

THE SPOILS OF
POYNTON

by

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I

MRS. GERETH had said she would go with the rest to church, but suddenly it seemed to her she shouldn't be able to wait even till church-time for relief: breakfast was at Waterbath a punctual meal and she had still nearly an hour on her hands. Knowing the church to be near she prepared in her room for the little rural walk, and on her way down again, passing through corridors and observing imbecilities of decoration, the aesthetic misery of the big commodious house, she felt a return of the tide of last night's irritation, a renewal of everything she could secretly suffer from ugliness and stupidity. Why did she consent to such contacts? why did she so rashly expose herself? She had had, heaven knew, her reasons, but the whole experience was to be sharper than she had feared. To get away from it and out into the air, into the presence of sky and trees, flowers and birds, was a necessity of every nerve. The flowers at Waterbath would probably go wrong in colour and the nightingales sing out of tune; but she remembered to have heard the place described as possessing those advantages that are usually spoken of as natural. There were advantages enough it clearly didn't possess. It was hard for her to believe a woman could look presentable who had been kept awake for hours by the wall-paper in her room; yet none the less, as she rustled in her fresh widow's weeds across the hall, she was sustained by the consciousness, which always added to the unction of her social Sundays, that she was, as usual, the only person in the house incapable of wearing in her preparation the horrible stamp of the same exceptional smartness that would be conspicuous in a grocer's wife. She would rather have perished than have looked *en-dimanchée*.

She was fortunately not challenged, the hall being empty of the other women, who were engaged precisely in arraying themselves to that dire end. Once in the grounds she recognised that, with a site, a view, that struck the note, set an example to all inmates, Waterbath ought to have been charming. How she herself, with such elements to handle, would have taken the fine hint of nature! Suddenly, at the turn of a walk, she came on a member of the party, a young lady seated on a bench in deep and lonely meditation. She had observed the girl at dinner and afterwards: she was always looking at girls with reference, apprehensive or speculative, to her son. Deep in her heart was a conviction that Owen would in spite of all her spells marry at last a frump; and this from no evidence she could have represented as adequate, but simply from her deep uneasiness, her belief that such a special sensibility as her own could have been inflicted on a woman only as a source of anguish. It would be her fate,

bearded me in my den. ‘What won’t a mother do, you know?’—that was one of the things she said. What wouldn’t a mother do indeed? I thought I had sufficiently shown her what! She tried to break me down by an appeal to my good nature, as she called it, and from the moment she opened on *you*, from the moment she denounced Owen’s falsity, I was as good-natured as she could wish. I understood it as a plea for mere mercy—because you and he between you were killing her child. Of course I was delighted that Mona should be killed, but I was studiously kind to Mrs. Brigstock. At the same time I was honest, I didn’t pretend to anything I couldn’t feel. I asked her why the marriage hadn’t taken place months ago, when Owen was perfectly ready; and I showed her how completely that fatuous mistake on Mona’s part cleared his responsibility. It was she who had killed him—it was she who had destroyed his affection, his illusions. Did she want him now when he was estranged, when he was disgusted, when he had a sore grievance? She reminded me that Mona had a sore grievance too, but admitted she hadn’t come to me to speak of that. What she had come for was not to get the old things back, but simply to get Owen. What she wanted was that I would, in simple pity, see fair play. Owen had been awfully bedevilled—she didn’t call it that, she called it ‘mised ’; but it was simply you who had bedevilled him. He would be all right still if I would only see you well out of the way. She asked me point-blank if it was possible I could want him to marry you.”

Fleda had listened in unbearable pain and growing terror, as if her companion, stone by stone, were piling some fatal mass upon her breast. She had the sense of being buried alive, smothered in the mere expansion of another will; and now there was but one gap left to the air. A single word, she felt, might close it, and with the question that came to her lips as Mrs. Gereth paused she seemed to herself to ask, in cold dread, for her doom. “What did you say to that?” she gasped.

“I was embarrassed, for I saw my danger—the danger of her going home and saying to Mona that I was backing you up. It had been a bliss to learn that Owen had really turned to you, but my joy didn’t put me off my guard. I reflected intensely a few seconds; then I saw my issue.”

“Your issue?” Fleda echoed.

“I remembered how you had tied my hands about saying a word to Owen.”

Fleda wondered. “And did you remember the little letter that, with your hands tied, you still succeeded in writing him?”

“Perfectly; my little letter was a model of reticence. What I remembered was all that in those few words I forbade myself to say. I had been an angel of delicacy—I had effaced myself like a saint. It wasn’t for me to have done all that and then figure to such a woman as having done the opposite. Besides, it was none of her business.”

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"Is that what you said to her?" the girl asked.

"I said to her that her question revealed a total misconception of the nature of my present relations with my son. I said to her that I had no relations with him at all and that nothing had passed between us for months. I said to her that my hands were spotlessly clean of any attempt to make up to you. I said to her that I had taken from Poynton what I had a right to take, but had done nothing else in the world. I was determined that since I had bitten my tongue off to oblige you I would at least have the righteousness that my sacrifice gave me."

"And was Mrs. Brigstock satisfied with your answer?"

"She was visibly relieved."

"It was fortunate for you," said Fleda, "that she's apparently not aware of the manner in which, almost under her nose, you advertised me to him at Poynton."

Mrs. Gereth appeared to recall that scene; she smiled with a serenity remarkably effective as showing how cheerfully used she had grown to invidious allusions to it. "How should she be aware of it?"

"She would if Owen had described your outbreak to Mona."

"Yes, but he didn't describe it. All his instinct was to conceal it from Mona. He wasn't conscious, but he was already in love with you!" Mrs. Gereth declared.

Fleda shook her head wearily. "No—I was only in love with *him!*"

Here was a faint illumination with which Mrs. Gereth instantly mingled her fire. "You dear old wretch!" she exclaimed; and she again, with ferocity, embraced her young friend.

Fleda submitted like a sick animal: she would submit to everything now. "Then what further passed?"

"Only that she left me thinking she had got something."

"And what had she got?"

"Nothing but her luncheon. But *I* got every.

"Everything?" Fleda quavered.

Mrs. Gereth, struck apparently by something in her tone, looked at her from a tremendous height. "Don't fail me now!"

It sounded so like a menace that, with a full divination at last, the poor girl fell weakly into a chair. "What on earth have you done?"

Mrs. Gereth stood there in all the glory of a great stroke. "I've settled you." She filled the room, to Fleda's scared vision, with the glare of her magnificence. "I've sent everything back."

"Everything?" Fleda wailed.

"To the smallest snuff-box. The last load went yesterday. The same people did it. Poor little Ricks is empty." Then as if, for a crowning splendour, to check all deprecation, "They're yours, you goose!" the wonderful woman concluded, holding up her handsome head and rubbing her white hands. But there were tears none the less in her deep eyes.

XVIII

FLEDA was slow to take in the announcement, but when she had done so she felt it to be more than her cup of bitterness would hold. Her bitterness was her anxiety, the taste of which suddenly sickened her. What had she on the spot become but a dire traitress to her friend? The treachery increased with the view of the friend's motive, a motive splendid as a tribute to her value. Mrs. Gereth had wished to make sure of her and had reasoned that there would be no such way as by a large appeal to her honour. If it be true, as men have declared, that the sense of honour is weak in women, some of the bearings of this stroke might have thrown a light on the question. What was now at all events put before Fleda was that she had been made sure of, since the greatness of the surrender imposed an obligation as great. There was an expression she had heard used by young men with whom she danced: the only word to fit Mrs. Gereth's intention was that Mrs. Gereth had designed to "fetch" her. It was a calculated, it was a crushing bribe; it looked her in the eyes and said awfully: "That's what I do for you!" What Fleda was to do in return required no pointing out. The sense at present of how little she had done it made her almost cry out with pain; but her first endeavour in face of the fact was to keep such a cry from reaching her companion. How little she had done it Mrs. Gereth didn't yet know, and possibly there would be still some way of turning round before the discovery. On her own side too Fleda had almost made one: she had known she was wanted, but she had not after all conceived how magnificently much. She had been treated by her friend's act as a conscious prize, but her value consisted all in the power the act itself imputed to her. As high bold diplomacy it dazzled and carried her off her feet. She admired the noble risk of it, a risk Mrs. Gereth had faced for the utterly poor creature the girl now felt herself. The change it instantly wrought in her was moreover extraordinary: it transformed at a touch her feeling on the subject of concessions. A few weeks earlier she had jumped at the duty of pleading for them, practically quarrelling with the lady of Ricks for her refusal to restore what she had taken. She had been sore with the wrong to Owen, she had bled with the wounds of Poynton; now, however, as she heard of the replenishment of the void that had so haunted her she came as near sounding an alarm as if from the deck of a ship she had seen a person she loved jump into the sea. Mrs. Gereth had become in a flash the victim; poor little Ricks had yielded up its treasure in a night. If Fleda's present view of the "spoils" had taken precipitate form the form would have been a frantic command. It was indeed for mere want of breath she didn't shout "Oh stop them—it's no use; bring them back—it's too late!" And what most kept her breathless

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was her companion's very grandeur. Fleda distinguished as never before the purity of the passion concerned; it made Mrs. Gereth august and almost sublime. It was absolutely unselfish—she cared nothing for mere possession. She thought solely and incorruptibly of what was best for the objects themselves; she had surrendered them to the presumptive care of the one person of her acquaintance who felt about them as she felt herself and whose long lease of the future would be the nearest approach that could be compassed to committing them to a museum. Now it was indeed that Fleda knew what rested on her; now it was also that she measured as for the first time her friend's notion of the natural influence of a grand "haul." Mrs. Gereth had risen to the idea of blowing away the last doubt of what her young charge would gain, of making good still more than she was obliged to make it the promise of weeks before. It was one thing for the girl to have learnt that in a certain event restitution would be made; it was another for her to see the condition, with a noble trust, treated in advance as performed, and to know she should have only to open a door to find every old piece in every old corner. To have played such a card would be thus, for so grand a gambler, practically to have won the game. Fleda had certainly to recognise that, so far as the theory of the matter went, the game had been won. Oh she had been made sure of!

