't *see* it?"

Orbison answered her sharply. "There's a rather badly smashed young man down yonder in that

hospital on the road to the sea," he said. "It seems to me you might be more concerned with him than with other people's opinion of you."

Claire stepped back from him so quickly and awkwardly that it was almost as if she staggered, while her right arm and shoulder oddly made a semblance of the gesture of one who strives to shield his head from harm. And with that she began to weep aloud. "Oh!" she said. "I see! You hate me for—for not *wanting* you to think I'm just a little fool! Well—all right!" She began to walk away; but she did not go all the distance to the hotel doorway. She stopped, came back toward Orbison; and, in a broken voice, pathetically sweet, like that of a quietly sobbing child, "I don't care!" she said. "You—you did like *one* thing about me. I never meant to tell you, but you did like one thing I did. I did it for you. You said —you said it gave you the—the loveliest moment in the—in the greatest hour of beauty you'd ever known. It was—it was I that sang at the Greek theatre for you. And anyway, you *did* say—you *did* say you liked *that!*"

Then, her slender shoulders heaving with the sobs that came faster and more convulsively as she went, she ran to the doorway and disappeared within that

portal of the ancient house of refuge from the world.

Miss Orbison helped her brother to let himself down into his chair, where he reclined, sighing, with a hand over his eyes; but immediately she made a sign to Eugene Rennie, and walked to a little distance.

"I thought what you promised me might not be necessary," she said hurriedly, as the American joined her. "I thought the poor foolish little thing had done it herself and saved us the trouble, when Charles spoke to her like that. He did make it pretty plain that he saw how absurdly self-centred she was, I must say! I thought then there might be no need for you to speak to her; but since she told him she was the person who sang at the Greek theatre, I'm afraid you must do it. He's talked of it again and again; nothing in his life ever made such an impression on him as that voice, and now he knows it was *hers*—well, I'm afraid you must go ahead, Mr. Rennie. You'll try to make her understand?"

"Yes," he said dejectedly. "I suppose so."

He waited an hour; then he went to the door of the cell used as a salon by Mrs. Ambler and her daughter, and knocked.

Claire was there alone.

"My poor dear child," he said as he came in. "Do you think you could stand a lecture on invalids and what's good for them—from a fellow countryman?"

She looked at him gently. "My mother's been wanting us to go away," she said. "That's what you mean, isn't it?"

XX

THE little salon was between the two bedrooms, and both mother and daughter slept with their doors open, because of a nervousness Mrs. Ambler felt about her heart. This was an organ without defect; but she was ill-persuaded of its soundness, and customarily spoke of various indigestions she had suffered as "heart attacks." She was apprehensive of such an attack coming upon her in the night, and wished to be able, even with a voice stricken possibly almost to a whisper, to summon her daughter.

Thus, that last night of theirs in Raona, Mrs. Ambler not only could have spoken to Claire in little more than a whisper, but she could also hear a sound as small as that from her daughter's room; and, waking suddenly, toward morning she did hear such a sound. She listened for a little while; then she spoke.

"Claire, are you awake?"

"Yes."

"Are you crying?"

"No."

"It sounds like it."

"Well, I'm not," the daughter insisted.

"I shouldn't think you would," Mrs. Ambler said. "I should think you'd be glad to leave a place where they do such awful things as those ruffians did to poor young Mr. Liana. And you needn't cry over him, either. He's perfectly certain to get well."

"I told you I wasn't crying."

"I think you're very foolish. You know you adore Paris."

"I'm not crying!"

"Very well," Mrs. Ambler said. "How long have you been awake like that?"

"Like what?"

"You know perfectly well what I mean. For heaven's sake, stop that crying and try to get some sleep!"

Claire's voice became petulant. "Please let me alone, Mother!"

Mrs. Ambler sighed and let her alone. No one else could have known in the morning how desolately her daughter had wept, most of the night. Above all, no one would have guessed such a thing of Claire at noon when Miss Orbison came for her and took her to the invalid's cell to say good-bye to him.

He sat by the open window listening absently to the talk of his friend Rennie; the air out over the garden beyond them was bright with the strong spring sunshine; but nothing anywhere was brighter than the eyes of the American girl as she came in and gave them greeting. She was charming, in her lively Parisian travelling dress of blue silk, as knowingly scant as any other of her dresses; her slim and rakish black slippers glittered below the fine long shapes of silk stockings that left some doubt of their being stockings at all; her silken blue helmet disclosed just two small curved glints of her fair hair before her hidden ears; and at her waist she wore a cluster of diminutive fresh pink roses.

She spoke first to Rennie: "So sweet of you to send me these!" She touched her bouquet as she sat down between the two men. "The nicest possible bits of Raona one could take away! I'll keep them, Mr. Rennie; and when you come to New York, some day, if you want a reminder of your lovely garden here, I'll show them to you."

"Dear me!" Orbison said. "That's another advantage owning a villa gives a chap over one who merely sojourns at a hotel—a villa can have a garden. There isn't a florist in Raona, unfortunately."

"Mr. Orbison!" Claire laughed. "I'll remember you without your sending me a going-away *corsage!*"

"I hope so."

"You know darn well I will!" she said gayly. "I've certainly been brazen enough in showing you the devastating impression you made on me from the first. I've really pursued you in the most unmaidenly way, and I'm afraid I'd keep right on doing it if we were going to stay any longer. Fortunately for you, my mother's been simply dying for weeks to get back to Paris, and yesterday evening she reached such a climax of rebellion she just broke my spirit and I gave in. Lucky for you, I did!"

"No," he said. "I don't think that's very lucky for me, Miss Ambler."

"What? Not even after the scene I made yesterday afternoon because you scolded me for something I darn well deserved to be scolded for? You don't think you're lucky, even after that?"

"No," he said slowly. "Not even after—anything!"

For an instant, as he said this, she looked startled; then she laughed. "Well, then *I'm* the lucky one to be going, Mr. Orbison."

"Why?"

"Well, you see," she answered merrily, in the manner of a little belle who coquettes with her grandfather, "if I stayed much longer I might be getting *too* serious about you! Just think how far it's gone with me already!"

"Has it?"

"'*Has* it!' Dear me! Didn't I confess to you yesterday I sang the Pastorale that night at the Greek theatre absolutely for you? I did! Absolutely! If you don't believe me, you can ask my mother. I told her when I came home that night; and this is the honest truth, Mr. Orbison. I said, 'That nice Mr. Orbison was there and he hasn't taken the trouble to meet us; I think maybe he would if he knew I sang the Pastorale just to make him!'" And with that her laughter tinkled out in childlike merriment. "But it didn't make you. After all my trouble! If I hadn't eavesdropped when you were talking to your sister I'd never even have known you liked it at all!"

"'Liked it,'" he repeated. "I'm glad you eavesdropped, because you know what I felt about it better than if I'd said the same things to you. It was the most beautiful thing that's ever been in my life; and it remains that, Miss Ambler, as long as I have any life. I hope you'll always remember my"—he fal-

tered, then finished huskily—"my gratitude for it."

Then, though only during an instant, her eyes wavered from their careless-seeming gayety. There was a flickering in her expression as of some portended sharp change in it; but the instant passed. "Well, I'm glad," she said; and she flashed to him the side-long insouciant glance, merry and brilliant, of the confessed coquette admitting the worst of her co-quetries and impudently claiming the worst of them to be pretty. "Of course Arturo Liana was *with* me there, and *he* felt a little gratitude, *too*, Mr. Orbison!"

Orbison's troubled expression altered into some-thing like a wondering dismay; but he contrived to laugh. "Everybody was grateful. You mustn't think I took so beautiful a thing as that all to myself just because you said it was!"

Claire seemed to be as light-headed as she was light-hearted. "Murder! What I *said?* My mother tells me, I don't know how many times a day, that if I had to be held responsible for everything I *say*, I'd be guillotined! But don't you think I didn't mean a great big *part* of it, for you, Mr. Orbison; I did, honestly! Honestly, I thought of you while I was singing it and wondered if you liked it, and *that's* true anyhow, absolutely!"

