

# The Portrait

By Mrs. Oliphant

At the period when the following incidents occurred I was living with my father at The Grove, a large old house in the immediate neighbourhood of a little town. This had been his home for a number of years; and I believe I was born in it. It was a kind of house which, notwithstanding all the red and white architecture, known at present by the name of Queen Anne, builders nowadays have forgotten how to build. It was straggling and irregular, with wide passages, wide staircases, broad landings; the rooms large but not very lofty; the arrangements leaving much to be desired, with no economy of space: a house belonging to a period when land was cheap, and, so far as that was concerned, there was no occasion to economise. Though it was so near the town, the clump of trees in which it was environed was a veritable grove. In the grounds in spring the primroses grew as thickly as in the forest. We had a few fields for the cows, and an excellent walled garden. The place is being pulled down at this moment to make room for more streets of mean little houses,—the kind of thing, and not a dull house of faded gentry, which perhaps the neighbourhood requires. The house was dull, and so were we, its last inhabitants; and the furniture was faded, even a little dingy,—nothing to brag of. I do not, however, intend to convey a suggestion that we were faded gentry, for that was not the case. My father, indeed, was rich, and had no need to spare any expense in making his life and his house bright if he pleased; but he did not please, and I had not been long enough at home to exercise any special influence of my own. It was the only home I had ever known; but except in my earliest childhood, and in my holidays as a schoolboy, I had in reality known but little of it. My mother had died at my birth, or shortly after, and I had grown up in the gravity and silence of a house without women. In my infancy, I believe, a sister of my father's had lived with us, and taken charge of the household and of me; but she, too, had died long, long ago, my mourning for her being one of the first things I could recollect. And she had no successor. There was, indeed, a housekeeper and some maids, —the latter of whom I only saw disappearing at the end of a passage, or whisking out of a room when one of "the gentlemen" appeared. Mrs Weir, indeed, I saw nearly every day; but a curtsy, a smile, a pair of nice round arms which she caressed while folding them across her ample waist, and a large white apron, were all I knew of her. This was the only female influence in the house. The drawing-room I was aware of only as a place of deadly good order, into which nobody ever entered. It had three long windows opening on the lawn, and communicated at the upper end, which was rounded like a great bay, with the conservatory. Sometimes I gazed into it as a child from without, wondering at the needlework on the chairs, the screens, the looking-glasses which never reflected any living face. My father did not like the room, which probably was not wonderful, though it never occurred to me in those early days to inquire why.

I may say here, though it will probably be disappointing to those who form a sentimental idea of the capabilities of children, that it did not occur to me either, in these early days, to make any inquiry about my mother. There was no room in life, as I knew it, for any such person; nothing suggested to my mind either the fact that she must have existed, or that there was need of her in the house. I accepted, as I believe most children do, the facts of existence, on the basis with which I had first made acquaintance with them, without question or remark. As a matter of fact, I was aware that it was rather dull at home; but neither by comparison with the books I read, nor by the communications received from my school-fellows, did this seem to me anything

remarkable. And I was possibly somewhat dull too by nature, for I did not mind. I was fond of reading, and for that there was unbounded opportunity. I had a little ambition in respect to work, and that too could be prosecuted undisturbed. When I went to the university, my society lay almost entirely among men; but by that time and afterwards, matters had of course greatly changed with me, and though I recognised women as part of the economy of nature, and did not indeed by any means dislike or avoid them, yet the idea of connecting them at all with my own home never entered into my head. That continued to be as it had always been, when at intervals I descended upon the cool, grave, colourless place, in the midst of my traffic with the world: always very still, well-ordered, serious—the cooking very good, the comfort perfect—old Morpew, the butler, a little older (but very little older, perhaps on the whole less old, since in my childhood I had thought him a kind of Methuselah), and Mrs Weir, less active, covering up her arms in sleeves, but folding and caressing them just as always. I remember looking in from the lawn through the windows upon that deadly-orderly drawing-room, with a humorous recollection of my childish admiration and wonder, and feeling that it must be kept so for ever and ever, and that to go into it would break some sort of amusing mock mystery, some pleasantly ridiculous spell.

But it was only at rare intervals that I went home. In the long vacation, as in my school holidays, my father often went abroad with me, so that we had gone over a great deal of the Continent together very pleasantly. He was old in proportion to the age of his son, being a man of sixty when I was twenty, but that did not disturb the pleasure of the relations between us. I don't know that they were ever very confidential. On my side there was but little to communicate, for I did not get into scrapes nor fall in love, the two predicaments which demand sympathy and confidences. And as for my father himself, I was never aware what there could be to communicate on his side. I knew his life exactly—what he did almost at every hour of the day; under what circumstances of the temperature he would ride and when walk; how often and with what guests he would indulge in the occasional break of a dinner-party, a serious pleasure,—perhaps, indeed, less a pleasure than a duty. All this I knew as well as he did, and also his views on public matters, his political opinions, which naturally were different from mine. What ground, then, remained for confidence? I did not know any. We were both of us of a reserved nature, not apt to enter into our religious feelings, for instance. There are many people who think reticence on such subjects a sign of the most reverential way of contemplating them. Of this I am far from being sure; but, at all events, it was the practice most congenial to my own mind.