She couldn't, however, succeed for so very many minutes in putting off her exposure. "Why didn't you wait, dearest? Ah why didn't you wait?"—if that inconsequent appeal kept rising to her lips to be cut short before it was spoken, this was only because at first the humility of gratitude helped her to gain time, enabled her to present herself very honestly as too overcome to be clear. She kissed her companion's hands, she did homage at her feet, she murmured soft snatches of praise, and yet in the midst of it all was conscious that what she really showed most was the dark despair at her heart. She saw the poor woman's glimpse of this strange reserve suddenly widen, heard the quick chill of her voice pierce through the false courage of endearments. "Do you mean to tell me at such an hour as this that you've really lost him?"

The tone of the question made the idea a possibility for which Fleda had nothing from this moment but terror. "I don't know, Mrs. Gereth; how can I say?" she asked. "I've not seen him for so long; as I told you just now, I don't even know where he is. That's by no fault of his," she hurried on: "he would have been with me every day if I had consented. But I made him understand, the last time, that I'll receive him again only when he's able to show me his release as quite signed and sealed. Oh he can't yet, don't you see?—and that's why he hasn't been back. It's far better than his coming only that we should both be miserable. When he does come he'll be in a better position. He'll be tremendously moved by the wonderful thing you've done. I know you wish me to feel you've done it as much for

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me as for Owen, but your having done it for me is just what will delight him most! When he hears of it," said Fleda in panting optimism, "when he hears of it—!" There indeed, regretting her advance and failing of every confidence, she quite broke down. She was wholly powerless to say what Owen would do when he heard of it. "I don't know what he won't make of you and how he won't hug you!" she had to content herself with meanly declaring. She had drawn her terrible dupe and judge to a sofa with a vague instinct, of pacifying her and still, after all, gaining time; but it was a position in which that extraordinary character, portentously patient again during this demonstration, looked far from inviting a "hug." Fleda found herself tricking out the situation with artificial flowers, trying to talk even herself into the fancy that Owen, whose name she now made simple and sweet, might come in upon them at any moment. She felt an immense need to be understood and justified; she abjectly averted her face from all she might have to be forgiven. She pressed on her hostess's arm as if to keep her quiet till she should really know, and then, after a minute, she poured out the clear essence of what in happier days had been her "secret." "You mustn't think I don't adore him when I've told him so to his face. I love him so that I'd die for him—I love him so that it's horrible. Don't look at me therefore as if I hadn't; been kind, as if I hadn't been as tender as if he were dying and my tenderness were what would save him. Look at me as if you believe me, as if you feel what I've been through. Darling Mrs. Gereth, I could kiss the ground he walks on. I haven't a rag of pride; I used to have, but it's gone. I used to have a secret, but every one knows it now, and any one who looks at me can say, I think, what's the matter with me. It's not so very fine, my secret, and the less one really says about it the better; but I want you to have it from me because I was stiff before. I want you to see for yourself that I've been, brought as low as a girl can very well be. It serves me right," Fleda laughed, "if I was ever proud and horrid to you! I don't know what you wanted me, in those days at Ricks, to do, but I don't think you can have wanted much more than what I've done. The other day at Maggie's I did things that made me afterwards think of you! I don't know what girls may do; but if he doesn't know that there isn't an inch of me that isn't his—!" Fleda sighed as if she couldn't express it; she piled it up, as she would have said; holding Mrs. Gereth with dilated eyes she seemed to sound her for the effect of these professions. "It's idiotic," she wearily smiled; "it's so strange that I'm almost angry for it, and the strangest part of all is that it isn't even happiness. It's anguish—it was from the first; from the first there was a bitterness and a dread. But I owe you every word of the truth. You don't do him justice either; he's a dear, I assure you he's a dear: I'd trust him to the last breath. I don't think you really know him. He's ever so much cleverer than he makes any show of; he's remarkable in his own shy way. You told me at Ricks that you wanted me to let

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myself go, and I've 'gone' quite far enough to discover as much as that, as well as all sorts of other delightful things about him. You'll tell me I make myself out worse than I am," said the girl, feeling more and more in her companion's attitude a quality that treated her speech as a desperate rignmarole and even perhaps as a piece of cold immodesty. She wanted to make herself out "bad"—it was a part of her justification; but it suddenly occurred to her that such a picture of her extravagance imputed a want of gallantry to the young man. "I don't care for anything you think," she declared, "because Owen, don't you know? sees me as I am. He's so kind that it makes up for everything!"

This attempt at gaiety was futile; the silence with which for a minute her great swindled benefactress greeted her troubled plea brought home to her afresh that she was on the bare defensive. "Is it a part of his kindness never to come near you?" Mrs. Gereth enquired at last. "Is it a part of his kindness to leave you without an inkling of where he is?" She rose again from where Fleda had kept her down; she seemed to tower there in the majesty of her gathered wrong. "Is it a part of his kindness that after I've toiled as I've done for six days, and with my own weak hands, which I haven't spared, to denude myself, in your interest, to that point that I've nothing left, as I may say, but what I have on my back—is it a part of his kindness that you're not even able to produce him for me?"

There was a high contempt in this which was for Owen quite as much, and in the light of which Fleda felt that her effort at plausibility had been mere grovelling. She rose from the sofa with an humiliated sense of rising from ineffectual knees. That discomfort, however, lived but an instant: it was swept away in a rush of loyalty to the absent. She herself could bear his mother's scorn, but to avert it from all *his* decency she broke out with a quickness that was like the raising of an arm. "Don't blame him—don't blame him: he'd do anything on earth for me! It was I," said Fleda eagerly, "who sent him back to her. I made him go, I pushed him out of the house. I declined to have anything to say to him except on another footing."

Mrs. Gereth stared as at some gross material ravage. "Another footing? What other footing?"

"The one I've already made so clear to you: my having it from her in black and white, as you may say, that she freely gives him up."

"Then you think he lies when he tells you he has recovered his liberty?"

Fleda failed of presence of mind a moment; after which she exclaimed with a certain hard pride: "He's enough in love with me for anything!"

"For anything apparently save to act like a man and impose his reason and his will on your incredible folly. For anything save to put an end, as any man worthy of the name would have put it, to your systematic, to your idiotic perversity. What are you, after all, my

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dear, I should like to know, that a gentleman who offers you what Owen offers should have to meet such wonderful exactions, to take such extraordinary precautions about your sweet little scruples?" Her resentment rose to a high insolence which Fleda took full in the face and which, for the moment at least, had the horrible force to present to her vengefully a showy side of the truth. It gave her a blinding glimpse of lost alternatives. "I don't know what to think of him," Mrs. Gereth went on; "I don't know what to call him: I'm so ashamed of him that I can scarcely speak of him even to *you*. But indeed I'm so ashamed of you both together that I scarcely know in common decency where to look." She paused to give Fleda the full benefit of this harsh statement; then she exclaimed with the very best of her coarseness: "Any one but a jackass would have tucked you under his arm and marched you off to the Registrar!"

Fleda wondered; with her free imagination she could wonder even while her cheek stung from a slap. "To the Registrar?"

"That would have been the sane sound immediate course to adopt. With a grain of gumption you'd both instantly have felt it. *I* should have found a way to take you, you know, if I had been what Owen's supposed to be. *I* should have got the business over first—then the rest could come when you liked! Good God, girl, your place was to stand before me, as a woman honestly married. One doesn't know what one has hold of in touching you, and you must excuse my saying that you're literally unpleasant to me to meet you as you are. Then at least we could have talked, and Owen, if he had the ghost of a sense of humour, could have snapped his fingers at your refinements."