She jumped up briskly and put forth her hand to Miss Orbison. "Good-bye. If you ever *do* come to New York, remember, you've promised on your word of honour to let us know. Mr. Rennie——"

"I'm going to be at the station," he said. "We'll say good-bye there."

"How lovely of you!" She turned to Orbison, and he took her extended hand in his cold long fingers. "Good-bye," she said cheerfully. "You've been absolutely sweet to Mother and me; I'm going to read Plato and everything. I hope you won't forget us quite."

"No," he murmured. "I'll never——"

"You're lovely to say so," she said. "We won't forget you either. I never will, Mr. Orbison. Good-bye —and thank all of you for everything!"

Her cheeriness continued till the door had closed upon her and the continuously accompanying sound of half-laughter with which she expressed her high cordiality. But Rennie thought her voice had shaken a little when she said, "I never will, Mr. Orbison"; and Orbison himself, as he sank down upon his chair, had a disturbing impression that her hand had trembled within his loose and feeble clasp.

He sat staring out of the window, while his friend, watching him, thought the look upon his face the

most deeply puzzled, and yet the most melancholy, he had ever seen upon it. Eugene Rennie's own look, as Orbison did not observe, was one of growing doubt and sharp compunction—the look of a man who finds himself involved in what he fears may prove to be, in the end, a grave mistake.

Miss Orbison had no such expression. She was serious, but not doubtful; and she began briskly to talk casual commonplaces with the anxious caller.

He stayed with them half an hour longer; then got to his feet, saying that it was time for him to be on his way to the station.

Orbison, who had not spoken since Claire left the room, turned his head and stared vaguely at his departing friend.

"We didn't find out, Eugene," he said.

"Didn't find what out?"

"We didn't find out what was in that pretty little head. And now we'll never know; but I'm sure—I'm sure——"

"Yes?"

"In spite of all her lightness and her self-centred youthfulness——" Orbison paused again; then he said, "I'm sure it was something fine and sweet—in spite of anything!"

XXI

THE station at Raona is by the water, and the road down from the great cliff to the sea level is one that in a photograph seems to be an interminable gray ribbon strewn back and forth upon the landscape. Rennie drove down in a donkey cart he owned, and he was late. When he arrived upon the platform the passengers were all aboard and the train was slowly beginning to be in motion. He looked up and down the length of it, disappointed.

"Mr. Rennie! Mr. Rennie!"

Claire had seen him, and she called loudly from the open window of a *wagon-lit* compartment.

"Mr. Rennie! *Here,* Mr. Rennie!"

He looked again, then catching a glimpse of a waving hand, saw framed in the open window the face he sought. Upon it were the glistening streaks of heavy tears; but her eyes were wide and staring with an anxiety more poignant than her grief. The train was moving faster.

"Mr. Rennie!" she screamed. "Mr. *Rennie!*"

He ran toward her, and for a few seconds maintained a pace as rapid as the train's. She leaned from the window and seized his uplifted hand.

"Did I get by with it?" she gasped.

"Yes! God bless you!" he cried, and their hands were parted swiftly.

He stood at the end of the platform and waved his white handkerchief to her; but in a moment, as she looked back, his receding figure dwindled and grew tiny, as if he were a mechanical toy at the end of two long, converging horizontal rods—a little doll man, diminishing and waving a doll's white handkerchief. Above him the vast and broken blue landscape climbed into the sky, and a hazy curve of the cliff disclosed the gray monastery set upon its precipice. Thin as a spider's guy lines, the garden railing ran at the edge, and tiny dark figures stood there, the size of exclamation points. "Ah, good-bye!" Claire cried. "Good-bye . . ."

Her mother pulled her back into her seat. "Do you want to get your head taken off?"

"It seems so strange," Claire said, and uselessly applied a soaked handkerchief to her eyes and nose. "It's so *strange*, Mother. I don't understand it!"

"For heaven's sake, stop crying! It only makes

you talk as if you had a cold in the head. What don't you understand?"

"It's so strange there'll be *people* there—in that garden—year after year—just as *we* were. They'll come there and never know anything happened there. . . . There'll be people there, looking down over that cliff at the sea a hundred years from now. It's so strange——"

"Yes, of course there'll be people there," Mrs. Ambler said. "Probably a thousand years from now; they were there a thousand years ago, and three thousand for that matter. It's an everlasting sort of place. Do you think it does any good to cry about it?"

But she knew what her daughter was crying about, and her sharpness was tactful. She said no more, but took up a book and read, apparently paying no attention to anything else. Claire was silent, sitting motionless, and, as the afternoon waned, her mother, glancing at her almost imperceptibly, saw that her eyes were dry. She was pale, but her breathing was quiet and not troubled by the little starts and catches that had beset her during the first hour of their journey.

The train stopped at the seaport town of Castro-

vecchio; and when it went on again they heard American voices in the next compartment—voices of a mother and her son, it became evident. A little later, a youth of twenty-four or thereabouts appeared in the corridor, lounging, enjoying a cigarette and looking out of the window opposite the Amblers' open door. He was tall, of an athlete's figure, comely of face, well-advised in dress, and his air was that of a carefree and generally amused person. After a time his observation wandered, and he was aware of the girl sitting in the compartment outside of which he took his pleasure. His awareness of her, indeed, was vivid, almost fervent. He looked full ready to be cordial.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "Does my smoking annoy you?"

"Not at all," Mrs. Ambler assured him.

"Are you sure?" he asked earnestly. "Does it annoy you in the least?"

"No. It doesn't come into the compartment; it blows the other way."

"Well, I'll be glad to throw my cigarette away," he said. "I will if it annoys either of you." He looked anxiously at Claire and added: "Are you sure it doesn't annoy either of you?"

Claire did not even look toward him.

"Well," he said, still hopefully earnest, "if you're sure you *both* don't mind it——"

At that, Mrs. Ambler was a little amused with him and a little embarrassed; then, looking at her silent and motionless daughter, she was stirred by a faint anxiety. Claire's eyes, staring straight before her at the wall of the compartment, seemed to express a dangerous hostility.

"No, no! Neither of us minds it at all," Mrs. Ambler said hastily; whereupon, after coughing and murmuring, "Well——" he moved away. They heard him speaking a few minutes later when he had rejoined his mother. The train had stopped at a village, and in the silence his voice, though not loud, was more audible than he knew. "Americans, yes. Frostiest looking girl I ever saw!"

He was not wholly discouraged, however; for after they were in motion again, he reappeared in the corridor, and the two ladies were conscious that upon the slightest sign to indicate they knew of his existence he would offer them the entertainment of conversation. Mrs. Ambler timidly considered offering the sign; but a glance at her daughter dismayed her.

"See here," the mother said, when the young man

had again been frosted into a departure. "I hope you aren't going to keep this up too long, Claire."

"Keep what up?"

"Now, now!" Mrs. Ambler protested. "There wouldn't be anything out of the way in letting that good-looking boy talk to you. He seems very nice indeed, and as he and his mother are probably going all the way through, I don't see——" She paused. "It might help you to get out of yourself a little."

"I don't want to be got out of myself."

"Now, now!" Mrs. Ambler said again, and she smiled, though not unsympathetically. "You don't think this is going to last, do you, dear—at your age? How long do you suppose it will be before you'll be interested in seeing something of pleasant young gentlemen again?"

"I never will," Claire said. "Never."

"But if only on your own account you ought——"

"No," Claire interrupted. "On their account is what I mean."

"Good gracious! You haven't become precisely poison to gentlemen, my child!"

"Yes," Claire said, in a dead voice. "That's all I am."

Her mother urged no more, and the unhappy girl

sat staring frozenly at the polished wall before her. Her thoughts were long and sorrowful, and after a while they became bitter, as well. The persistent youth returned once more to the corridor, and although he affected a manner of interest in his cigarette and the landscape, she was unable not to be conscious of his ever-hopeful consciousness of herself. "Idiot!" she thought, addressing him. "Miserable sleek-haired little idiot! Thinking your awful prattle could be endured for an instant! Haven't you got eyes?"