And then I was for a long time absent, making my own way in the world. I did not make it very successfully. I accomplished the natural fate of an Englishman, and went out to the Colonies; then to India in a semi-diplomatic position; but returned home after seven or eight years, invalided, in bad health and not much better spirits, tired and disappointed with my first trial of life. I had, as people say, “no occasion” to insist on making my way. My father was rich, and had never given me the slightest reason to believe that he did not intend me to be his heir. His allowance to me was not illiberal, and though he did not oppose the carrying out of my own plans, he by no means urged me to exertion. When I came home he received me very affectionately, and expressed his satisfaction in my return. “Of course,” he said, “I am not glad that you are disappointed, Philip, or that your health is broken; but otherwise it is an ill wind, you know, that blows nobody good—and I am very glad to have you at home. I am growing an old man—”

“I don't see any difference, sir,” said I; “everything here seems exactly the same as when I went away—”

He smiled, and shook his head. "It is true enough," he said, "after we have reached a certain age we seem to go on for a long time on a plane, and feel no great difference from year to year; but it is an inclined plane—and the longer we go on, the more sudden will be the fall at the end. But at all events it will be a great comfort to me to have you here."

"If I had known that," I said, "and that you wanted me, I should have come in any circumstances. As there are only two of us in the world—"

"Yes," he said, "there are only two of us in the world; but still I should not have sent for you, Phil, to interrupt your career."

"It is as well, then, that it has interrupted itself," I said, rather bitterly; for disappointment is hard to bear.

He patted me on the shoulder, and repeated, "It is an ill wind that blows nobody good," with a look of real pleasure which gave me a certain gratification too; for, after all, he was an old man, and the only one in all the world to whom I owed any duty. I had not been without dreams of warmer affections, but they had come to nothing—not tragically, but in the ordinary way. I might perhaps have had love which I did not want, but not that which I did want,—which was not a thing to make any unmanly moan about, but in the ordinary course of events. Such disappointments happen every day; indeed, they are more common than anything else, and sometimes it is apparent afterwards that it is better it was so.

However, here I was at thirty stranded—yet wanting for nothing, in a position to call forth rather envy than pity from the greater part of my contemporaries,—for I had an assured and comfortable existence, as much money as I wanted, and the prospect of an excellent fortune for the future. On the other hand, my health was still low, and I had no occupation. The neighbourhood of the town was a drawback rather than an advantage. I felt myself tempted, instead of taking the long walk into the country which my doctor recommended, to take a much shorter one through the High Street, across the river, and back again, which was not a walk but a lounge. The country was silent and full of thoughts—thoughts not always very agreeable—whereas there were always the humours of the little urban population to glance at, the news to be heard, all those petty matters which so often make up life in a very impoverished version for the idle man. I did not like it, but I felt myself yielding to it, not having energy enough to make a stand. The rector and the leading lawyer of the place asked me to dinner. I might have glided into the society, such as it was, had I been disposed for that—everything about me began to close over me as if I had been fifty, and fully contented with my lot.

It was possibly my own want of occupation which made me observe with surprise, after a while, how much occupied my father was. He had expressed himself glad of my return; but now that I had returned, I saw very little of him. Most of his time was spent in his library, as had always been the case. But on the few visits I paid him there, I could not but perceive that the aspect of the library was much changed. It had acquired the look of a business-room, almost an office. There were large business-like books on the table, which I could not associate with anything he could naturally have to do; and his correspondence was very large. I thought he closed one of those books hurriedly as I came in, and pushed it away, as if he did not wish me to see it. This surprised me at the moment, without arousing any other feeling; but afterwards I remembered it with a clearer sense of what it meant. He was more absorbed altogether than I had been used to see him. He was visited by men sometimes not of very prepossessing appearance. Surprise grew in my mind without any very distinct idea of the reason of it; and it was not till after a chance conversation with Morphew that my vague uneasiness began to take definite shape. It was begun without any special intention on my part. Morphew had informed me that

master was very busy, on some occasion when I wanted to see him. And I was a little annoyed to be thus put off. "It appears to me that my father is always busy," I said, hastily. Morpew then began very oracularly to nod his head in assent.

"A deal too busy, sir, if you take my opinion," he said.

This startled me much, and I asked hurriedly, "What do you mean?" without reflecting that to ask for private information from a servant about my father's habits was as bad as investigating into a stranger's affairs. It did not strike me in the same light.

"Mr Philip," said Morpew, "a thing 'as 'appened as 'appens more often than it ought to. Master has got awful keen about money in his old age."

"That's a new thing for him," I said.

"No, sir, begging your pardon, it ain't a new thing. He was once broke of it, and that wasn't easy done; but it's come back, if you'll excuse me saying so. And I don't know as he'll ever be broke of it again at his age."

I felt more disposed to be angry than disturbed by this. "You must be making some ridiculous mistake," I said. "And if you were not so old a friend as you are, Morpew, I should not have allowed my father to be so spoken of to me."

The old man gave me a half-astonished, half-contemptuous look. "He's been my master a deal longer than he's been your father," he said, turning on his heel. The assumption was so comical that my anger could not stand in face of it. I went out, having been on my way to the door when this conversation occurred, and took my usual lounge about, which was not a satisfactory sort of amusement. Its vanity and emptiness appeared to be more evident than usual to-day. I met half-a-dozen people I knew, and had as many pieces of news confided to me. I went up and down the length of the High Street. I made a small purchase or two. And then I turned homeward—despising myself yet finding no alternative within my reach. Would a long country walk have been more virtuous?—it would at least have been more wholesome—but that was all that could be said. My mind did not dwell on Morpew's communication. It seemed without sense or meaning to me; and after the excellent joke about his superior interest in his master to mine in my father, was dismissed lightly enough from my mind. I tried to invent some way of telling this to my father without letting him perceive that Morpew had been finding faults in him, or I listening; for it seemed a pity to lose so good a joke. However, as I returned home, something happened which put the joke entirely out of my head. It is curious when a new subject of trouble or anxiety has been suggested to the mind in an unexpected way, how often a second advertisement follows immediately after the first, and gives to that a potency which in itself it had not possessed.