This stirring speech affected our young lady as if it had been the shake of a tambourine borne toward her from a gipsy dance: her head seemed to go round and she felt a sudden passion in her feet. The thrill, however, was but meagrely expressed in the flatness with which she heard herself presently say: "I'll go to the Registrar now."

"Now?" Magnificent was the sound Mrs. Gereth threw into this monosyllable. "And pray who's to take you?" Fleda gave a colourless smile, and her companion continued: "Do you literally mean that you can't put your hand upon him?" Fleda's sick grimace appeared to irritate her; she made a short imperious gesture. "Find him for me, you fool—*find* him for me!"

"What do you want of him," Fleda dismally asked—"feeling as you do to both of us?"

"Never mind how I feel, and never mind what I say when I'm furious!" Mrs. Gereth still more incisively added. "Of course I cling to you, you wretches, or I shouldn't suffer as I do. What I want of him is to see that he takes you; what I want of him is to go with you myself to the place." She looked round the room as if, in feverish haste, for a mantle to catch up; she bustled to the window as if to spy out a cab: she would allow half an hour for the job. Already in her

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bonnet, she had snatched from the sofa a garment for the street: she jerked it on as she came back. "Find him, find him," she repeated; "come straight out with me to try at least and get *at* him!"

"How can I get *at* him? He'll come when he's ready," our young woman quavered.

Mrs. Gereth turned on her sharply. "Ready for what? Ready to see me ruined without a reason or a reward?"

Fleda could at first say nothing; the worst of it all was the something still unspoken between them. Neither of them dared utter it, but the influence of it was in the girl's tone when she returned at last with great gentleness: "Don't be cruel to me—I'm very unhappy." The words produced a visible impression on Mrs. Gereth, who held her face averted and sent off through the window a gaze that kept pace with the long caravan of her treasures. Fleda knew she was watching it wind up the avenue of Poynton—Fleda participated indeed fully in the vision; so that after a little the most consoling thing seemed to her to add: "I don't see why in the world you take so for granted that he's, as you say, 'lost.'"

Mrs. Gereth continued to stare out of the window, and her stillness denoted some success in controlling herself. "If he's not lost why are you unhappy?"

"I'm unhappy because I torment you and you don't understand me."

"No, Fleda, I don't understand you," said Mrs. Gereth, finally facing her again. "I don't understand you at all, and it's as if you and Owen were of quite another race and another flesh. You make me feel very old-fashioned and simple and bad. But you must take me as I am, since you take so much else with me!" She spoke now with the drop of her resentment, with a dry and weary calm. "It would have been better for me if I had never known you," she pursued, "and certainly better if I hadn't taken such an extraordinary fancy to you. But that too was inevitable: everything, I suppose, is inevitable. It was all my own doing—you didn't run after me: I pounced on you and caught you up. You're a stiff little beggar in spite of your pretty manners: yes, you're hideously misleading. I hope you feel how handsome it is of me to recognise the independence of your character. It was your clever sympathy that did it—your beautiful feeling for those accursed vanities. You were sharper about them than any one I had ever known, and that was a thing I simply couldn't resist. Well," the poor lady concluded after a pause, "you see where it has landed us!"

"If you'll go for him yourself I'll wait here," said Fleda.

Mrs. Gereth, holding her mantle together, appeared for a while to consider. "To his club, do you mean?"

"Isn't it there, when he's in town, that he has a room? He has at present no other London address," Fleda said. "It's there one writes to him."

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"How do *I* know, with my wretched relations with him?" Mrs. Gereth cried.

"Mine have not been quite so bad as that," Fleda desperately smiled. Then she added: "His silence, *her* silence, our hearing nothing at all—what are these but the very things on which, at Poynton and at Ricks, you rested your assurance that everything is at an end between them?"

Mrs. Gereth looked dark and void. "Yes, but I hadn't heard from you then that you could invent nothing better than, as you call it, to send him back to her."

"Ah but on the other hand"—the girl sprung to this—"you've learned from them what you didn't know, you've learned by Mrs. Brigstock's visit that he cares for me." She found herself in the position of availing herself of optimistic arguments that she formerly had repudiated; her refutation of her companion had completely changed its ground. A fever of ingenuity had started to burn in her, though she was painfully conscious, on behalf of her success, that it was visible as fever. She could herself see the reflexion of it gleam in her critic's sombre eyes.

"You plunge me in stupefaction," that personage answered, "and at the same time you terrify me. Your account of Owen's inconceivable, and yet I don't know what to hold on by. He cares for you, it does appear, and yet in the same breath you tell me that nothing is more possible than that he's spending these days at Waterbath. Pardon me if I'm so dull as not to see my way in such darkness. If he's at Waterbath he doesn't care for you. If he cares for you he's not at Waterbath."

"Then where is he?" poor Fleda helplessly wailed. She caught herself up, however; she would do her best to be brave and clear. Before Mrs. Gereth could reply, with due obviousness, that this was a question for her not to ask but to answer, she found an air of assurance to say: "You simplify far too much. You always did and you always will. The tangle of life is much more intricate than you've ever, I think, felt it to be. You slash into it," cried Fleda finely, "with a great pair of shears; you nip at it as if you were one of the Fates! If Owen's at Waterbath he's there to wind everything up."

His mother shook her head with slow austerity. "You don't believe a word you're saying. I've frightened you, as you've frightened me: you're whistling in the dark to keep up our courage. I do simplify, doubtless, if to simplify is to fail to comprehend the inanity of a passion that bewilders a young blockhead with bugaboo barriers, with hideous and monstrous sacrifices. I can only repeat that you're beyond me. Your perversity's a thing to howl over. However," the poor woman continued with a break in her voice, a long hesitation and then the dry triumph of her will, "I'll never mention it to you again! Owen I can just make out; for Owen is a blockhead. Owen's a blockhead," she repeated with a quiet tragic finality, looking

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straight into Fleda's eyes. "I don't know why you dress up so the fact that he's disgustingly weak."

Fleda at last, before her companion's, lowered her look. Because I love him. It's because he's weak that he needs me," she added.

"That was why his father, whom he exactly resembles, needed *me*. And I didn't fail his father," said Mrs. Gereth. She gave her visitor a moment to appreciate the remark; after which she pursued: "Mona Brigstock isn't weak. She's stronger than you!"

"I never thought she was weak," Fleda answered. She looked vaguely round the room with a new purpose: she had lost sight of her umbrella.

"I did tell you to let yourself go, but it's clear enough that you really haven't," Mrs. Gereth declared. "If Mona has got him—"

Fleda had accomplished her search; her hostess paused. "If Mona has got him?" the girl panted, tightening the umbrella.

"Well," said Mrs. Gereth profoundly, "it will be dear enough that Mona *has*."

"Has let herself go?"

"Has let herself go." Mrs. Gereth spoke as if she meant it to the fullest extent of her cynicism and saw it in every detail.

Fleda felt the tone and finished her preparation; then she went and opened the door. "We'll look for him together," she said to her friend, who stood a moment taking in her face. "They may know something about him at the Colonel's."

"We'll go there." Mrs. Gereth had picked up her gloves and her purse. "But the first thing," she went on, "will be to wire to Poynton."

"Why not to Waterbath at once?" Fleda asked.

Her companion wondered. "In *your* name?"

"In my name. I noticed a place at the corner."

While Fleda held the door open Mrs. Gereth drew on her gloves. "Forgive me," she presently said. "Kiss me," she added.

Fleda, on the threshold, kissed her. Then they both went out.

XIX

IN the place at the corner, on the chance of its saving time, Fleda wrote her telegram—wrote it in silence under Mrs. Gereth's eye and then in silence handed it to her. "I send this to Waterbath, on the possibility of your being there, to ask you to come to me." Mrs. Gereth held it a moment, read it more than once; then keeping it, and with her eyes on her companion, seemed to consider. There was the dawn of a kindness in her look; Fleda measured in it, as the reward of complete submission, a slight relaxation of her rigour.

"Wouldn't it perhaps after all be better," she asked, "before do-

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ing this, to see if we can make his whereabouts certain?"

"Why so? It will be always so much done," said Fleda. "Though I'm poor," she added with a smile, "I don't mind the shilling."

"The shilling's *my* shilling," said Mrs. Gereth. Fleda stayed her hand. "No, no—I'm superstitious. To succeed it must be all me!"

"Well, if that will make it succeed!" Mrs. Gereth took back her shilling, but she still kept the telegram. "As he's most probably not there—"

"If he shouldn't be there," Fleda interrupted, "there will be no harm done."

"If he 'shouldn't be' there!" Mrs. Gereth ejaculated. "Heaven help us, how you assume it!"

"I'm only prepared for the worst. The Brigstocks will simply send any telegram on."

"Where will they send it?"

"Presumably to Poynton."

"They'll read it first," said Mrs. Gereth. "Yes, Mona will. She'll open it under the pretext of having it repeated, and then will probably do nothing. She'll keep it as a proof of your immodesty."