She blamed him fiercely for not seeing her as she pictured herself to herself. In the autumn she had seen Clothilde Berin, the Parisian actress, play an abysmal tragedy. Mlle. Berin was a tall black-and-white woman with gloomy black eyes under black brows, and, in the final scene of the drama, she sat, in black mourning, staring hollowly straight before her, over the heads of the audience, into an eternity of pain. And thus, to Claire, it seemed now that she herself appeared. She forgot her charming little dress, her pinkish gray stockings, her jaunty blue hat, and even her roses from Raona. What she imagined the young man in the corridor would see—if he had eyes!

—was a long, black-haired, black-eyed, black-clad woman with a dead white skin, staring forever before her. Couldn't the idiot recognize a tragedy when he saw it?

Then, with horror, she realized that her two natures were in conflict again; the tricky and malicious artist was at work within her even now, when she was in the midst of the deepest suffering she had ever known. In spite of her true anguish, she was thinking of herself as picturesque; and she was indignant with a cub of a boy, whom she had never seen before, because he did not perceive how picturesque she really was! And thus she reached the bottom of her despair. "No wonder I do such harm!" she thought. "My very soul is artificial—and hideous!"

But at night she lay in her berth in the train that still sped roaring northward—endlessly northward—and the desperation of her will to return was so great that, conscious of her own absurdity, she entreated the iron tracks beneath her to change their course, curve backward and bring her again, in the morning, to Raona.

"I've *got* to go back," she whispered to the soggy little pillow. "Ah, I want to *see* him again! I'll only

just look at him. They'd let me do that, wouldn't they?"

Then she knew what she had given up. The morning could not bring her to Raona but it need bring her no despair of her soul. The artist within it had behaved not so badly, after all.

PART III

"TWENTY-FIVE!"

XXII

THE endless processions of automobiles, with black tops shiny in an autumnal drizzle, filled the long avenues of Manhattan, and, creeping busily between quivering halts, were like armies of beetles on the march through gloomy ruts in wet stone. Not unlike detached smaller beetles upright and gesticulating to the greater were the traffic directors in gleaming black oilskin, while other imperious coleoptera stood at the awning entrances to apartment houses, and, as the electric lights came on in the late afternoon, outlined themselves in dark wet glitterings that became flashingly active when automobiles drew to the curb. At such times there seemed to be a deposit of larvæ; the hard and darkly shining sides of the cars opened, emitting plastic beings to be taken in charge, apparently, by the attendant beetles at the awning ends, and, upon the fashionable avenues, the larvæ were of a superior, tenderer kind; —delicate things, exquisitely swathed, they were

handled sweetly and hygienically with deferential white gloves.

This is not to say that the deference was anything more than a hopeful sale of so much manner for proportionate *pourboire.* The giant beetle at the awning of the Abercrombie Apartments on Park Avenue had in his heart no true deference for the larvæ deposited with him, though they were among the most richly and softly wrapped in all that thoroughfare. "Tea!" he said mockingly to an official friend, who paused beside him in a relaxed interval. "They call it 'tea'! If you'd see 'em comin' away from all these 'teas,' about an hour or so from now, you'd like to get hold of a little of that kind of 'tea' yourself, Charlie."

The policeman laughed admiringly. "Cost about eight dollars a quart from a bootlegger, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, and more. It's a shame," the doorman said bitterly. "You'd be surprised how much of it they get away with. Yes, and even young girls! It's the worst waste we've ever had in this country. Now before prohibition——" But here he interrupted himself; a French automobile drew out of the traffic to halt by the awning; he stepped forward cordially and opened the door. "Yes'm," he said, not replying to any inquiry. "It's a nasty afternoon. Very nasty, in-

deed, ma'am, and it looks like a nasty evening, too. Yes, ma'am, indeed it does so!"

The policeman glanced with a favourable interest at the emerging figure; for he knew that his friend spoke so freely of the weather to only those whom he regarded as important clients. This one, moreover, had every appearance of being such a client; she presented to view the slender elegance, completed, not immature, of a gracefully experienced young lady of the world, and, better still, she was to be distinguished from previously arriving clients by something even more ingratiating than her superior comeliness. Most of the others, too much like larvae, came out of their cars in a dead-eyed coma; apparently they had to be passed inside the building and relieved of their swathings before being roused to complete consciousness;—this one was already brilliantly alive; her blue eyes were twinklingly aware of everything and took note of both the doorman and the policeman as fellow-beings worthy of cognizance.

"Mr. Winge tells me he thinks it may be the climate, William," she said to the former. "Mr. Winge is almost sure the climate has something to do with the weather."

The policeman was charmed with her. "They ought

to make more like that one," he said, when she had gone briskly into the great, lighted doorway. "Who was she talkin' about? Her husband?"

"No; she ain't married. This Winge is only a dumb-bell lives here her and I joke about. He ain't got no chance with her at all."

"I hope not," the policeman said. "You'd hate to think of one like that marryin' a dumb-bell. About how old is she, you think?"

"Miss Ambler?" the doorman returned thoughtfully. "Well—prob'ly somewhere around where either they marry a young feller or else don't, and wait a while and marry a man that's lost his wife."

"Is she so?" his friend said, amused. "I expect from her looks, though, she don't feel no great call to be troublin' her head over that!"

But his surmise was not at all a correct one: Miss Ambler had been troubling her head about that a great deal of late. In fact, at this very moment, in the elevator of the Abercrombie, she was almost acutely troubling her head about it and she had some special promptings to painful thought upon the subject. The least pressing of them, it may be explained, as a key to her present state of mind, was the fact that

a previously patient suitor had delivered an ultimatum: he was to have a favourable answer by nightfall of to-day or he would henceforth treat her as a stranger, none of her proposed middle-grounds being possible for him. She found herself able to endure the prospect of his alienation; but a more serious matter was involved: she was twenty-four, which is bearable; —what began to take her breath was the imminent approach of her birthday. She had only a fortnight left; then she would be twenty-five.

Here was a disturbing numeral. For a girl the difference between twenty-four and twenty-five has a disproportionate importance. In certain uncomfortable suggestions it may be equal to the difference made by a whole decade in the life of a young man: for her, the difference between twenty-four and twenty-five may be what the difference between twenty-five and thirty-five is for him. In Claire's mind, at twenty-four, there was a Rubicon before her; and to cross over, unwed and even unbetrothed, into twenty-five, was almost crossing over into a definite spinsterhood. Or, if it were not crossing into a spinsterhood so definite as to be absolute and permanent, it was crossing into that period of limbo wherein a maiden waits, ageing, until perchance she marries the relict widower of a

former girl-friend and brings up children not her own. The doorman had defined Claire's age shrewdly enough.

She had shivered a little upon leaving twenty-three for twenty-four, as if at the touch of an October breeze in August; yet autumnal gayety was easily possible for twenty-four. Twenty-four was not so bad of itself; its sinister quality resided in its border, and, as she approached nearer and nearer that border, she more and more often incredulously murmured the dread numeral to herself, wondering and dismayed to find it upon her lips.

"Twenty-five!" she thus whispered in the elevator. "Twenty-*five!*"

The elevator man did not hear her. What he said was only a coincidence; her apartment was upon the eighteenth floor. "Eighteen, Miss Ambler?"

"Twenty, Henry, please."

He nodded affably. "Mrs. Allyngton's, I expect. She seems to be having quite a tea this afternoon. Quite a tea at Mrs. Allyngton's this afternoon, Miss Ambler." And he added, in an admiring tone, though his purpose was merely to make a little more conversation with this favoured resident: "I was pretty sure you wouldn't miss it, Miss Ambler. I told Joe; I said

'She'll be back here in time for it,' I said. 'You'll see,' I said. 'She ain't goin' to let 'em leave *her* out when there's anything going *on!*' I told him, 'Not Miss Ambler!' I told him."

His passenger made the appreciative murmur of laughter required by genial manners; but as she stepped out upon the twentieth floor she was less pleased than she appeared. "Twenty-five!" she whispered again. But it seemed that even before twenty-five was actually reached, a girl had to exert herself to keep people from leaving her out. Her exertions must be somewhat noticeable since they roused the admiration of the elevator man.