I was approaching our own door, wondering whether my father had gone, and whether, on my return, I should find him at leisure—for I had several little things to say to him—when I noticed a poor woman lingering about the closed gates. She had a baby sleeping in her arms. It was a spring night, the stars shining in the twilight, and everything soft and dim; and the woman's figure was like a shadow, flitting about, now here, now there, on one side or another of the gate. She stopped when she saw me approaching, and hesitated for a moment, then seemed to take a sudden resolution. I watched her without knowing, with a prevision that she was going to address me, though with no sort of idea as to the subject of her address. She came up to me doubtfully, it seemed, yet certainly, as I felt, and when she was close to me, dropped a sort of hesitating curtsey, and said, "It's Mr Philip?" in a low voice.

"What do you want with me?" I said.

Then she poured forth suddenly, without warning or preparation, her long speech—a flood of words which must have been all ready and waiting at the doors of her lips for utterance. “Oh, sir, I want to speak to you! I can’t believe you’ll be so hard, for you’re young; and I can’t believe he’ll be so hard if so be as his own son, as I’ve always heard he had but one, ‘I speak up for us. Oh, gentleman, it is easy for the likes of you, that, if you ain’t comfortable in one room, can just walk into another; but if one room is all you have, and every bit of furniture you have taken out of it, and nothing but the four walls left—not so much as the cradle for the child, or a chair for your man to sit down upon when he comes from his work, or a saucepan to cook him his supper—”

“My good woman,” I said, “who can have taken all that from you? surely nobody can be so cruel?”

“You say it’s cruel!” she cried with a sort of triumph. “Oh, I knowed you would, or any true gentleman that don’t hold with screwing poor folks. Just go and say that to him inside there, for the love of God. Tell him to think what he’s doing, driving poor creatures to despair. Summer’s coming, the Lord be praised, but yet it’s bitter cold at night with your counterpane gone; and when you’ve been working hard all day, and nothing but four bare walls to come home to, and all your poor little sticks of furniture that you’ve saved up for, and got together one by one, all gone—and you no better than when you started, or rather worse, for then you was young. Oh, sir!” the woman’s voice rose into a sort of passionate wail. And then she added, beseechingly, recovering herself—“Oh, speak for us—he’ll not refuse his own son—”

“To whom am I to speak? who is it that has done this to you?” I said.

The woman hesitated again, looking keenly in my face—then repeated with a slight faltering, “It’s Mr Philip?” as if that made everything right.

“Yes; I am Philip Canning,” I said; “but what have I to do with this? and to whom am I to speak?”

She began to whimper, crying and stopping herself. “Oh, please sir! it’s Mr Canning as owns all the house property about—it’s him that our court and the lane and everything belongs to. And he’s taken the bed from under us, and the baby’s cradle, although it’s said in the Bible as you’re not to take poor folks’s bed.”

“My father!” I cried in spite of myself—“then it must be some agent, some one else in his name. You may be sure he knows nothing of it. Of course I shall speak to him at once.”

“Oh, God bless you, sir,” said the woman. But then she added, in a lower tone—“It’s no agent. It’s one as never knows trouble. It’s him that lives in that grand house.” But this was said under her breath, evidently not for me to hear.

Morpheus’s words flashed through my mind as she spoke. What was this? Did it afford an explanation of the much occupied hours, the big books, the strange visitors? I took the poor woman’s name, and gave her something to procure a few comforts for the night, and went indoors disturbed and troubled. It was impossible to believe that my father himself would have acted thus; but he was not a man to brook interference, and I did not see how to introduce the subject, what to say. I could but hope that, at the moment of broaching it, words would be put into my mouth, which often happens in moments of necessity, one knows not how, even when one’s theme is not so all-important as that for which such help has been promised. As usual, I did not see my father till dinner. I have said that our dinners were very good, luxurious in a simple way, everything excellent in its kind, well cooked, well served, the perfection of comfort without show—which is a combination very dear to the English heart. I said nothing till Morpheus, with

his solemn attention to everything that was going, had retired—and then it was with some strain of courage that I began.

“I was stopped outside the gate to-day by a curious sort of petitioner—a poor woman, who seems to be one of your tenants, sir, but whom your agent must have been rather too hard upon.”

“My agent? who is that?” said my father, quietly.

“I don’t know his name, and I doubt his competence. The poor creature seems to have had everything taken from her—her bed, her child’s cradle.”

“No doubt she was behind with her rent.”

“Very likely, sir. She seemed very poor,” said I.

“You take it coolly,” said my father, with an upward glance, half-amused, not in the least shocked by my statement. “But when a man, or a woman either, takes a house, I suppose you will allow that they ought to pay rent for it.”

“Certainly, sir,” I replied, “when they have got anything to pay.”

“I don’t allow the reservation,” he said. But he was not angry, which I had feared he would be.

“I think,” I continued, “that your agent must be too severe. And this emboldens me to say something which has been in my mind for some time”—(these were the words, no doubt, which I had hoped would be put into my mouth; they were the suggestion of the moment, and yet as I said them it was with the most complete conviction of their truth)—“and that is this: I am doing nothing; my time hangs heavy on my hands. Make me your agent. I will see for myself, and save you from such mistakes; and it will be an occupation—”

“Mistakes? What warrant have you for saying these are mistakes?” he said testily; then after a moment: “This is a strange proposal from you, Phil. Do you know what it is you are offering?—to be a collector of rents, going about from door to door, from week to week; to look after wretched little bits of repairs, drains, &c.; to get paid, which, after all, is the chief thing, and not to be taken in by tales of poverty.”

“Not to let you be taken in by men without pity,” I said.

He gave me a strange glance, which I did not very well understand, and said, abruptly, a thing which, so far as I remember, he had never in my life said before, “You’ve become a little like your mother, Phil—”

“My mother!” The reference was so unusual—nay, so unprecedented—that I was greatly startled. It seemed to me like the sudden introduction of a quite new element in the stagnant atmosphere, as well as a new party to our conversation. My father looked across the table, as if with some astonishment at my tone of surprise.