"What of that?" asked Fleda.

"You don't mind her seeing it?"

Rather musingly and absently she shook her head. "I don't mind anything."

"Well then, that's all right," said Mrs. Gereth as wanting only to feel she had been irreproachably considerate. After this she was gentler still, yet had another point to clear up. "Why have you given, for a reply, your sister's address?"

"Because if he does come to me he must come to me there. If that telegram goes," said Fleda, "I return to Maggie's to-night."

Her friend seemed to wonder at this. "You won't receive him here with me?"

"No, I won't receive him here with you. Only where I received him last—only there again." As to this Fleda was firm.

But Mrs. Gereth had obviously now had some practice in following queer movements prompted by queer feelings. She resigned herself, though she fingered the paper a moment longer. She appeared to hesitate, then brought out: "You couldn't then, if I release you, make your message a little stronger?" Fleda gave her a faint smile. "He'll come if he can."

She met fully what this conveyed; with decision she pushed in the telegram. But she laid her hand quickly on another form and with still greater decision wrote another message. "This from me" she said to Fleda when she had finished: "to catch him possibly at Poynton. Will you read it?"

Fleda turned away. "Thank you."

"It's stronger than yours."

"I don't care"—and the girl moved to the door. Mrs. Gereth,

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having paid for the second missive, rejoined her, and they drove together to Owen's club, where the elder lady alone got out. Fleda, from the hansom, watched through the glass doors her brief conversation with the hall-porter and then met in silence her return with the news that he had not seen Owen for a fortnight and was keeping his letters till called for. These had been the last orders; there were a dozen letters lying there. He had no more information to give, but they would see what they could find at Colonel Gereth's. To any connexion with this enquiry, however, Fleda now roused herself to object, and her friend had indeed to recognise that on second thoughts it couldn't be quite to the taste of either of them to advertise in the remoter reaches of the family that they had forfeited the confidence of the master of Poynton. The letters lying at the club proved effectively that he was not in London, and this was the question that immediately concerned them. Nothing could concern them further till the answers to their telegrams should have had time to arrive. Mrs. Gereth had got back into the cab, and, still at the door of the club, they sat staring at their need of patience. Fleda's eyes rested, in the great hard street, on passing figures that struck her as puppets pulled by strings. After a little the driver challenged them through the hole in the top. "Anywhere in particular, ladies?"

Fleda decided. "Drive to Euston, please."

"You won't wait for what we may hear?" Mrs. Gereth asked.

"Whatever we hear I must go." As the cab went on she added: "But I needn't drag *you* to the station."

Mrs. Gereth had a pause; then "Nonsense!" she sharply replied.

In spite of this sharpness they were now almost equally and almost tremulously mild; though their mildness took mainly the form of an inevitable sense of nothing left to say. It was the unsaid that occupied them—the thing that for more than an hour they had been going round and round without naming it. Much too early for Fleda's train, they encountered at the station a long half-hour to wait. Fleda made no further allusion to Mrs. Gereth's leaving her; their dumbness, with the elapsing minutes, grew to be in itself a reconstituted bond. They slowly paced the great grey platform, and presently Mrs. Gereth took the girl's arm and leaned on it with a hard demand for support. It seemed to Fleda not difficult for each to know of what the other was thinking—to know indeed that they had in common two alternating visions, one of which at moments brought them as by a common impulse to a pause. This was the one that was fixed; the other filled at times the whole space and then was shouldered away. Owen and Mona glared together out of the gloom and disappeared, but the replenishment of Poynton made a shining steady light. The old splendour was there again, the old things were in their places. Our friends looked at them with an equal yearning; face to face on the platform, they counted them in each other's eyes. Fleda had come back to them by a road as strange as the road they

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themselves had followed. The wonder of their great journeys, the prodigy of this second one, was the question that made her occasionally stop. Several times she uttered it, asked how this and that difficulty had been met. Mrs. Gereth replied with pale lucidity—was naturally the person most familiar with the truth that what she undertook was always somehow achieved. To do it was to do it—she had more than one kind of magnificence. She confessed there, audaciously enough, to a sort of arrogance of energy, and Fleda, going on again, her appeal more than answered and her arm rendering service, flushed in her diminished identity with the sense that such a woman was great.

“You do mean literally everything, to the last little miniature on the last little screen?”

“I mean literally everything. Go over them with the catalogue!”

Fleda went over them while they walked again; she had no need of the catalogue. At last she spoke once more. “Even the Maltese cross?”

“Even the Maltese cross. Why not that as well as everything else?—especially as I remembered how you like it.”

Finally, after an interval, the girl exclaimed: “But the mere fatigue of it, the exhaustion of such a feat! I drag you to and fro here while you must be ready to drop.”

“I’m very, very tired.” Mrs. Gereth’s slow head-shake was tragic. “I couldn’t do it again.”

“I doubt if they’d bear it again!”

“That’s another matter: they’d bear it if *I* could. There won’t have been, this time either, a shake or a scratch. But I’m too tired—I very nearly don’t care.”

“You must sit down then till I go,” said Fleda. “We must find a bench.”

“No. I’m tired of them: I’m not tired of you. This is the way for you to feel most how much I rest on you.” Fleda had a compunction, wondering as they continued to stroll whether it was right after all to leave her. She believed however that if the flame might for the moment burn low it was far from dying out; an impression presently confirmed by the way Mrs. Gereth went on: “But one’s fatigue’s nothing. The idea under which one worked kept one up. For you I could—I can still. Nothing will have mattered if she’s not there.”

There was a question that this imposed, but Fleda at first found no voice to utter it: it was the thing that between them, since her arrival, had been so consciously and vividly unsaid. Finally she was able to breathe: “And if she is there—if she’s there already?”

Mrs. Gereth’s rejoinder too hung back; then when it came—from sad eyes as well as from lips barely moved—it was unexpectedly merciful. “It will be very hard.” That was all now, and it was poignantly simple. The train Fleda was to take had drawn up; the girl kissed her as if in farewell. Mrs. Gereth submitted, then after a little

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brought out: "If we *have* lost—!"

"If we have lost?" Fleda repeated as she paused again.

"You'll all the same come abroad with me?"

"It will seem very strange to me if you want me. But whatever you ask, whatever you need, that I will now always do."

"I shall need your company," said Mrs. Gereth. Fleda wondered an instant if this were not practically a demand for penal submission—for a surrender that, in its complete humility, would be a long expiation. But there was none of the latent chill of the vindictive in the sequel. "We can always, as time goes on, talk of them together."

"Of the spoils—?" Fleda had selected a third-class compartment: she stood a moment looking into it and at a fat woman with a basket who had already taken possession. "Always?" she said, turning again to her friend. "Never!" she exclaimed. She got into the carriage and two men with bags and boxes immediately followed, blocking up door and window so long that when she was able to look out again Mrs. Gereth had gone.

XX

THERE came to her at her sister's no telegram in answer to her own: the rest of that day and the whole of the next elapsed without a word either from Owen or from his mother. She was free, however, to her infinite relief, from any direct dealing with suspense, and conscious, to her surprise, of nothing that could show her, or could show Maggie and her brother-in-law, that she was excited. Her excitement was composed of pulses as swift and fine as the revolutions of a spinning top: she supposed she was going round, but went round so fast that she couldn't even feel herself move. Her trouble occupied some quarter of her soul that had closed its doors for the day and shut out even her own sense of it; she might perhaps have heard something if she had pressed her ear to a partition. Instead of that she sat with her patience in a cold still chamber from which she could look out in quite another direction. This was to have achieved an equilibrium to which she couldn't have given a name: indifference, resignation, despair were the terms of a forgotten tongue. The time even seemed not long, for what were the stages of the journey but the very items of Mrs. Gereth's surrender? The detail of that performance, which filled the scene, was what Fleda had now before her eyes. The part of her loss that she could think of was the reconstituted splendour of Poynton. It was the beauty she was most touched by that, in tons, she had lost—the beauty that, charged upon big wagons, had safely crept back to its home. But the loss was a gain to memory, and love; it was to her too at last that, in condonation of her treachery, the spoils had crept back. She greeted them with open arms; she thought of them hour after hour; they made a com-

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pany with which solitude was warm and a picture that, at this crisis, overlaid poor Maggie's scant mahogany. It was really her obliterated passion that had revived, and with it an immense assent to Mrs. Gereth's early judgement of her. She equally, she felt, was of the religion, and like any other of the passionately pious she could worship now even in the desert. Yes, it was all for *her*; far round as she had gone she had been strong enough: her love had gathered them in. She wanted indeed no catalogue to count them over; the array of them, miles away, was complete; each piece, in its turn, was perfect to her; she could have drawn up a catalogue from memory. Thus again she lived with them, and she thought of them without a question of any personal right. That they might have been, that they might still be hers, that they were perhaps already another's, were ideas that had too little to say to her. They were nobody's at all—too proud, unlike base animals and humans, to be reducible to anything so narrow. It was Poynton that was theirs; they had simply recovered their own. The joy of that for them was the source of the strange peace that had descended like a charm.