XXIII

IN A corner, and a little apart from the general hilarity of Mrs. Allyngton's "tea," Claire sat asking herself why she made the exertions. At almost twenty-five, she was able to occupy her mind seriously with this puzzle and at the same time to produce the amount of chatter necessary to prevent the two gentlemen attending her from suspecting that either she or they were less lively than the liveliest of the party. Simultaneously she could take stock of everyone in the place, observing swiftly how well or ill such a one was "looking"; who talked to whom; how Mr. So-and-So's flirtation with Mrs. Thus-and-Thus progressed; what every woman wore and that the painted table Mrs. Allyngton had added to the "Regency treatment" of the apartment was probably spurious.

Most of the women present were young wives about Claire's age; some of them were several years younger; two or three were a few years older; and she had known nearly all of them in their previous state of

candidacy for the matrimonial condition. They had passed out of the preparatory period, and she hadn't; so that her relation to them was a little like that of a student, still in school, to former classmates who, after a thrilling Commencement, have become graduates gloriously preoccupied with their new world. Companion initiates in an experience superior to hers, they seemed to have fulfilled their destiny, and to be at last properly and completely alive; while she, avoided by this common, happy destiny, was left outside, not yet really alive and never to be, indeed, if that destiny should still avoid her or she reject it. The latter alternative was the kinder, and already she knew that some of these friends were beginning to say of her: "It isn't for lack of asking."

She was still with them but no longer of them, though they were obviously as fond of her as ever. They were always pleased to have their husbands dance with her; and she foresaw that as the years went by they would find an "odd man" for her whenever they could. At present she was still almost too amply able to supply the "odd man," herself; and here she felt another difference between her condition and that of the graduates: it seemed to her that in spite of their superior advantages she understood

men—even the husbands of some of her friends—better than they did. Apparently, marriage often involved a kind of blindness.

One of the men now chattering with her, over his third cocktail, was in reality, Claire thought, a total stranger to his wife, a pretty woman twittering with a group at Mrs. Allyngton's piano. This man had tried to kiss Claire the first time he found himself alone with her, and the only reason he hadn't tried again, she knew, was that she had thereafter successfully avoided being alone with him. Two or three of the other men present, she had cause to be aware, would do the same thing if she gave them half a chance to hope that they could "get away with it." Another, an immaculate fat man, had annoyed her with confidential witticisms of double meaning until she stopped him. These were but sporadic indications of the nature of the beast, as she realized; but they certainly meant something; and her deduction was that most men were grosser and more predatory than their wives suspected. Without effort, she attracted men—attracted them sometimes to her own discomfort; but, in general, and as a woman, she believed that she did not really like them.

She attracted men, but she no longer attracted

boys; she had been through the experience of perceiving that. With her mother, she had returned to the Maine coast for the past two summers, and had found herself "too old" for the Beach Club dances. A person of fifty, seeing her beside one of the girls who prevailed at these dances, could not have decided which was the elder: to his eye Claire showed not any outward sign at all of her maturity; but the dancing boys knew instantly that she was "too old" for them. Youth has its own divinations; and, for these boys—some of them her own age—Claire was already an "old girl."

"Twenty-five!" she thought, now, biting again upon this sore tooth. Twenty-five would make her an "old girl" indeed; but it should not make her marry. She knew well enough why these women at Mrs. Allyngton's had married these men. Some of them had married in a kind of contagion because they were of the marrying age and because "all the rest" were getting married. Some of them had dallied, then married almost in a panic, grasping at anything as they saw "twenty-five," or worse, approaching; she had been a bridesmaid for "old girls" thus frantically marrying and had shed tears, really of rage, for them.

Angered but vague, she supposed the whole affair

of marriage to be "something probably biological." The young had to get out of the nest: the boy learned to forage for himself; but the girl's part was ignominious: she had to find a forager—and ride him! A whole epoch in a woman's life was devoted to the competition, the struggles against her companions to obtain a forager;—hysterically affecting gayety all the while, she must scramble and fight to get him, never letting him perceive that it wasn't he who did the scrambling. The elation of newly engaged girls had sometimes made Claire sick with pity for her sex: it seemed to her that what she read in the roseate look of the maiden betrothed was, "*I've got mine!*"

Having got theirs, they were generous to Claire: they wanted her to get hers, though she needed no forager and could still choose which one of several she would take, if she wished. She had been fortunate enough to have the foragers scrambling for her, indeed; and what she was resolved to resist was the contagion: she was bitterly resolved not to be married because "all the rest" were married or getting themselves married. Almost despairingly, she asked for a better reason.

A dozen of "all the rest" were here in Mrs. Allyngton's apartment, this afternoon, and, as she looked at

them, she wondered that such a contagion could reach her from them; for undeniably she felt it. She was intimate with them, and several of them still thought of her as "best friend"; but the intimacy was merely habit, she perceived—a habit sprung from chance propinquities and parental associations. She and these best friends of hers had shared experiences: they had stepped together into the arena and had formed the intimacies of a band of young gladiators. When they found themselves pitted against one another they had fought according to their own code, though most of them had half-forgiven some rather tricky wounds;—but what Claire had come more and more keenly to realize was that she had little true congeniality with any of them. Why then did she bore herself by remaining intimate with them? Why did she still make exertions not to be "left out"? Why on earth had she bothered to come here this afternoon?

For Mrs. Allyngton's "tea" was only the daily "cocktail party." The "conversation" was but the noise that mechanically grew louder and less coherent as the chemical action of gin inevitably operated the mechanical action of vocal organs. Daily these people met somewhere to put themselves through these

same chemic mechanics: they seemed to need to drug themselves in order to bear one another's society, and since they were as dull as that, Claire thought, what wonder their lives were as chemic mechanical as their parties! Well, why in the world did she still go to the parties?

She couldn't answer her own question; but she was certain that she hadn't come, this afternoon, because Walter Rackbridge would be here. Mr. Rackbridge was he who had delivered the ultimatum expiring at nightfall of this same day, and the last person with whom she desired to hold converse. Yet here he was, a comely, thin, dark bachelor of thirty with a haggard eye; and, upon his arrival in Claire's corner, the two attendant gentlemen at once intelligently went forth to riot mildly in other regions. She was left tête-à-tête with him and in an unhappy mood.

XXIV

"YOU'VE decided," he said immediately. "Which is it, Claire?"

She shook her head, looking at him sadly. "Thoughtful of you, Walter, to ask me that—here!"

"Isn't it?" The young man's face, not hopeful before she spoke, became gloomier; for correctly he assumed that what she said was an unfavourable portent. "I suppose you think I might have been more tactful to inquire by telephone?"

"No," she returned, and she laughed ruefully. "My idea of tactful is that you'd have made no inquiry at all."

"I see. I should just have let it run on, remaining your undemanding servant forever. Well, I'm afraid tact will have to go by the board."

"I dare say. And you with it, Walter?"

"If you send me by the board with it, yes."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, no! I'd never send you. That's in your own hands: if you go it's because you want to."

"Claire," he said quietly, "I think you've told other men just that same thing. Probably some of them have been weak enough to keep on hanging around rather than incur the kind of reproach you imply."

"What 'reproach'?"

"That they didn't care enough for you to be content with your liking them. That's a pretty old story, it seems to me, and so far as I'm concerned it's not helpful. I think you're the cruellest person I've ever known, Claire."

"Do you?" she said; and her expression, as she looked wearily away from him, caused his own to become one of desperation.

"Yes, I do—banal as you think me for saying so." He was not altogether successful in stifling an actual groan; it became audible, and that there might be no doubt of his suffering, a dew, not of the heat, appeared upon his forehead. "You've been genuinely brutal to me almost from the first," he said. "You're the most adorable thing in this world, and you know perfectly well that any man in his senses must see that you are. You knew at the very start that *I* thought so; you didn't care at all for me and yet you deliberately made yourself as enrapturing to me as

you could. You've always done that: you're doing it even now at the very moment when you intend to tell me I've got to give up my last hope of you."

"Now?" she asked scornfully. "What am I doing now?"

"You're looking your most beautiful!" He laughed painfully. "You couldn't even bring yourself to the decency of dressing unbecomingly or in any way looking less charming—and I couldn't possibly find a more damning thing to say of you."

"Oh, dear!" she murmured. "I think you've said this to me several times before, Walter."