“Is that so very extraordinary?” he said.

“No; of course it is not extraordinary that I should resemble my mother. Only—I have heard very little of her—almost nothing.”

“That is true.” He got up and placed himself before the fire, which was very low, as the night was not cold—had not been cold heretofore at least; but it seemed to me now that a little chill came into the dim and faded room. Perhaps it looked more dull from the suggestion of a something brighter, warmer, that might have been. “Talking of mistakes,” he said, “perhaps that was one: to sever you entirely from her side of the house. But I did not care for the connection. You will understand how it is that I speak of it now when I tell you—” He stopped here, however, said nothing more for a minute or so, and then rang the bell. Morphew came, as he always did, very deliberately, so that some time elapsed in silence, during which my surprise grew. When the old man appeared at the door—“Have you put the lights in the drawing-room, as I told you?” my father said.

“Yes, sir; and opened the box, sir; and it’s a—it’s a speaking likeness—”

This the old man got out in a great hurry, as if afraid that his master would stop him. My father did so with a wave of his hand.

“That’s enough. I asked no information. You can go now.”

The door closed upon us, and there was again a pause. My subject had floated away altogether like a mist, though I had been so concerned about it. I tried to resume, but could not. Something seemed to arrest my very breathing: and yet in this dull respectable house of ours, where everything breathed good character and integrity, it was certain that there could be no shameful mystery to reveal. It was some time before my father spoke, not from any purpose that I could see, but apparently because his mind was busy with probably unaccustomed thoughts.

“You scarcely know the drawing-room, Phil,” he said at last.

“Very little. I have never seen it used. I have a little awe of it, to tell the truth.”

“That should not be. There is no reason for that. But a man by himself, as I have been for the greater part of my life, has no occasion for a drawing-room. I always, as a matter of preference, sat among my books; however, I ought to have thought of the impression on you.”

“Oh, it is not important,” I said; “the awe was childish. I have not thought of it since I came home.”

“It never was anything very splendid at the best,” said he. He lifted the lamp from the table with a sort of abstraction, not remarking even my offer to take it from him, and led the way. He was on the verge of seventy, and looked his age: but it was a vigorous age, with no symptoms of giving way. The circle of light from the lamp lit up his white hair, and keen blue eyes, and clear complexion; his forehead was like old ivory, his cheek warmly coloured: an old man, yet a man in full strength. He was taller than I was, and still almost as strong. As he stood for a moment with the lamp in his hand, he looked like a tower in his great height and bulk. I reflected as I looked at him that I knew him intimately, more intimately than any other creature in the world,—I was familiar with every detail of his outward life; could it be that in reality I did not know him at all?

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The drawing-room was already lighted with a flickering array of candles upon the mantelpiece and along the walls, producing the pretty starry effect which candles give without very much light. As I had not the smallest idea what I was about to see, for Morpew’s “speaking likeness” was very hurriedly said, and only half comprehensible in the bewilderment of my faculties, my first glance was at this very unusual illumination, for which I could assign no reason. The next showed me a large full-length portrait, still in the box in which apparently it had travelled, placed upright, supported against a table in the centre of the room. My father walked straight up to it, motioned to me to place a smaller table close to the picture on the left side, and put his lamp upon that. Then he waved his hand towards it, and stood aside that I might see.

It was a full-length portrait of a very young woman—I might say a girl, scarcely twenty—in a white dress, made in a very simple old fashion, though I was too little accustomed to female costume to be able to fix the date. It might have been a hundred years old, or twenty, for aught I knew. The face had an expression of youth, candour, and simplicity more than any face I had ever seen,—or so, at least, in my surprise, I thought. The eyes were a little wistful, with something which was almost anxiety—which at least was not content—in them; a faint, almost imperceptible, curve in the lids. The complexion was of a dazzling fairness, the hair light, but the

eyes dark, which gave individuality to the face. It would have been as lovely had the eyes been blue— probably more so—but their darkness gave a touch of character, a slight discord, which made the harmony finer. It was not, perhaps, beautiful in the highest sense of the word. The girl must have been too young, too slight, too little developed for actual beauty; but a face which so invited love and confidence I never saw. One smiled at it with instinctive affection. “What a sweet face!” I said. “What a lovely girl! Who is she? Is this one of the relations you were speaking of on the other side?”

My father made me no reply. He stood aside, looking at it as if he knew it too well to require to look, —as if the picture was already in his eyes. “Yes,” he said, after an interval, with a long-drawn breath, “she was a lovely girl, as you say.”

“Was?—then she is dead. What a pity!” I said; “what a pity! so young and so sweet!”

We stood gazing at her thus, in her beautiful stillness and calm—two men, the younger of us full grown and conscious of many experiences, the other an old man—before this impersonation of tender youth. At length he said, with a slight tremulousness in his voice, “Does nothing suggest to you who she is, Phil?”

I turned round to look at him with profound astonishment, but he turned away from my look. A sort of quiver passed over his face. “That is your mother,” he said, and walked suddenly away, leaving me there.

My mother!

I stood for a moment in a kind of consternation before the white-robed innocent creature, to me no more than a child; then a sudden laugh broke from me, without any will of mine: something ludicrous, as well as something awful, was in it. When the laugh was over, I found myself with tears in my eyes, gazing, holding my breath. The soft features seemed to melt, the lips to move, the anxiety in the eyes to become a personal inquiry. Ah, no! nothing of the kind; only because of the water in mine. My mother! oh, fair and gentle creature, scarcely woman—how could any man’s voice call her by that name! I had little idea enough of what it meant,—had heard it laughed at, scoffed at, revered, but never had learned to place it even among the ideal powers of life. Yet, if it meant anything at all, what it meant was worth thinking of. What did she ask, looking at me with those eyes? what would she have said if “those lips had language”? If I had known her only as Cowper did—with a child’s recollection—there might have been some thread, some faint but comprehensible link, between us; but now all that I felt was the curious incongruity. Poor child! I said to myself; so sweet a creature: poor little tender soul! as if she had been a little sister, a child of mine,—but my mother! I cannot tell how long I stood looking at her, studying the candid, sweet face, which surely had germs in it of everything that was good and beautiful; and sorry, with a profound regret, that she had died and never carried these promises to fulfilment. Poor girl! poor people who had loved her! These were my thoughts: with a curious vertigo and giddiness of my whole being in the sense of a mysterious relationship, which it was beyond my power to understand.