It was broken on the third day by a telegram from Mrs. Gereth. "Shall be with you at 11.30—don't meet me at station." Fleda turned this over; she was sufficiently expert not to disobey the injunction. She had only an hour to take in its meaning, but that hour was longer than all the previous time. If Maggie had studied her convenience the day Owen came, Maggie was also at the present juncture a miracle of refinement. Increasingly and resentfully mystified, in spite of all reassurance, by the impression that Fleda suffered much more than she gained from the grandeur of the Gereths, she had it at heart to exemplify the perhaps truer distinction of nature that characterised the house of Vetch. She was not, like poor Fleda, at every one's beck, and the announced visitor was to see no more of her than what the arrangement of luncheon might tantalisingly show. Maggie described herself to her sister as intending for a just provocation even the agreement she had had with her husband that he also should keep away. Fleda accordingly awaited alone the subject of so many manoeuvres—a period that was slightly prolonged even after the drawing-room door, at 11.30, was thrown open. Mrs. Gereth stood there with a face that spoke plain, but no sound fell from her till the withdrawal of the maid, whose attention had immediately attached itself to the rearrangement of a window-blind and who seemed, while she bustled at it, to contribute to the pregnant silence; before the duration of which, however, she retreated with a sudden stare.

"He has done it," said Mrs. Gereth, turning her eyes avoidingly but not unperceivingly about her and in spite of herself dropping an opinion upon the few objects in the room. Fleda, on her side, in her silence observed how characteristically she looked at Maggie's possessions before looking at Maggie's sister. The girl understood and

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at first had nothing to say; she was still dumb while their guest selected, after dryly balancing, a seat less distasteful than the one that happened to be nearest. On the sofa near the window the poor woman finally showed what the two last days had done for the age of her face. Her eyes at last met Fleda's. "It's the end."

"They're married?"

"They're married."

Fleda came to the sofa in obedience to the impulse to sit down by her; then paused before her while Mrs. Gereth turned up a dead grey mask. A tired old woman sat there with empty hands in her lap. "I've heard nothing," said Fleda. "No answer came."

"That's the only answer. It's the answer to everything." So Fleda saw; for a minute she looked over her companion's head and far away. "He wasn't at Waterbath. Mrs. Brigstock must have read your telegram and kept it. But mine, the one to Poynton, brought something. 'We are here—what do you want?'" Mrs. Gereth stopped as if with a failure of voice; on which Fleda sank upon the sofa and made a movement to take her hand. It met no response; there could be no attenuation. Fleda waited; they sat facing each other like strangers. "I wanted to go down," Mrs. Gereth presently continued. "Well, I went."

All the girl's effort tended for the time to a single aim—that of taking the thing with outward detachment, speaking of it as having happened to Owen and to his mother and not in any degree to herself. Something at least of this was in the encouraging way she said: "Yesterday morning?"

"Yesterday morning. I saw him."

Fleda hesitated. "Did you see *her*?"

"Thank God, no!"

Fleda laid on her arm a hand of vague comfort, of which Mrs. Gereth took no notice. "You've been capable, just to tell me, of this wretched journey—of this consideration that I don't deserve?"

"We're together, we're together," said Mrs. Gereth. She looked helpless as she sat there, her eyes, unseeingly enough now, on a tall Dutch clock, old but rather poor, that Maggie had had as a wedding-gift and that eked out the bareness of the room.

To Fleda, in the face of the event, it appeared that this was exactly what they were not: the last inch of common ground, the ground of their past intercourse, had fallen from under them. Yet what was still there was the grand style of her companion's treatment of her. Mrs. Gereth couldn't stand upon small questions, couldn't in conduct make small differences. "You're magnificent!" her young friend exclaimed. "There's an extraordinary greatness in your generosity."

"We're together, we're together," Mrs. Gereth lifelessly repeated. "That's all we are now; it's all we have." The words brought to Fleda a sudden vision of the empty little house at Ricks; such a vision might also have been what her companion found in the face of

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the stopped Dutch clock. Yet with this it was clear she would still show no bitterness: she had done with that, had given the last drop to those horrible hours in London. No passion even was left her, and her forbearance only added to the force with which she represented the final vanity of everything.

Fleda was so far from a wish to triumph that she was absolutely ashamed of having anything to say for herself; but there was one thing, all the same, that not to say was impossible. "That he has done it, that he couldn't not do it, shows how right I was." It settled for ever her attitude, and she spoke as if for her own mind; then after a little she added very gently, for Mrs. Gereth's: "That's to say it shows he was bound to her by an obligation that, however much he may have wanted to, he couldn't in any sort of honour break."

Blanched and bleak, Mrs. Gereth looked at her. "What sort of an obligation do you call that? No such obligation exists for an hour between any man and any woman who have hatred on one side. He had ended by hating her, and he hates her now more than ever."

"Did he tell you so?" Fleda asked.

"No. He told me nothing but the great gawk of a fact. I saw him but for three minutes." She was silent again, and Fleda, as before some lurid image of this interview, sat without speaking. "Do you wish to appear as if you don't care?" Mrs. Gereth presently demanded.

"I'm trying not to think of myself."

"Then if you're thinking of Owen how can you *bear* to think?"

Sadly and submissively Fleda shook her head; the slow tears had come into her eyes. "I can't. I don't understand—I don't understand!" she broke out.

"*I* do then." Mrs. Gereth looked hard at the floor. "There was no obligation at the time you saw him last—when you sent him, hating her as he did, back to her."

"If he went," Fleda asked, "doesn't that exactly prove that he recognised one?"

"He recognised rot! You know what I think of him." Fleda knew; she had no wish to provoke a fresh statement. Mrs. Gereth made one—it was her sole faint flicker of passion—to the extent of declaring that he was too abjectly weak to deserve the name of a man. For all Fleda cared!—it was his weakness she loved in him. "He took strange ways of pleasing you!" her friend went on. "There was no obligation till suddenly, the other day, the situation changed."

Fleda wondered. "Suddenly—?"

"It came to Mona's knowledge—I can't tell you how, but it came—that the things I was sending back had begun to arrive at Poynton. I had sent them for you, but it was her I touched." Mrs. Gereth paused; Fleda was too absorbed in her explanation to do anything but take blankly the full cold breath of this. "They were there, and that determined her."

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“Determined her to what?”

“To act, to take means.”

“To take means?” Fleda repeated.

“I can’t tell you what they were, but they were powerful. She knew how,” said Mrs. Gereth.

Fleda received with the same stoicism the quiet immensity of this allusion to the person who had not known how. But it made her think a little, and the thought found utterance, with unconscious irony, in the simple interrogation: “Mona?”

“Why not? She’s a brute.”

“But if he knew that so well, what chance was there in it for her?”

“How can I tell you? How can I talk of such honors? I can only give you, of the situation, what I see. He knew it, yes. But as she couldn’t make him forget it she tried to make him like it. She tried and she succeeded: that’s what she did. She’s after all so much less of a fool than he. And what *else* had he originally liked?” Mrs. Gereth shrugged her shoulders. “She did what you wouldn’t!” Fleda’s face had grown dark with her wonder at the sense of this, but her friend’s empty hands offered no balm to the pain in it. “It was that if it was anything. Nothing else meets the misery of it. Then there was quick work. Before he could turn round he was married.”

Fleda, as if she had been holding her breath, gave the sigh of a listening child. “At that place you spoke of in town?”

“At a Registry-office—like a pair of low atheists.”

The girl considered. “What do people say of that? I mean the ‘world.’”

“Nothing, because nobody knows. They’re to be married on the seventeenth at Waterbath church. If anything else comes out everybody’s a little prepared. It will pass for some stroke of diplomacy, some move in the game, some outwitting of *me*. It’s known there has been a great row with me.”

Fleda was mystified. “People surely know at Poynton,” she objected, “if, as you say, she’s there.”

“She was there, day before yesterday, only for a few hours. She met him in London and went down to see the things.”

Fleda remembered that she had seen them only once. “Did you see them?” she then ventured to ask.

“Everything.”

“Are they right?”

“Quite right. There’s nothing like them,” said Mrs. Gereth. At this her companion took up one of her hands again and kissed it as she had done in London. “Mona went back that night; she was not there yesterday. Owen stayed on,” she added. Fleda stared. “Then she’s not to live there?”

“Rather! But not till after the public marriage.” Mrs. Gereth seemed to muse; then she brought out: “She’ll live there alone.”

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“Alone?”

“She’ll have it to herself.”

“He won’t live with her?”

“Never! But she’s none the less his wife, and you’re not,” said Mrs. Gereth, getting up. “Our only chance is the chance she may die.”

Fleda appeared to measure it: she appreciated her visitor’s magnanimous use of the plural. “Mona won’t die,” she replied.