He caught his breath; then he said quietly, "Yes, the only novelty about this is that it's the last time. Don't think I'm unaware of the answer you're going to give me. It's 'no.' "

She continued to look away from him, and did not speak.

"Isn't it?" he said, in a voice a little tremulous, after a silence. "Isn't it 'no'?"

She turned and looked at him with a sorrowful gravity. "I told you more than a year ago that I could never be in love with you, Walter. You've been pretty nice to me and you know well enough how much I like you. I like to be with you—when you're

sensible enough to be just friendly—and I like to hear music with you: I even like spending several hours at a time with you—again when you're just friendly. Well, that's all, and I can't help it. You say it's not enough, and I can't help that, either. You say I've got to promise to marry you or you'll take yourself permanently out of my orbit. Very well, I'm not going to be married merely for the sake of being married."

"And if you married me," he said gently, "that's all it would be?"

She was sorry for him; he was miserable, and she knew that he had cared for her, truly and well, a long time. Moisture appeared in her eyes. "Yes, it would," she said. "I'm sorry I ever let you get started, Walter. That was my fault, it's true; because I could have stopped you; but I hadn't learned enough to do such things then. I confess to you that I wanted to charm all the men I could. There—I'm letting you see what I've really been like; it ought to be useful to you."

"Useful!" he groaned. "It only makes me see that you're lovelier than ever—for owning up to it." He took a step away, as if to leave her; then turned back. "Well—nothing's likely to make any difference for me? It's all over, is it?"

"Unless you'd like it to stay as it is."

"I can't," he said. "I've tried; but I've either got to win you or leave you—and I can't win you. Well——" He contrived to form the semblance of a smile. "Good-bye—dear."

"Good-bye," she said, in a low voice; and to her sudden surprise she found this parting sharply painful: she had expected to be relieved, not hurt, by it. She put out her hand impulsively. "Good-bye—dear!" she said in little more than a whisper.

At that, he started and looked at her intently; but she released her hand from his, said hastily, "No! Just good-bye!" and, crestfallen, he turned away.

He did not go far. Their hostess was already upon them, convoying a middle-aged gentleman and a girl of eighteen; and before Walter could evade this anti-climax, Mrs. Allyngton had seized him by the arm. "I was just coming over to break up the tête-à-tête," she said. "Miss Ambler, this is Mr. Sherman Peale. Walter, this is Miss Peale. There's some music coming and you can dance with her pretty soon, and in the meanwhile be witty for her. You can, sometimes, you know! Claire, I'm going to leave Mr. Peale with you; that's what he wants."

XXV

THAT was what Mr. Sherman Peale wanted, as Claire already understood. He was a grayish, meagre man with a brown face and alert bright eyes that had seen a great deal, but were as lively and unjaded as those of his eighteen-year-old daughter who now turned aside with the unhappy Walter. Claire catalogued Mr. Peale as an "interesting" man, for which rating she had previous information from the public prints. He was an exploring anthropologist and had just returned to face batteries of interviewers after a long immersion in the steamy jungles of the Orinoco, a river of apparently no interest to him at the present moment. With a breath-taking clarity he explained what did interest him.

"I saw you the moment my daughter and I came into this room, Miss Ambler," he said. "Yours was the one face that stood out, and I knew you were the one person here I wanted to know. I've been living entirely among savages for several years and I'm

afraid I've thus relapsed into a habit of primitive frankness of speech lost by our own race some thousands of years ago. Can you stand it?"

"I think perhaps," she said, "I can even equal it."

At that, his youthful eyes glinted forth sparklings of pleasure. "Well, suppose you give me a sample of your own."

"Of my own frankness?" She laughed, and then, with a light audacity, she said, "I saw you as you came in, Mr. Peale, and humbly hoped for a little notice." And, though she should have blushed to say it, this was the mere truth: she had observed the advent of the distinguished gentleman, and had instantly thought, recognizing him, "There's a man I'd like to know!" The reason she should have blushed was that this thought of hers had been in her head during her rejection of Walter Rackbridge: the unfortunate Walter might well have been entitled to all of her thoughts for those few crucial moments. But no one had quite all of Claire's thoughts at any moment whatever; she was never wholly free of that "double" sense of hers, that curse of "seeing" herself as somebody else, even when she truly suffered. And thus, even while she had rejected Walter and had said to herself of Sherman Peale, "There's a

man I'd like to know," she had simultaneously been her own audience, seated aloof and observing the actress. Moreover, as audience, she had said: "Walter goes. That brown-faced man coming in and looking at me, could that be He?" And she had let the brown-faced man become aware for an instant of her eyes upon him; so here he was—of course!

"You'll get the notice, Miss Ambler," he said, delighted. "I hope you can stand it as well as the frankness."

"I think I can. Has it begun?"

"Decisively!" he rejoined; and he went on at once: "After a man has been cut off a long time from his kind, he comes back to them as a lonely stranger. My wife used to go with me upon my expeditions; but since her death I've gone alone. Coming back to New York has seemed to me the loneliest of all my expeditions, though it might surprise you to hear me say so, Miss Ambler. I've moved among crowds of people ever since I landed, two weeks ago; I've been obliged to make speeches at science association dinners—even at other dinners. I've been in a whirl of lunches and parties and reporters and celebrities; I've even danced until three in the morning. Yet I've never felt so alone in my life; it may be nostalgia

for swamps and savages, but I don't feel that I've been in actual human contact with a fellow-being since I left South America. When I saw you I had a queer thought, and as you say you can stand savage frankness, I'll tell you what it was. I thought, "There's someone who would understand me."

"It might be overestimation," Claire said. "But how could you feel quite so alone with a daughter like that to go about with you?"

"Kitty? Good heavens! To me she's the greatest stranger of all. I left her a little schoolgirl of fourteen in her aunt's charge, and I've come back to find a curiously sophisticated adult person whose very vocabulary is less open to me than that of some primitive tribes who express themselves principally in grunts and squeals. Bless me! I'm afraid I shall never become acquainted with Kitty. That good-looking youth with her now already knows more about her, I haven't a doubt, than I ever shall."

Claire's eyes followed his glance to where his daughter sat with Walter; and to the girl of almost twenty-five Miss Kitty Peale was no such mystery as her father found her. She was a slim little fair creature, exquisite peach-bloom in a knowing small gray hat, an amber-coloured blouse and skirt, the latter

perhaps eighteen inches long, pale yellow silk stockings naturally much in view, and beautiful amber shoes from the Rue St. Honoré—superb small works by an artist in footwear and worth preserving in a collection. She was not inappreciative of them, herself, and, as she chattered to Walter, sometimes slightly elevated one or the other of them, bestowing a momentary glance of thoughtful pleasure upon it from beneath her lovely ashen lashes. Her stockings pleased her, too, undoubtedly; though she frequently tweaked the little skirt down to cover part of a knee-cap. She had many such little fluttery and impulsive gestures, and her voice was also fluttery and impulsive. She uttered laughter and little outcries as of surprise throughout her talking, so that she seemed continually to have an obbligato accompaniment of mirth and wonderment.

"Ah, me!" Claire thought. "That's just what I was like, then. Poor Walter!"

But, to her surprise, as she glanced at him, Walter seemed less downcast than she had expected. His equanimity was the more puzzling to her because she could hear perfectly what the child was loudly prattling to him. "So you're actually Charlie Rackbridge's cousin! I know him awf'ly well, really! I

think he's perfectly peachy wonderful—just as a boy in college, I mean of course. I went down to both the games he played in before he broke his collar-bone; but of course I'm not wildly collegiate; Charlie's peachy in his own place, I mean! I never *dreamed* I'd meet a cousin of his this afternoon." Here she looked wistfully for one second into Walter's eyes; then, with an air of mockery, tapped his arm with the tips of her fingers. "And *such* a cousin!"

"She's a terrific little belle, I'm afraid," her father said to Claire. "She has a squadron of boys hanging about and seems to spare no one. She tells me she prefers 'older men,' and I suppose she means young gentlemen about as old as the one she's proceeding to enthrall just now. I haven't a doubt she'll annex him before she leaves his side and will probably tell me, after we go out, that she has an engagement with him for the evening. She'll break several previous ones, incidentally, but she'll patch all that up later somehow. I'm sure I don't know how she does it."