Presently my father came back: possibly because I had been a long time unconscious of the passage of the minutes, or perhaps because he was himself restless in the strange disturbance of his habitual calm. He came in and put his arm within mine, leaning his weight partially upon me, with an affectionate suggestion which went deeper than words. I pressed his arm to my side: it was more between us two grave Englishmen than any embracing.

“I cannot understand it,” I said.

“No. I don’t wonder at that; but if it is strange to you, Phil, think how much more strange to me! That is the partner of my life. I have never had another—or thought of another. That—girl!

If we are to meet again, as I have always hoped we should meet again, what am I to say to her—I, an old man? Yes; I know what you mean. I am not an old man for my years; but my years are three-score and ten, and the play is nearly played out. How am I to meet that young creature? We used to say to each other that it was for ever, that we never could be but one, that it was for life and death. But what—what am I to say to her, Phil, when I meet her again, that—that angel? No, it is not her being an angel that troubles me; but she is so young! She is like my—my granddaughter,” he cried, with a burst of what was half sobs, half laughter; “and she is my wife,—and I am an old man—an old man! And so much has happened that she could not understand.”

I was too much startled by this strange complaint to know what to say. It was not my own trouble, and I answered it in the conventional way.

“They are not as we are, sir,” I said; “they look upon us with larger, other eyes than ours.”

“Ah! you don’t know what I mean,” he said quickly; and in the interval he had subdued his emotion. “At first, after she died, it was my consolation to think that I should meet her again—that we never could be really parted. But, my God, how I have changed since then! I am another man—I am a different being. I was not very young even then—twenty years older than she was: but her youth renewed mine. I was not an unfit partner; she asked no better: and knew as much more than I did in some things—being so much nearer the source—as I did in others that were of the world. But I have gone a long way since then, Phil—a long way; and there she stands just where I left her.”

I pressed his arm again. “Father,” I said, which was a title I seldom used, “we are not to suppose that in a higher life the mind stands still.” I did not feel myself qualified to discuss such topics, but something one must say.

“Worse, worse!” he replied; “then she too will be like me, a different being, and we shall meet as what? as strangers, as people who have lost sight of each other, with a long past between us—we who parted, my God! with—with—”

His voice broke and ended for a moment: then while, surprised and almost shocked by what he said, I cast about in my mind what to reply, he withdrew his arm suddenly from mine, and said in his usual tone, “Where shall we hang the picture, Phil? It must be here in this room. What do you think will be the best light?”

This sudden alteration took me still more by surprise, and gave me almost an additional shock; but it was evident that I must follow the changes of his mood, or at least the sudden repression of sentiment which he originated. We went into that simpler question with great seriousness, consulting which would be the best light. “You know I can scarcely advise,” I said; “I have never been familiar with this room. I should like to put off if you don’t mind, till daylight.”

“I think,” he said, “that this would be the best place.” It was on the other side of the fireplace, on the wall which faced the windows,—not the best light, I knew enough to be aware, for an oil-painting. When I said so, however, he answered me with a little impatience,—” It does not matter very much about the best light. There will be nobody to see it but you and me. I have my reasons—” There was a small table standing against the wall at this spot, on which he had his hand as he spoke. Upon it stood a little basket in very fine lace-like wickerwork. His hand must have trembled, for the table shook, and the basket fell, its contents turning out upon the carpet,—little bits of needlework, coloured silks, a small piece of knitting half done. He laughed as they rolled out at his feet, and tried to stoop to collect them, then tottered to a chair, and covered for a moment his face with his hands.

No need to ask what they were. No woman’s work had been seen in the house since I could recollect it. I gathered them up reverently and put them back. I could see, ignorant as I was, that

the bit of knitting was something for an infant. What could I do less than put it to my lips? It had been left in the doing—for me.

“Yes, I think this is the best place,” my father said a minute after, in his usual tone.

We placed it there that evening with our own hands. The picture was large, and in a heavy frame, but my father would let no one help me but himself. And then, with a superstition for which I never could give any reason even to myself having removed the packings, we closed and locked the door, leaving the candles about the room, in their soft strange illumination lighting the first night of her return to her old place.

That night no more was said. My father went to his room early, which was not his habit. He had never, however, accustomed me to sit late with him in the library. I had a little study or smoking-room of my own, in which all my special treasures were, the collections of my travels and my favourite books—and where I always sat after prayers, a ceremonial which was regularly kept up in the house. I retired as usual this night to my room, and as usual read—but to-night somewhat vaguely, often pausing to think. When it was quite late, I went out by the glass door to the lawn, and walked round the house, with the intention of looking in at the drawing-room windows, as I had done when a child. But I had forgotten that these windows were all shuttered at night, and nothing but a faint penetration of the light within through the crevices bore witness to the instalment of the new dweller there.