“Well, *I* shall, thank God! Till then”—and with this, for the first time, Mrs. Gereth put out her hand—“don’t desert me.”

Fleda took her hand, clasping it for a renewal of engagements already taken. She said nothing, but her silence committed her as solemnly as the vow of a nun. The next moment something occurred to her. “I mustn’t put myself in your son’s way, you know.”

Mrs. Gereth gave a laugh of bitterness. “You’re prodigious! But how shall you possibly be more out of it? Owen and I—” She didn’t finish her sentence.

“That’s your great feeling about him,” Fleda said; “but how, after what has happened, can it be his about you?”

Mrs. Gereth waited. “How do you know what has happened? You don’t know what I said to him.”

“Yesterday?”

“Yesterday.”

They looked at each other with a long deep gaze.

Then, as Mrs. Gereth seemed again about to speak, the girl, closing her eyes, made a gesture of strong prohibition. “Don’t tell me!”

“Merciful powers, how you worship him!” Mrs. Gereth wonderingly moaned. It was for Fleda the shake that made the cup overflow. She had a pause, that of the child who takes time to know that he responds to an accident with pain; then, dropping again on the sofa, she broke into tears. They were beyond control, they came in long sobs, which for a moment her friend, almost with an air of indifference, stood hearing and watching. At last Mrs. Gereth too sank down again. Mrs. Gereth soundlessly wearily wept.

XXI

“IT looks just like Waterbath; but, after all, we bore *that* together”: these words formed part of a letter in which, before the seventeenth, Mrs. Gereth, writing from disfigured Ricks, named to Fleda the day on which she would be expected to arrive there on a second visit. “I shan’t for a long time to come,” the missive continued, “be able to receive any one who may *like* it, who would try to smooth it down, and me with it; but there are always things you and I can comfortably hate together, for you’re the only person who comfortably un-

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derstands. You don't understand quite everything, but of all my acquaintance you're far away the least stupid. For action you're no good at all; but action's over, for me, for ever, and you'll have the great merit of knowing when I'm brutally silent what I shall be thinking about. Without setting myself up for your equal I dare say I shall also know what are your own thoughts. Moreover, with nothing else but my four walls, you'll at any rate be a bit of furniture. For that, a little, you know, I've always taken you—quite one of my best finds. So come if possible on the fifteenth."

The position of a scrap of furniture was one that Fleda could conscientiously accept, and she by no means insisted on so high a place in the list. This communication made her easier, if only by its acknowledgement that her friend had something left: it still implied recognition of the principle of property. Something to hate, and to hate "comfortably," was at least not the utter destitution to which, after their last interview, she had helplessly seemed to see the ex-mistress of Poynton go forth. She remembered indeed that in the state in which they first saw it she herself had "liked" the blest refuge of Ricks; and she now wondered if the tact for which she was commended had then operated to make her keep her kindness out of sight. She was at present ashamed of such obliquity and made up her mind that if this happy impression, quenched in the translated spoils, should revive on the spot, she would utter it to her companion without reserve. Yes, she was capable of as much "action" as that: all the more that the spirit of her hostess seemed for the time at least wholly to have failed. The mother's three minutes with the son had been a blow to all talk of travel, and after her woeful hour at Maggie's she had, like some great moaning wounded bird, made her way with wings of anguish back to the nest she knew she should find empty. Fleda, on that dire day, could neither keep her nor give her up; she had pressingly offered to return with her, but Mrs. Gereth, in spite of the theory that their common grief was a bond, had even declined all escort to the station, conscious apparently of something abject in her collapse and almost fiercely eager, as with a personal shame, to be unwatched. All she had said to Fleda was that she would go back to Ricks that night, and the girl had lived for days after with a dreadful image of her position and her misery there. She had had a vision of her now lying prone on some unmade bed, now pacing a bare floor as a lioness deprived of her cubs. There had been moments when her mind's ear was strained to listen for some sound of grief wild enough to be wafted from afar. But the first sound, at the end of a week, had been a note announcing, without reflexions, that the plan of going abroad had been abandoned. "It has come to me indirectly, but with much appearance of truth, that they are going—for an indefinite time. That quite settles it; I shall stay where I am, and as soon as I've turned round again I shall look for you." The second letter had come a week later, and on the fif-

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teenth Fleda was on her way to Ricks.

Her arrival took the form of a surprise very nearly as violent as that of the other time. The elements were different, but the effect, like the other, arrested her on the threshold: she stood there stupefied and delighted at the magic of a passion of which such a picture represented the low-water mark. Wound up but sincere, and passing quickly from room to room, Fleda broke out before she even sat down. "If you turn me out of the house for it, my dear, there isn't a woman in England for whom it wouldn't be a privilege to live here." Mrs. Gereth was as honestly bewildered as she had of old been falsely calm. She looked about at the few sticks that, as she afterwards phrased it, she had gathered in, and then hard at her guest, as to protect herself against a joke all too cruel. The girl's heart gave a leap, for this stare was the sign of an opportunity. Mrs. Gereth was all unwitting; she didn't in the least know what she had done. Therefore as Fleda could tell her, Fleda suddenly became the one who knew most. That counted for the moment as a splendid position; it almost made all the difference. Yet what contradicted it was the vivid presence of the artist's idea. "Where on earth did you put your hand on such beautiful things?"

"Beautiful things?" Mrs. Gereth turned again to the little worn bleached stuffs and the sweet spindle-legs. "They're the wretched things that were here—that stupid starved old woman's."

"The maiden-aunt's, the nicest, the dearest old woman that ever lived? I thought you had got rid of the maiden-aunt."

"She was stored in an empty barn—stuck away for a sale; a matter that, fortunately, I've had neither time nor freedom of mind to arrange. I've simply, in my extremity, fished her out again."

"You've simply, in your extremity, made a delight of her." Fleda took the highest line and the upper hand, and as Mrs. Gereth, challenging her cheerfulness, turned again a lustreless eye over the contents of the place, she broke into a rapture that was unforced, yet that she was conscious of an advantage in being able to feel. She moved, as she had done on the previous occasion, from one piece to another, with looks of recognition and hands that lightly lingered, but she was as feverishly jubilant now as she had of old been anxious and mute. "Ah the little melancholy tender tell-tale things: how can they not speak to you and find a way to your heart? It's not the great chorus of Poynton; but you're not, I'm sure, either so proud or so broken as to be reached by nothing but that. This is a voice so gentle, so human, so feminine—a faint, far-away voice with the little quaver of a heart-break. You've listened to it unawares; for the arrangement and effect of everything—when I compare them with what we found the first day we came down—shows, even if mechanically and disdainfully exercised, your admirable, your infallible hand. It's your extraordinary genius; you make things 'compose' in spite of yourself. You've only to be a day or two in a place with four sticks

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for something to come of it!"

"Then if anything has come of it here, it has come precisely of just four. That's literally, by the inventory, all there are!" said Mrs. Gereth.

"If there were more there would be too many to convey the impression in which half the beauty resides—the impression somehow of something dreamed and missed, something reduced, relinquished, resigned: the poetry, as it were, of something sensibly *gone*." Fleda ingeniously and triumphantly worked it out. "Ah there's something here that will never be in the inventory!"

"Does it happen to be in your power to give it a name?" Mrs. Gereth's face showed the dim dawn of an amusement at finding herself seated at the feet of her pupil.

"I can give it a dozen. It's a kind of fourth dimension. It's a presence, a perfume, a touch. It's a soul, a story, a life. There's ever so much more here than you and I. We're in fact just three!"

"Oh if you count the ghosts—!"

"Of course I count the ghosts, confound you! It seems to me ghosts count double—for what they were and for what they are. Somehow there were no ghosts at Poynton," Fleda went on. "That was the only fault."

Mrs. Gereth, considering, appeared to fall in with this fine humour. "Poynton was too splendidly happy."

"Poynton was too splendidly happy," Fleda promptly echoed.

"But it's cured of that now," her companion added.

"Yes, henceforth there'll be a ghost or two."

Mrs. Gereth thought again: she found her young friend suggestive. "Only *she* won't see them."

"No, 'she' won't see them." Then Fleda said: "What I mean is, for this dear one of ours, that if she had (as I *know* she did; it's in the very touch of the air!) a great accepted pain—"

She had paused an instant, and Mrs. Gereth took her up. "Well, if she had?"

Fleda still hung fire. "Why, it was worse than yours."

Mrs. Gereth debated. "Very likely." Then she too hesitated. "The question is if it was worse than yours."

"Mine?" Fleda looked vague.

"Precisely. Yours."

At this our young lady smiled. "Yes, because it was a disappointment. She had been so sure."

"I see. And you were never sure."

"Never. Besides, I'm happy," said Fleda.

Mrs. Gereth met her eyes a while. "Goose!" she quietly remarked as she turned away. There was a curtness in it; nevertheless it represented a considerable part of the basis of their new life.