Claire thoroughly knew how Kitty did it; and she shivered slightly, remembering how she herself had done it. "There, but for the grace of God in making me almost twenty-five, walk I!" she thought; and then hearing what Kitty said next, she was startled.

"I saw you the minute I came into the place," Kitty chirped loudly. "And I wondered right away who you were."

At this, Claire perceived that in one detail, at least, even the grace of God had not granted to twenty-five any superiority over eighteen. Kitty was beginning with Walter just as her father and Claire had begun with each other. "Good heavens!" the girl almost twenty-five said to herself. "Did *I* do it like this at eighteen? Am I *still* doing only the same things I did then—endlessly repeating them as long as I can stay in the ring?" And, dismayed, she wondered if there was any real difference between her present situation with Mr. Sherman Peale and Kitty's with Walter Rackbridge. Hadn't Kitty probably asked herself, at first sight of Walter, "Is this He?" She indeed probably had! And just as Claire was already certain that if she chose she could make Mr. Peale take any amount of interest in her she thought desirable, wasn't the eighteen-year-old girl capable of a like certainty in regard to Walter? "Not that Walter would," Claire thought; and then, hearing his response to Kitty's overture, she had another surprise.

"I'm glad you wondered," he said gravely. "I

think I'd like to be wondered about—by you—very much."

Claire stared at him incredulously, for he seemed to mean what he said; and she remembered how quickly desolated gentlemen are caught, sometimes, on the rebound. This thought disturbed her, not because she was at all a dog in the manger, or could be jealous of another's seizing upon what she, herself, rejected, but because she had a liking for Walter that was almost a fondness, and she admired him. His native talent and a genius for work had made him one of the best young architects in New York; he was kind, generous and able—a man much too good to be caught on the rebound by an eighteen-year-old bit of peach-bloom. And here Claire consoled herself with a difference between eighteen and twenty-five. "Never a thought in that little head except about herself—not one! She's making poor old Walter believe she's thinking of him; but eighteen *can't* think of anything except itself. The poor thing ought to know better than to trust her—she might actually marry him! Such things have happened often enough."

Ah, that peach-bloom! Dangerous to any man of

any age, if it wished to be Claire knew. Peach-bloom! Alas—twenty-five!

The explorer was speaking to her. "There's another thing I'd like to ask you if you can stand."

"Well then, ask me. I'll answer you."

"I'm asking because of my loneliness," he said seriously. "You see, a civilized thinking man is naturally lonely among savages, no matter how much he may find to interest him. Well, I discovered long ago that he can be quite as lonely in civilized quarters of the world, and I've just been making a re-discovery of that uncomfortable fact. The truth is that I'm a peculiar man; I've never been at all like anyone else I've ever known, and, naturally, as queer a person as I can't expect many people to understand him, nor can he hope to find many true companions. Yet that's what I've yearned for all my life, understanding and companionship. I'm as abrupt as I am frank, Miss Ambler; I always make up my mind about people at my first glance and I've already told you I saw understanding in your face. What I want to ask you is if you think you could stand seeing something of me. Do you think you could?"

She laughed. "We might mutually have some burdens to bear, if I could, Mr. Peale."

"No," he said, leaning toward her earnestly. "I'm serious. Perhaps I'd better tell you a little about myself." And with this he began an autobiography that seemed to Claire to be one of perfect candour yet strongly favourable to its subject. Half an hour later, when musicians had begun to play in the next room, Mr. Peale's memoirs had not reached his adult period. Nevertheless, in spite of his naïve self-absorption, Claire did not consider him a fiasco; the narrative was vigorous and undeniably interesting; moreover, she saw that she had no further need to exert herself. All she had to do was to listen with a deeply understanding expression and, if she did this often enough he would presently wish her listening to be continuous. Before they parted, to-day, he would ask her how soon he could see her again: she set his proposal of marriage—if she chose—at about a month in the future; less than that—if she chose. But she did not choose; for already she knew the brown-faced man was not He. There was no He; no true mate awaited her or ever would come out of space to claim her—twenty-five was all that claimed her!

She jumped up to the first dancer who presented himself, and departed from Mr. Peale with a word of apology so quickly spoken that he had no opportunity

to ask her when he might continue his r ...rative. He meant to "cut in," and hovered in the offing, waiting to do so; whereupon, finding herself swept near a door, she said hurriedly, "That's all; I'm going home," slid from her partner's arms and out into the hallway. But just as she effected this evasion, Miss Kitty Peale dancing near her with Walter, was claimed, and left him for another.

Kitty somewhat recklessly allowed it to become evident that she was reluctant to make the exchange, and as she was borne onward her eyes lingered upon her previous partner.

"Don't forget," she called sweetly. "Eight-thirty to-night."

And Claire, as she went toward the outer door of the apartment, heard Walter's response, a single word: "*Forget?*"

The incredulity he expressed was sufficient.

"Idiot!" Claire said reminiscently, as she waited for the elevator; and when she had reached her own apartment, and, after a dexterous avoidance of her mother, was in her own room, she said "Idiot!" again.

She looked at a little clock of lapus lazuli and gold upon a table, and sat down before a mirror to remove

her shoes: she must undress, then dress for a dinner. "Dress, undress, dress, undress!" she murmured wretchedly, half-aloud. "Undress, then dress again. And what the devil is it all *about?*"

She had taken off one shoe; she held it in her hand and sat staring at it, her head bent over it, until she noticed a tiny drop of water upon the shining black surface of its long, curved heel;—a tear had fallen there without her being aware of it in her eye.

She hurled the pretty shoe across the room, so that it struck noisily against the wall. "Oh, my gosh!" she whispered in sharp despair. "Twenty-five! I can't stand it and it can't be stopped! Nothing in the world can *stop* it! Twenty-*five!*"

XXVI

SHE had been twenty-five for a month and a week; it was bearable as is everything that must be borne; but it was still incredible. "My twenty-sixth year!" she said to herself. "That's the same as the twenty-seventh—or twenty-eighth——" And she thought of herself as "outside of life" now, forever. "I've chosen not to live," she thought. "What's the difference between that and suicide?"

Her mother had gone to a concert; Claire was alone in the apartment and she stood at a window, from this high cliffside looking forth upon tower and abyss illumined by the prodigious night flares. The new skyline, staggering with the new sky-scrapers, rose even above her, overwhelming the stars with the blatant giantism of the new New York. She felt its huge provincial commonness, its stupendous materialism and its frantic magnificence; but in the main it seemed to her a Titanic honeycomb of lighted cells, with open doors through which flitted hordes and hordes of girls breathlessly hungry for the approval of men

who sat in the cells appraising stodgily, or, roused by some cunning appeal, succumbing to it with repulsive flaccidity. Yet all these were ephemera; skyscrapers, hungry girls and the men they sought already partook of the dust they would soon become. She had learned how suddenly the quicksilver years run out, carrying youth and life itself with them.

She turned from the window, took up a book and sat down with it in an exquisite but comfortable Louis Sixteenth chair. "What on earth *is* this stuff?" she inquired petulantly when her eye, not her mind, had read a paragraph blindly the third time. Then she left the book upon the chair, went to the "concert grand" piano, and sang half of a song in her rich and moving voice; but she stopped in the middle of a note; her hands dropped from the keys. Frowning, she rose and began to pace the floor.

"I ought to have gone out," she said aloud. "I don't believe I should be alone to-night. I feel as if I might be going to do something crazy."

Then, upon the instant, she did the thing she feared she might do. She went to the telephone and called Walter Rackbridge at a club. He was there; his voice indicated surprise when she let him know who spoke to him, and it was significant that she had to let him

know this. For the first time he failed to recognize her voice.

"Are you busy just now?" she asked, with some sharpness.

"No, not for an hour or so. I have an appointment later. Why?"

"I thought if you cared to come and see me——"

"You mean now?"

"Yes, if you——"

"Why of course, if you wish," he said politely. "I'll be there immediately."