In the morning my father was entirely himself again. He told me without emotion of the manner in which he had obtained the picture. It had belonged to my mother’s family, and had fallen eventually into the hands of a cousin of hers, resident abroad—“A man whom I did not like, and who did not like me,” my father said; “there was, or had been, some rivalry, he thought: a mistake, but he was never aware of that. He refused all my requests to have a copy made. You may suppose, Phil, that I wished this very much. Had I succeeded, you would have been acquainted, at least, with your mother’s appearance, and need not have sustained this shock. But he would not consent. It gave him, I think, a certain pleasure to think that he had the only picture. But now he is dead—and out of remorse, or with some other intention, has left it to me.”

“That looks like kindness,” said I.

“Yes; or something else. He might have thought that by so doing he was establishing a claim upon me,” my father said: but he did not seem disposed to add any more. On whose behalf he meant to establish a claim I did not know, nor who the man was who had laid us under so great an obligation on his deathbed. He *had* established a claim on me at least: though, as he was dead, I could not see on whose behalf it was. And my father said nothing more. He seemed to dislike the subject. When I attempted to return to it, he had recourse to his letters or his newspapers. Evidently he had made up his mind to say no more.

Afterwards I went into the drawing-room to look at the picture once more. It seemed to me that the anxiety in her eyes was not so evident as I had thought it last night. The light possibly was more favourable. She stood just above the place where, I make no doubt, she had sat in life, where her little work-basket was—not very much above it. The picture was full-length, and we had hung it low, so that she might have been stepping into the room, and was little above my own level as I stood and looked at her again. Once more I smiled at the strange thought that this young creature, so young, almost childish, could be my mother; and once more my eyes grew wet looking at her. He was a benefactor, indeed, who had given her back to us. I said to myself, that if I could ever do anything for him or his, I would certainly do, for my—for this lovely young creature’s sake.

And with this in my mind, and all the thoughts that came with it, I am obliged to confess that the other matter, which I had been so full of on the previous night, went entirely out of my head.

\* \* \*

It is rarely, however, that such matters are allowed to slip out of one's mind. When I went out in the afternoon for my usual stroll—or rather when I returned from that stroll— I saw once more before me the woman with her baby whose story had filled me with dismay on the previous evening. She was waiting at the gate as before, and—“Oh, gentleman, but haven't you got some news to give me?” she said.

“My good woman—I—have been greatly occupied. I have had—no time to do anything.”

“Ah!” she said, with a little cry of disappointment, “my man said not to make too sure, and that the ways of the gentlefolks is hard to know.”

“I cannot explain to you,” I said, as gently as I could, “what it is that has made me forget you. It was an event that can only do you good in the end. Go home now, and see the man that took your things from you, and tell him to come to me. I promise you it shall all be put right.”

The woman looked at me in astonishment, then burst forth, as it seemed, involuntarily,—“What! without asking no questions?” After this there came a storm of tears and blessings, from which I made haste to escape, but not without carrying that curious commentary on my rashness away with me—“Without asking no questions?” It might be foolish, perhaps: but after all how slight a matter. To make the poor creature comfortable at the cost of what—a box or two of cigars, perhaps, or some other trifle. And if it should be her own fault, or her husband's—what then? Had I been punished for all my faults, where should I have been now. And if the advantage should be only temporary, what then? To be relieved and comforted even for a day or two, was not that something to count in life? Thus I quenched the fiery dart of criticism which my *protégée* herself had thrown into the transaction, not without a certain sense of the humour of it. Its effect, however, was to make me less anxious to see my father, to repeat my proposal to him, and to call his attention to the cruelty performed in his name. This one case I had taken out of the category of wrongs to be righted, by assuming arbitrarily the position of Providence in my own person—for, of course, I had bound myself to pay the poor creature's rent as well as redeem her goods—and, whatever might happen to her in the future, had taken the past into my own hands. The man came presently to see me who, it seems, had acted as my father's agent in the matter. “I don't know, sir, how Mr Canning will take it,” he said. “He don't want none of those irregular, bad-paying one's in his property. He always says as to look over it and let the rent run on is making things worse in the end. His rule is, ‘Never more than a month, Stevens:’ that's what Mr Canning says to me, sir. He says, ‘More than that they can't pay. It's no use trying.’ And it's a good rule; it's a very good rule. He won't hear none of their stories, sir. Bless you, you'd never get a penny of rent from them small houses if you listened to their tales. But if so be as you'll pay Mrs Jordan's rent, it's none of my business how it's paid, so long as it's paid, and I'll send her back her things. But they'll just have to be took next time,” he added, composedly. “Over and over: it's always the same story with them sort of poor folks—they're too poor for anything, that's the truth,” the man said.

Morphew came back to my room after my visitor was gone. “Mr Philip,” he said, “you'll excuse me, sir, but if you're going to pay all the poor folk's rent as have distresses put in, you may just go into the court at once, for it's without end—”

"I am going to be the agent myself, Morphew, and manage for my father: and we'll soon put a stop to that," I said, more cheerfully than I felt.

"Manage for—master," he said, with a face of consternation. "You, Mr Philip!"

"You seem to have a great contempt for me, Morphew."

He did not deny the fact. He said with excitement, "Master, sir—master don't let himself be put a stop to by any man. Master's—not one to be managed. Don't you quarrel with master, Mr Philip, for the love of God." The old man was quite pale.

"Quarrel!" I said. "I have never quarrelled with my father, and I don't mean to begin now."

Morphew dispelled his own excitement by making up the fire, which was dying in the grate. It was a very mild spring evening, and he made up a great blaze which would have suited December. This is one of many ways in which an old servant will relieve his mind. He muttered all the time as he threw on the coals and wood. "He'll not like it—we all know as he'll not like it. Master won't stand no meddling, Mr Philip,"—this last he discharged at me like a flying arrow as he closed the door.