On the eighteenth *The Morning Post* had at last its clear message, a brief account of the marriage, from the residence of the

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bride's mother, of Mr. Owen Gereth of Poynton Park to Miss Mona Brigstock of Waterbath. There were two ecclesiastics and six bridesmaids and, as Mrs. Gereth subsequently said, a hundred frumps, as well as a special train from town: the scale of the affair sufficiently showed that the preparations had been in hand for some time back. The happy pair were described as having taken their departure for Mr. Gereth's own seat, famous for its unique collection of artistic curiosities. The newspaper and letters, the fruits of the first London post, had been brought to the mistress of Ricks in the garden; and she lingered there alone a long time after receiving them. Fleda kept at a distance; she knew what must have happened, for from one of the windows she saw her rigid in a chair, her eyes strange and fixed, the newspaper open on the ground and the letters untouched in her lap. Before the morning's end she had disappeared and the rest of that day remained in her room: it recalled to Fleda, who had picked up the newspaper, the day, months before, on which Owen had come down to Poynton to make his engagement known. The hush of the house at least was the same, and the girl's own waiting, her soft wandering, through the hours: there was a difference indeed sufficiently great and of which her companion's absence might in some degree have represented a considerate recognition. That was at any rate the meaning Fleda, devoutly glad to be alone, attached to her opportunity. Mrs. Gereth's sole allusion the next day to the subject of their thoughts has already been mentioned: it was a dazzled glance at the fact that Mona's quiet pace had really never slackened.

Fleda fully assented. "I said of our disembodied friend here that she had suffered in proportion as she had been sure. But that's not always a source of suffering. It's Mona who must have been sure!"

"She was sure of *you!*" Mrs. Gereth returned. But this didn't diminish the satisfaction taken by Fleda in showing how serenely and lucidly she herself could talk.

XXII

HER relation with her wonderful friend had however in becoming a new one begun to shape itself almost wholly on breaches and omissions. Something had dropped out altogether, and the question between them, which time would answer, was whether the change had made them strangers or yokefellows. It was as if at last, for better or worse, they were, in a clearer cruder air, really to know each other. Fleda wondered how Mrs. Gereth had escaped hating her: there were hours when it seemed that such a feat might leave after all a scant margin for future accidents. The thing indeed that now came out in its simplicity was that even in her shrunken state the lady of Ricks was larger than her wrongs. As for the girl herself, she had made up her mind that her feelings had no connexion with the case.

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It was her claim that they had never yet emerged from the seclusion into which, after her friend's visit to her at her sister's, we saw them precipitately retire: if she should suddenly meet them in straggling procession on the road it would be time enough to deal with them. They were all bundled there together, likes with dislikes and memories with fears; and she had for not thinking of them the excellent reason that she was too occupied with the actual. The actual was not that Owen Gereth had seen his necessity where she had pointed it out; it was that his mother's bare spaces demanded all the tapestry the recipient of her bounty could furnish. There were moments during the month that followed when Mrs. Gereth struck her as still older and feebler and as likely to become quite easily amused.

At the end of it, one day, the London paper had another piece of news: "Mr. and Mrs. Owen Gereth, who arrived in town last week, proceed this morning to Paris." They exchanged no word about it till the evening, and none indeed would then have been uttered had not the mistress of Ricks irrelevantly broken out: "I dare say you wonder why I declared the other day with such assurance that he wouldn't live with her. He apparently is living with her."

"Surely it's the only proper thing for him to do."

"They're beyond me—I give it up," said Mrs. Gereth.

"I don't give it up—I never did," Fleda returned.

"Then what do you make of his aversion to her?"

"Oh she has dispelled it."

Mrs. Gereth said nothing for a minute. "You're prodigious in your choice of terms!" she then simply ejaculated.

But Fleda went luminously on; she once more enjoyed her great command of her subject. "I think that when you came to see me at Maggie's you saw too many things, you had too many ideas."

"You had none at all," said Mrs. Gereth. "You were completely bewildered."

"Yes, I didn't quite understand—but I think I understand now. The case is simple and logical enough. She's a person who's upset by failure and who blooms and expands with success. There was something she had set her heart upon, set her teeth about—the house exactly as she had seen it."

"She never saw it at all, she never looked at it!" cried Mrs. Gereth.

"She doesn't look with her eyes; she looks with her ears. In her own way she had taken it in; she knew, she felt when it had been touched. That probably made her take an attitude that was extremely disagreeable. But the attitude lasted only while the reason for it lasted."

"Go on—I can bear it now," said Mrs. Gereth. Her companion had just perceptibly paused.

"I know you can, or I shouldn't dream of speaking. When the pressure was removed she came up again. From the moment the

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house was once more what it had to be her natural charm reasserted itself."

"Her natural charm!"—Mrs. Gereth could barely articulate.

"It's very great; everybody thinks so; there must be something in it. It operated as it had operated before. There's no need of imagining anything very monstrous. Her restored good humour, her splendid beauty and Mr. Owen's impressibility and generosity sufficiently cover the ground. His great bright sun came out!"

"And his great bright passion for another person went in. Your explanation would doubtless be perfect if he didn't love you."

Fleda was silent a little. "What do you know about his 'loving' me?"

"I know what Mrs. Brigstock herself told me."

"You never in your life took her word for any other matter."

"Then won't yours do?" Mrs. Gereth demanded. "Haven't I had it from your own mouth that he cares for you?"

Fleda turned pale, but she faced her companion and smiled. "You confound, Mrs. Gereth. You mix things up. You've only had it from my own mouth that I care for *him!*"

It was doubtless in contradictory allusion to this (which at the time had made her simply drop her head as in a strange vain reverie) that Mrs. Gereth said, a day or two later to her inmate: "Don't think I shall be a bit affected if I'm here to see it when he comes again to make up to you."

"He won't do that," the girl replied. Then she added, smiling: "But if he should be guilty of such bad taste it wouldn't be nice of you not to be disgusted."

"I'm not talking of disgust; I'm talking of its opposite," said Mrs. Gereth: "of any reviving pleasure one might feel in such an exhibition. I shall feel none at all. You may personally take it as you like; but what conceivable good will it do?"

Fleda wondered. "To me, do you mean?"

"Deuce take you, no! To what we don't, you know, by your wish, ever talk about."

"The spoils?" Fleda considered again. "It will do no good of any sort to anything or any one. That's another question I'd rather we shouldn't discuss, please," she gently added.

Mrs. Gereth shrugged her shoulders. "It certainly isn't worth it!"

Something in her manner prompted her companion, with a certain inconsequence, to speak again. "That was partly why I came back to you, you know—that there should be the less possibility of anything painful."

"Painful?" Mrs. Gereth stared. "What pain can I ever feel again?"

"I meant painful to myself," Fleda, with a slight impatience, explained.

"Oh I see." Her friend was silent a minute. "You use sometimes

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such odd expressions. Well, I shall last a little, but I shan't last for ever."

"You'll last quite as long—" But she suddenly dropped.

Mrs. Gereth took her up with a cold smile that seemed the warning of experience against hyperbole. "As long as what, please?"

The girl thought an instant; then met the difficulty by adopting, as an amendment, the same tone. "As any danger of the ridiculous."

That did for the time, and she had moreover, as the months went on, the protection of suspended allusions. This protection was marked when, in the following November, she received a letter directed in a hand a quick glance at which sufficed to make her hesitate to open it. She said nothing then or afterwards; but she opened it, for reasons that had come to her, on the morrow. It consisted of a page and a half from Owen Gereth, dated from Florence, but with no other preliminary. She knew that during the summer he had returned to England with his wife and that after a couple of months they had again gone abroad. She also knew, without communication, that Mrs. Gereth, round whom Ricks had grown submissively and indescribably sweet, had her own view of her daughter-in-law's share in this second migration. It was a piece of calculated insolence—a stroke odiously directed at showing whom it might concern that now she had Poynton fast she was perfectly indifferent to living there. *The Morning Post*, at Ricks, had again been a resource: it was stated in that journal that Mr. and Mrs. Owen Gereth proposed spending the winter in India. There was a person to whom it was clear she led her wretched husband by the nose. Such was the light in which the contemporary scene was offered to Fleda until, in her own room, late at night, she broke the seal of her letter.

"I want you inexpressibly to have as a remembrance something of mine—something of real value. Something from Poynton is what I mean and what I should prefer. You know everything there, and far better than I what's best and what isn't. There are a lot of differences, but aren't some of the smaller things the most remarkable? I mean for judges, and for what they'd bring. What I want you to take from me, and to choose for yourself, is the thing in the whole house that's most beautiful and precious. I mean the 'gem of the collection,' don't you know? If it happens to be of such a sort that you can take immediate possession of it—carry it right away with you—so much the better. You're to have it on the spot, whatever it is. I humbly entreat of you to go down there and see. The people have complete instructions: they'll act for you in every possible way and put the whole place at your service. There's a thing mamma used to call the Maltese cross and that I think I've heard her say is very wonderful. Is that the gem of the collection? Perhaps you'd take it or anything equally convenient. Only I do want you awfully to let it be the very pick of the place. Let me feel that I can trust you for this. You won't refuse if you'll simply think a little what it must be that

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makes me ask.”