He was there within ten minutes, in fact, and when he came in, still obviously surprised, he found her seated in the pretty chair and apparently reading. She looked up languidly; then, as he sat down, facing her, she murmured a word of thanks for his coming. "Good of you to be so obliging, Walter."

"Not at all," he said cordially. "You wanted to see me about something?"

Her eyes opened wide with the full look she gave him then. "I'm not sure," she said slowly, "that it's necessary to add 'about something.'"

He was mystified; plainly so. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes."

"What about?" the simple creature inquired.

At that, she looked away and shook her head ruefully; but made no reply.

"Ah——" he began uncomfortably. "I suppose you—I haven't seen you since—well, I suppose you wanted to talk to me about something."

"Is it inconvenient for you to be here?"

"Not at all. I have to turn up at a party after the theatre."

"You 'have to'?" she asked. "You mean you promised to? You mustn't let me keep you."

"There's plenty of time," he assured her, and then, in silence, waited for her to explain why she had summoned him. No explanation appeared to be forthcoming; she sat looking before her at the fireplace where above a nether ruddiness small blue flames wavered upon the anthracite coal; but she did not speak, and appeared to have settled definitely into this brooding contemplation. More and more puzzled, he continued to wait, until it began to seem to him that he was engaged in a form of endurance contest. If he was, he failed to win it, for finally, after coughing slightly several times, he said, "Oh—by the way——" then stopped.

"Yes?" she said. "'By the way'—what?"

"I've been seeing quite a little of Sherman Peale lately and I've wondered if you appreciate what an extraordinary person he is."

"What?" she said lifelessly. "Oh, yes; I believe I do. Why?"

"He doesn't think so," Walter explained. "He's rather mystified by your treatment of him, though I'm sure you haven't meant to be rude."

"Rude?"

"Hasn't he written you twice asking when he could see you?"

"Yes. Three times. Another note came to-day 'in case the others had miscarried,' he mentioned."

"And you haven't answered any of them? I imagine he's a little taken aback."

"Do you?" she asked, still gazing absently at the fire. "How did you find all this out? Did Mr. Peale tell you?"

"No. His daughter told me. She was secretly terribly amused, and laughed about it. I'm afraid she doesn't take her father very seriously?"

"No," Claire said. "What does she take seriously?"

"I'm not sure. Why?"

"Because there's only one thing she can."

"Only one thing she can take seriously? A person, you mean?"

"Yes," Claire said; and now, as she spoke, she turned her head and looked at him with a clear and friendly regard. "I hear you've been everywhere with her lately and by this time you probably feel that you know her pretty well. Don't you?"

"Why, yes; of course."

Claire shook her head. "You don't. Nobody does. She doesn't, herself. She last of all, indeed!"

"You think so?"

"I know so," Claire said quietly. "She's eighteen. I know what I was like at eighteen and it's what I've been more or less like ever since, until I found twenty-five coming down on me. Of course I was a little less like eighteen with every advancing year, yet sometimes I feel that I've only lately quite got over being Miss Kitty Peale. Well, you see, I know her, and she's not good enough for you, Walter."

"Why, what——"

"Wait a moment. A girl of eighteen can't take you seriously; she can't take anything seriously, except herself; she can't think of anything except herself. It isn't her fault; she doesn't know how. She can't

be in love with anyone but herself; and that isn't her fault, either; she merely doesn't know how. All she can actually *see* is herself. She wants to have everybody in love with her that she can possibly get into that condition; but she really doesn't understand that her lovers are human beings, her fellow-beings—not even when she singles one out and believes that she adores him. It's only another way of adoring herself. I've really given you more feeling, just as your friend, than Kitty Peale is capable of giving you, even if she should let you marry her. I'm giving you so much friendship at this very moment, Walter, that I dare take the risk of asking you if you couldn't see her as she is, for your own sake, and cease to be one of her squadron. Her father told me she has a 'squadron' of boys about her. They'll content her and they won't get much hurt, but you might—especially if she should decide she wanted you to marry her."

Walter stared, and his colour heightened visibly. "See here," he said. "Do you mean you're advising me to stop seeing her?"

"Yes. I take that risk."

"I think you might very well call it a risk!" he said bitterly.

"I'll define it if you like," she rejoined, giving him a wan and rather wavering smile. "I told you I would never take you myself and I never shall. I know now that I'll never be married—never—not ever at all, Walter. And since I won't take you, myself, you want to know how it gets to be my affair that you may wish to marry someone else. How dare I warn you to keep away from another girl, against whom there's nothing in the world to be said except that she's in the very perfection of the peach-bloom age? Well, I do warn you, because I know what trouble I made for a few boys and men when I had that age, myself, and I dare the risk of what you'll think of me for my warning. You'll very likely only think me a jealous dog in the manger." She rose suddenly, went to the other end of the room and stood with her back to him. "Well, if you care to think it, go ahead and think it!"

"What do you want me to think?" he asked, not moving from his chair.

"Anything you like!"

His reddened brow was corrugated by a frown of reflection; he shook his head ruefully, baffled, and then he was startled for she turned and spoke sharply to him.

"That's all I have to say. I think you'd better go."

"Go?" he repeated, and his bewilderment was so great that he could only inquire, feebly, "Go where?"

"Back to your club," she said angrily. "Or to keep your engagement with Miss Peale. Or anywhere you like!"

He got up and came to her. "What is it you want me to do, Claire? Do you mean that though you won't have me you're advising me not to marry anybody else?"

"Good heavens!" she cried. "Would that be so hard for a man? Plenty of women bear it. Couldn't you?"

"I don't see why I should," he said. "There's no reason in the world why I shouldn't marry if I wish to. Why shouldn't I now—if I wish to?"

"You poor goose!" she cried. "Because you'll only be marrying on the rebound after I refused you! Because you'll only be falling for peach-bloom that'll be gone forever in an hour or so! Because you'll have been caught by a self-centred little monkey's knowing how to say 'The first time I saw you I wondered who you were!' Wait till you find a woman who can take some interest in you for yourself and not in your

merely being in love with her! Then marry her, marry her as quickly as you can, in heaven's name!"

"But if I should never find her?"

"Well, couldn't you bear it?" she said fiercely. "*I* bear it! Couldn't you?"

"Never marrying?"

"Don't you know how much easier that is for a man? Don't you understand—don't you see——" Then, without warning and almost to his horror, for he had never seen her weep, she dropped down upon a sofa and burst into tears. "Don't you know," she sobbed, "don't you know that for a woman it's the same as suicide?"

He sat beside her and took her hand; but she jerked it away. "Let me alone!" she cried. "I told you to go! I want to be left by myself."

In high distress he rubbed his forehead. "Look here," he said. "This is terrible; I've never seen you like this and never dreamed you could be. What's the matter?"

"Nothing, I tell you, if you'll just go!"

"But there *is* something the matter," he insisted thoughtfully. "Your nerves are probably to blame and you oughtn't to let them get unstrung like this. You ought to——"

But, crying out, she interrupted him. "Ah! Will you please go back to your club before you tell me to see a nerve specialist?"

"All right; if you want to be let alone, I'll go." And with that, he rose and went decisively toward the door; but paused before he reached it. "You knew that when one girl asks a man not to let himself be carried away by another girl he's likely to think her merely jealous, didn't you?"

"Oh, glory!" Claire groaned. "I told you I took that risk knowingly."

"It's a long time—a long, long time"—he said, and his voice had become a little tremulous;—"It's a long, long time since you cared to have me in love with you. But you take enough interest in me now for myself to risk anything I might think of you."

"What?" she said in a low voice; then she lifted her head from between her two hands where it had been drooping; and with wet, wide eyes, she stared at him. "What?" she repeated more loudly; and a third time she said the word, louder still. "*What?*"

He came and stood before her. "You care enough for me on my own account to take that risk. How much more do you expect to care for anybody?"

Startled, disturbed to the depths of her being,

wretched, yet vaguely illumined by what at first seemed a mirage of happiness, she rose and moved as though to put a greater distance between them; but after one step away, she halted—she put a gentle and trembling hand softly upon his shoulder.

"I don't know," she said uncertainly. "I don't think I ever could know. Do you think it's enough, dear?"