I soon found there was truth in what he said. My father was not angry; he was even half amused. "I don't think that plan of yours will hold water, Phil. I hear you have been paying rents and redeeming furniture—that's an expensive game, and a very profitless one. Of course, so long as you are a benevolent gentleman acting for your own pleasure, it makes no difference to me. I am quite content if I get my money, even out of your pockets—so long as it amuses you. But as my collector, you know, which you are good enough to propose to be—"

"Of course I should act under your orders,"

I said; "but at least you might be sure that I would not commit you to any—to any—" I paused for a word.

"Act of oppression," he said with a smile— "piece of cruelty, exaction—there are half-a-dozen words—"

"Sir—" I cried.

"Stop, Phil, and let us understand each other. I hope I have always been a just man. I do my duty on my side, and I expect it from others. It is your benevolence that is cruel. I have calculated anxiously how much credit it is safe to allow; but I will allow no man, or woman either, to go beyond what he or she can make up. My law is fixed. Now you understand. My agents, as you call them, originate nothing—they execute only what I decide—"

"But then no circumstances are taken into account—no bad luck, no evil chances, no loss unexpected."

"There are no evil chances," he said, "there is no bad luck—they reap as they sow. No, I don't go among them to be cheated by their stories, and spend quite unnecessary emotion in sympathising with them. You will find it much better for you that I don't. I deal with them on a general rule, made, I assure you, not without a great deal of thought."

"And must it always be so?" I said. "Is there no way of ameliorating or bringing in a better state of things?"

"It seems not," he said; "we don't get 'no forrarder' in that direction so far as I can see." And then he turned the conversation to general matters.

I retired to my room greatly discouraged that night. In former ages—or so one is led to suppose—and in the lower primitive classes who still linger near the primeval type, action of any kind was, and is, easier than amid the complications of our higher civilisation. A bad man is a distinct entity, against whom you know more or less what steps to take. A tyrant, an oppressor, a bad landlord, a man who lets miserable tenements at a rack-rent (to come down to particulars),

and exposes his wretched tenants to all those abominations of which we have heard so much—well! he is more or less a satisfactory opponent. There he is, and there is nothing to be said for him—down with him! and let there be an end of his wickedness. But when, on the contrary, you have before you a good man, a just man, who has considered deeply a question which you allow to be full of difficulty; who regrets, but cannot, being human, avert, the miseries which to some unhappy individuals follow from the very wisdom of his rule,—what can you do—what is to be done? Individual benevolence at haphazard may baulk him here and there, but what have you to put in the place of his well-considered scheme? Charity which makes paupers? or what else? I had not considered the question deeply, but it seemed to me that I now came to a blank wall, which my vague human sentiment of pity and scorn could find no way to breach. There must be wrong somewhere—but where? There must be some change for the better to be made—but how?

I was seated with a book before me on the table, with my head supported on my hands. My eyes were on the printed page, but I was not reading—my mind was full of these thoughts, my heart of great discouragement and despondency, a sense that I could do nothing, yet that there surely must and ought, if I but knew it, be something to do. The fire which Morpew had built up before dinner was dying out, the shaded lamp on my table left all the corners in a mysterious twilight. The house was perfectly still, no one moving: my father in the library, where, after the habit of many solitary years, he liked to be left alone, and I here in my retreat, preparing for the formation of similar habits. I thought all at once of the third member of the party, the new-comer, alone too in the room that had been hers; and there suddenly occurred to me a strong desire to take up my lamp and go to the drawing-room and visit her, to see whether her soft angelic face would give any inspiration. I restrained, however, this futile impulse—for what could the picture say?—and instead wondered what might have been had she lived, had she been there, warmly enthroned beside the warm domestic centre, the hearth which would have been a common sanctuary, the true home. In that case what might have been? Alas! the question was no more simple to answer than the other: she might have been there alone too, her husband's business, her son's thoughts, as far from her as now, when her silent representative held her old place in the silence and darkness. I had known it so, often enough. Love itself does not always give comprehension and sympathy. It might be that she was more to us there, in the sweet image of her undeveloped beauty, than she might have been had she lived and grown to maturity and fading, like the rest.

I cannot be certain whether my mind was still lingering on this not very cheerful reflection, or if it had been left behind, when the strange occurrence came of which I have now to tell: can I call it an occurrence? My eyes were on my book, when I thought I heard the sound of a door opening and shutting, but so far away and faint that if real at all it must have been in a far corner of the house. I did not move except to lift my eyes from the book, as one does instinctively the better to listen; when— But I cannot tell, nor have I ever been able to describe exactly what it was. My heart made all at once a sudden leap in my breast. I am aware that this language is figurative, and that the heart cannot leap: but it is a figure so entirely justified by sensation, that no one will have any difficulty in understanding what I mean. My heart leapt up and began beating wildly in my throat, in my ears, as if my whole being had received a sudden and intolerable shock. The sound went through my head like the dizzy sound of some strange mechanism, a thousand wheels and springs, circling, echoing, working in my brain. I felt the blood bound in my veins, my mouth became dry, my eyes hot, a sense of something insupportable took possession of me. I sprang to my feet, and then I sat down again. I cast a

quick glance round me beyond the brief circle of the lamplight, but there was nothing there to account in any way for this sudden extraordinary rush of sensation—nor could I feel any meaning in it, any suggestion, any moral impression. I thought I must be going to be ill, and got out my watch and felt my pulse: it was beating furiously, about 125 throbs in a minute. I knew of no illness that could come on like this without warning, in a moment, and I tried to subdue myself, to say to myself that it was nothing, some flutter of the nerves, some physical disturbance. I laid myself down upon my sofa to try if rest would help me, and kept still—as long as the thumping and throbbing of this wild excited mechanism within, like a wild beast plunging and struggling, would let me. I am quite aware of the confusion of the metaphor—the reality was just so. It was like a mechanism deranged, going wildly with ever-increasing precipitation, like those horrible wheels that from time to time catch a helpless human being in them and tear him to pieces: but at the same time it was like a maddened living creature making the wildest efforts to get free.