Fleda read that last sentence over more times even than the rest: she was baffled—she couldn't think at all of what in particular made him ask. This was indeed because it might be one of so many things. She returned for the present no answer; she merely, little by little, fashioned for herself the form that her answer should eventually wear. There was only one form that was possible—the form of doing, at her time, what he wished. She would go down to Poynton as a pilgrim might go to a shrine, and as to this she must look out for her chance. She lived with her letter, before any chance came, a month, and even after a month it had mysteries for her that she couldn't meet. What did it mean, what did it represent, to what did it correspond in his imagination or his soul? What was behind it, what was before it, what was, in the deepest depth, within it? She said to herself that with these questions she was under no obligation to deal. There was an answer to them that, for practical purposes, would do as well as another: he had found in his marriage a happiness so much greater than, in the distress of his dilemma, he had been able to take heart to believe, that he now felt he owed her a token of gratitude for having kept him in the straight path. That explanation, I say, she could throw off; but no explanation in the least mattered: what determined her was the simple strength of her impulse to respond. The passion for which what had happened had made no difference, the passion that had taken this into account before as well as after, found here an issue that there was nothing whatever to choke. It found even a relief to which her imagination immensely contributed. Would she act upon his offer? She would act with secret rapture. To have as her own something splendid that he had given her, of which the gift had been his signed desire, would be a greater joy than the greatest she had believed to be left her, and she felt that till the sense of this came home she had even herself not known what burned in her successful stillness. It was an hour to dream of and watch for; to be patient was to draw out the sweetness. She was capable of feeling it as an hour of triumph, the triumph of everything in her recent life that had not held up its head. She moved there in thought—in the great rooms she knew; she should be able to say to herself that, for once at least, her possession was as complete as that of either of the others whom it had filled only with bitterness. And a thousand times yes—her choice should know no scruple: the thing she should go down to take would be up to the height of her privilege. The whole place was in her eyes, and she spent for weeks her private hours in a luxury of comparison and debate. It should be one of the smallest things because it should be one she could have close to her; and it should be one of the finest because it was in the finest he saw his symbol. She said to herself that of what it would symbolize she was content to know nothing more than just what her having it would tell her. At bottom she in-

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clined to the Maltese cross—with the added reason that he had named it. But she would look again and judge afresh; she would on the spot so handle and ponder that there shouldn't be the shade of a mistake.

Before Christmas she had a natural opportunity to go to London: there was her periodical call on her father to pay as well as a promise to Maggie to redeem. She spent her first night in West Kensington, with the idea of carrying out on the morrow the purpose that had most of a motive. Her father's affection was not inquisitive, but when she mentioned to him that she had business in the country that would oblige her to catch an early train he deprecated her excursion in view of the menace of the weather. It was spoiling for a storm: all the signs of a winter gale were in the air. She replied that she would see what the morning might bring; and it brought in fact what seemed in London an amendment. She was to go to Maggie the next day, and now that she started her eagerness had become suddenly a pain. She pictured her return that evening with her trophy under her cloak; so that after looking, from the doorstep, up and down the dark street, she decided with a new nervousness and sallied forth to the nearest place of access to the "Underground." The December dawn was dolorous, but there was neither rain nor snow; it was not even cold, and the atmosphere of West Kensington, purified by the wind, was like a dirty old coat that had been bettered by a dirty old brush. At the end of almost an hour, in the larger station, she had taken her place in a third-class compartment; the prospect before her was the run of eighty minutes to Poynton. The train was a fast one, and she was familiar with the moderate measure of the walk to the park from the spot at which it would drop her.

Once in the country indeed she saw that her father was right: the breath of December was abroad with a force from which the London labyrinth had protected her. The green fields were black, the sky was all alive with the wind; she had, in her anxious sense of the elements, her wonder at what might happen, a reminder of the surmises, in the old days of going to the Continent, that used to worry her on the way, at night, to the horrid cheap crossings by long sea. Something, in a dire degree at this last hour, had begun to press on her heart: it was the sudden imagination of a disaster, or at least of a check, before her errand was achieved. When she said to herself that something might happen she wanted to go faster than the train. But nothing could happen save a dismayed discovery that, by some altogether unlikely chance, the master and mistress of the house had already come back. In that case she must have had a warning, and the fear was but the excess of her hope. It was every one's being exactly where every one was that lent the quality to her visit. Beyond lands and seas and alienated for ever, they in their different ways gave her the impression to take as she had never taken it. At last it

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was already there, though the darkness of the day had deepened; they had whizzed past Chater—Chater which was the station before the right one. Off in that quarter was an air of wild rain, but there shimmered straight across it a brightness that was the colour of the great interior she had been haunting. That vision settled before her—in the house the house was all; and as the train drew up she rose, in her mean compartment, quite proudly erect with the thought that all for Fleda Vetch then the house was standing there.

But with the opening of the door she encountered a shock, though for an instant she couldn't have named it: the next moment she saw it was given her by the face of the man advancing to let her out, an old lame porter of the station who had been there in Mrs. Gereth's time and who now recognised her. He looked up at her so hard that she took an alarm and before alighting broke out to him: "They've come back?" She had a confused absurd sense that even he would know that in this case she mustn't be there. He hesitated, and in a few seconds her alarm had completely changed its ground: it seemed to leap, with her quick jump from the carriage, to the ground that was that of his stare at her. "Smoke?" She was on the platform with her frightened sniff; it had taken her a minute to become aware of an extraordinary smell. The air was full of it, and there were already heads at the windows of the train, looking out at something she couldn't see. Some one, the only other passenger, had got out of another carriage, and the old porter hobbled off to dose his door. The smoke was in her eyes, but she saw the station-master, from the end of the platform, identify her too and come straight at her. He brought her a finer shade of surprise than the porter, and while he was coming she heard a voice at a window of the train say that something was "a good bit off—a mile from the town." That was just what Poynton was. Then her heart stood still at the white wonder in the station-master's face.

"You've come down to it, miss, already?"

At this she knew. "Poynton's on fire?"

"Gone, miss—with this awful gale. You weren't wired? Look out!" he cried in the next breath, seizing her; the train was going on, and she had given a lurch that almost made it catch her as it passed. When it had drawn away she became more conscious of the pervading smoke, which the wind seemed to hurl in her face.

"Gone?" She was in the man's hands; she clung to him.

"Burning still, miss. Ain't it quite too dreadful? Took early this morning—the whole place is up there."

In her bewildered horror she tried to think. "Have they come back?"

"Back? They'll be there all day!"

"Not Mr. Gereth, I mean—nor his wife?"

"Nor his mother, miss—not a soul of *them* back. A pack o' servants in charge—not the old lady's lot, eh? A nice job for caretakers!

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Some rotten chimney or one of them portable lamps set down in the wrong place. What has done it is this cruel cruel night." Then as a great wave of smoke half-choked them he drew her with force to the little waiting-room. "Awkward for you, miss—I see!" She felt sick; she sank upon a seat, staring up at him. "Do you mean that great house is lost?"

"It was near it, I was told, an hour ago—the fury of the flames had got such a start. I was there myself at six, the very first I heard of it. They were fighting it then, but you couldn't quite say they had got it down."

Fleda jerked herself up. "Were they saving the things?"

"That's just where it was, miss—to get at the blessed things. And the want of right help—it maddened me to stand and see 'em muff it. This ain't a place, like, for anything organised. They don't come up to a *ree*/emergency."

She passed out of the door that opened toward the village, and met a great acrid gust. She heard a far-off windy roar which, in her dismay, she took for that of flames a mile away, and which, the first instant, acted upon her as a wild solicitation. "I must go there." She had scarcely spoken before the same omen had changed into an appalling check.

Her vivid friend moreover had got before her; he clearly suffered from the nature of the control he had to exercise. "Don't do that, miss—you won't care for it at all." Then as she waveringly stood her ground: "It's not a place for a young lady, nor, if you'll believe me, a sight for them as are in any way affected."

Fleda by this time knew in what way she was affected: she became limp and weak again; she felt herself give everything up. Mixed with the horror, with the kindness of the station-master, with the smell of cinders and the riot of sound was the raw bitterness of a hope that she might never again in life have to give up so much at such short notice. She heard herself repeat mechanically, yet as if asking it for the first time: "Poynton's *gone*?"

The man faltered. "What can you call it, miss, if it ain't really saved?"

A minute later she had returned with him to the waiting-room, where, in the thick swim of things, she saw something like the disc of a clock. "Is there an up-train?"

"In seven minutes."

She came out on the platform: everywhere she met the smoke. She covered her face with her hands. "I'll go back."