XXVII

AT ABOUT twelve o'clock on the night before her wedding, Claire came into her room, and, after locking the door, went to a chest and took from it a large oblong case of stamped brown leather. She set it upon a chair beside the chest; then, after a moment of frowning, sank down upon the floor beside the chair and opened the leathern case. It contained various objects, now worthless, and she took them out, one by one, and dropped them into a waste-basket that stood beside the chest.

There were some packets of letters, tied with narrow ribbons; there were a few withered flowers, singly and in little clumps, and there were ribbons that had been tied about bouquets of orchids, of roses, of violets; there were college pins, scarf pins, a green silk handkerchief, a club hat-band, and sheafs of photographs. Most of the photographs were of the heads of young gentlemen; but some were of groups of boys and girls together; and in most of these a younger Claire appeared. There were "snapshots"

of her with girls and boys in sail-boats, in motor-boats, or on beaches or rocks by the sea; and in a number of them she was seen with the same boy always beside her. Later pictures showed another boy occupying this favoured place; and in others other boys were seen there. Then there were little photographs taken abroad; and in several of these a young Italian cavalry officer was a romantic figure. Claire solemnly threw him into the waste-basket along with the rest.

At last the leathern chest was cleared of everything except a single photograph and a foreign envelope of thin bluish paper. She brought forth the photograph and looked at it long and intently; it was not a portrait; it was a landscape, singular and beautiful—a long ledge of cliff whereon were gardens and walled villas and Greek ruins and an old Mediterranean town, with a snow-capped volcano rising beyond and the sea washing the foot of the cliff. This photograph did not share the fate of the others; she replaced it gently in the case, and then, with fingers that moved slowly and gently, as in some reverent ceremony, she brought forth the bluish envelope and took from it two sheets of paper. One of these was thin and bluish, like the envelope; it was the conclusion of a letter the

previous pages of which had been lost, or destroyed; and the other sheet showed a writing in faded ink by a different hand.

Claire read the fragment of the letter first; she had read it often and often before. Part of the sentence at the top of the page was missing, having been written upon one of the lost sheets; and what she read began abruptly:

"Therefore I thought you might care to have the verses. His sister is anxious that I should send them to you and she speaks often and warmly of her gratitude to you. Please never doubt that you did the kindest and best thing; it is she who asks me to tell you that. I have made a copy of the verses for her, and the enclosure is the original, just as she found it among his effects. He had a fancy for writing in Elizabethan forms sometimes, though he laughed at his use of them, himself, and said he had no doubt he used them incorrectly. I thought them charming, and it seemed to me he had a distinct gift that way. He had not shown these that I send you to anyone—not even to his sister—nor had he spoken of them at all; but we both perceived that the reference was to you. My surmise is that they were written here at Raona, probably soon after your departure—or,

even, perhaps, a little before—and I hope that they and my sorrowful news may not make your remembrance of our beautiful old cliff too sad a one for you to return to us some day. For my own part, my heart is heavy just now, dear Miss Ambler, and I fear yours will be. We shall not look upon his like again—yet Raona stands here forever and waits your sight of it once more."

She put the writing back into the bluish envelope as gently and slowly as she had brought it forth; then she took up the other sheet and read the verses, as she had read them so many, many times before.

"O, Ladye, scorn mee!
Ladye, let mee be
Contente wyth lyfe or death,
Soe I may goe forth wyllinglye
When that the thread He sonderethe.

"O, Ladye scorn mee,
Gayze on mee mockynglye,
Be kynde and passe mee bye!
Suffere mee not to love thee, Ladye,
Lest I so hayte to die!"

She read slowly, her head bent far over the faded writing, and that fair and charming head of hers was bowed low indeed when she had finished. Her hands, rising to meet it, held the sheet of paper in them so that the writing came against her cheek. "Ah, good-bye—good-bye—good-bye!" she whispered brokenly.

She would never read either the letter or the quaint little poem again; or take them again from the leathern case where she replaced them; but she would always know they were there, and so, finally, in spite of that dutiful farewell whisper of hers, it was not quite good-bye.

XXVIII

THE church was not a large one, and the decorously expectant wedding-guests filled it comfortably. A soprano voice had sung nobly from a gallery, long white ribbons had been drawn, and now the organ palpitated profoundly into every ear a majestic vamping. Through a door just opened at the left of the altar, the clergyman in his gown could be seen, and, behind him, the bridegroom and his supporting comrade, composing themselves for the imminent confrontation and erasing from their countenances every token of either emotion or intelligence. All that they allowed to remain visible was accurate tailoring accompanied by the pallor of stage-fright.

The organ developed the heralding signal of the great nuptial approach; the air of the interior trembled to those bars of music so familiar that they seem to invest their composer, not in his chosen solemn mantle, but in the mocking garb of a come-

dian. To these helplessly satirical measures, the clergyman slowly advanced, followed obscurely by the two sartorial vacancies, while from the rear, dressed as twins, eight embarrassingly self-conscious gentlemen were seen to be approaching rhythmically. After them, eight lovely young women, all in heliotrope and as rhythmic and self-conscious as the eight gentlemen twins, though more becomingly so, passed through stained shafts of light from a pointed window, seeming to float dazzlingly in many colours for a moment before they turned to heliotrope again and paced slowly to their appointed stations.

Then the bride came down the aisle, alone. She walked with her head a little advanced but her face uplifted; and about her grave and tender eyes, and upon her lips, there appeared the faintest foreshadowings of an ineffable smile. Through the fine lace of her veil, there were glints of her fair hair like gold seen in a mist: never had she been so graceful; never had she looked so lovely. And when she passed through the coloured light of the great window, and her bridal white became a drifting rosiness in aureoles of amber and softest blue, a breathed "*Ah!*" of pleasure was multitudinous upon the air. For she seemed then just such a glimpsed vision of angelic beauty, wistful yet

serene, as a devout eye attuned to miracles should have beheld in that place.

She suspected this, herself, for she had seen the bridesmaids passing through that light before her. "I hope it's doing as well by me," she thought. "With this beautiful cream-white it ought to do even a lot better. Thank heaven everything's all right so far! I sha'n't begin to let my smile be more definite just yet—not till I reach the third pew from the end—and I mustn't forget to turn my head to the right and let a gentle little corner of the smile go to poor Mother after I've given Walter that look. He's there, waiting, of course; I'll be able to see him in a moment, poor thing! I'm getting married to him and this is my wedding—my *wedding!* It doesn't seem to be that. Why don't I realize it? How on earth does it happen? How does it come to be my wedding—if it really *is!* Am I in love with him? Is it because of that? Was it the contagion, after all? *Am* I getting married because 'all the rest' were getting married? What *is* my reason for it? Have I just been *crazy?* Good heavens, *is* it happening *now?*" And that "double" sense of hers was never more strongly with her than then, as she came down the aisle to be wedded. As audience, she saw herself distractedly asking these belated

questions and at the same time stage-directing her every movement and expression. But at the third pew from the front, where she intended to look up and seem to become happily conscious of Walter, then to smile exquisitely upon him, there was a moment when the audience within her, and the stage-director, and the actress as well, disappeared.

Walter should have advanced a step to meet her and take her hand; but he did not move. He stood stock-still; and, though he appeared to be looking at her, she saw that he was but dimly aware of her. His eyes were glassy and he trembled from head to foot; she perceived that he was almost helpless, dazed with stage-fright. And at that, a quick emotion rose within her: she was filled with pity, with tenderness and with amusement.

She put out her hand to him, and as he took it gingerly, she grasped his unnerved fingers strongly, and from her bright eyes gave him, not the look she had intended and rehearsed, but one more truly eloquent, wholly impulsive and impromptu.

"You dear goose!" it said so clearly that he understood it completely. "What's the matter with you? I'm here to see you through this, don't you understand? I'll see you through it all right, and I'll

see you through everything—*everything*—all right. That's what I'm here for. Don't you *see?*"

He did see: colour came into his stricken cheeks; something of his usual manliness returned to him, and, as he moved forward with her to the altar, his eyes became human again in the look of passionate gratitude he gave her.

She was uplifted with the happiness of a great reassurance; once more she knew that she had forgotten herself and remembered him.

THE END