When I could bear this no longer I got up and walked about my room; then having still a certain command of myself though I could not master the commotion within me, I deliberately took down an exciting book from the shelf, a book of breathless adventure which had always interested me, and tried with that to break the spell. After a few minutes, however, I flung the book aside; I was gradually losing all power over myself. What I should be moved to do,—to shout aloud, to struggle with I know not what; or if I was going mad altogether, and next moment must be a raving lunatic, —I could not tell. I kept looking round, expecting I don't know what: several times, with the corner of my eye I seemed to see a movement, as if some one was stealing out of sight; but when I looked straight, there was never anything but the plain outlines of the wall and carpet, the chairs standing in good order. At last I snatched up the lamp in my hand and went out of the room. To look at the picture? which had been faintly showing in my imagination from time to time, the eyes, more anxious than ever, looking at me from out the silent air. But no; I passed the door of that room swiftly, moving, it seemed, without any volition of my own, and before I knew where I was going, went into my father's library with my lamp in my hand.

He was still sitting there at his writing-table; he looked up astonished to see me hurrying in with my light. "Phil!" he said, surprised. I remember that I shut the door behind me, and came up to him, and set down the lamp on his table. My sudden appearance alarmed him. "What is the matter?" he cried. "Philip, what have you been doing with yourself?"

I sat down on the nearest chair and gasped, gazing at him. The wild commotion ceased, the blood subsided into its natural channels, my heart resumed its place. I use such words as mortal weakness can to express the sensations I felt. I came to myself thus, gazing at him, confounded, at once by the extraordinary passion which I had gone through, and its sudden cessation. "The matter?" I cried; "I don't know what is the matter."

My father had pushed his spectacles up from his eyes. He appeared to me as faces appear in a fever, all glorified with light which is not in them—his eyes glowing, his white hair shining like silver; but his look was severe. "You are not a boy, that I should reprove you; but you ought to know better," he said.

Then I explained to him, so far as I was able, what had happened. Had happened? nothing had happened. He did not understand me—nor did I, now that it was over, understand myself; but he saw enough to make him aware that the disturbance in me was serious, and not caused by any folly of my own. He was very kind as soon as he had assured himself of this, and talked, taking pains to bring me back to unexciting subjects. He had a letter in his hand with a very deep border

of black when I came in. I observed it, without taking any notice or associating it with anything I knew. He had many correspondents, and although we were excellent friends, we had never been on those confidential terms which warrant one man in asking another from whom a special letter has come. We were not so near to each other as this, though we were father and son. After a while I went back to my own room, and finished the evening in my usual way, without any return of the excitement which, now that it was over, looked to me like some extraordinary dream. What had it meant? had it meant anything? I said to myself that it must be purely physical, something gone temporarily amiss, which had righted itself. It was physical; the excitement did not affect my mind. I was independent of it all the time, a spectator of my own agitation—a clear proof that, whatever it was, it had affected my bodily organisation alone.

Next day I returned to the problem which I had not been able to solve. I found out my petitioner in the back street, and that she was happy in the recovery of her possessions, which to my eyes indeed did not seem very worthy either of lamentation or delight. Nor was her house the tidy house which injured virtue should have when restored to its humble rights. She was not injured virtue, it was clear. She made me a great many curtseys, and poured forth a number of blessings. Her “man” came in while I was there, and hoped in a gruff voice that God would reward me, and that the old gentleman ‘d let ‘em alone. I did not like the looks of the man. It seemed to me that in the dark lane behind the house of a winter’s night he would not be a pleasant person to find in one’s way. Nor was this all: when I went out into the little street which it appeared was all, or almost all, my father’s property, a number of groups formed in my way, and at least half-a-dozen applicants sidled up. “I’ve more claims nor Mary Jordan any day,” said one; “I’ve lived on Squire Canning’s property, one place and another, this twenty year.” “And what do you say to me,” said another; “I’ve six children to her two, bless you, sir, and ne’er a father to do for them.” I believed in my father’s rule before I got out of the street, and approved his wisdom in keeping himself free from personal contact with his tenants. Yet when I looked back upon the swarming thoroughfare, the mean little houses, the women at their doors all so open-mouthed, and eager to contend for my favour, my heart sank within me at the thought that out of their misery some portion of our wealth came—I don’t care how small a portion: that I, young and strong, should be kept idle and in luxury, in some part through the money screwed out of their necessities, obtained sometimes by the sacrifice of everything they prized! Of course I know all the ordinary commonplaces of life as well as any one—that if you build a house with your hands or your money, and let it, the rent of it is your just due, and must be paid. But yet

“Don’t you think, sir,” I said that evening at dinner, the subject being reintroduced by my father himself, “that we have some duty towards them when we draw so much from them?”

“Certainly,” he said; “I take as much trouble about their drains as I do about my own.”

“That is always something, I suppose.”

“Something! it is a great deal—it is more than they get anywhere else. I keep them clean, as far as that’s possible. I give them at least the means of keeping clean, and thus check disease, and prolong life—which is more, I assure you, than they’ve any right to expect.”

I was not prepared with arguments as I ought to have been. That is all in the Gospel according to Adam Smith, which my father had been brought up in, but of which the tenets had begun to be less binding in my day. I wanted something more, or else something less; but my views were not so clear, nor my system so logical and well-built, as that upon which my father rested his conscience, and drew his percentage with a light heart.

Yet I thought there were signs in him of some perturbation. I met him one morning coming out of the room in which the portrait hung, as if he had gone to look at it stealthily. He was shaking

his head, and saying "No, no," to himself, not perceiving me, and I stepped aside when I saw him so absorbed. For myself, I entered that room but little. I went outside, as I had so often done when I was a child, and looked through the windows into the still and now sacred place, which had always impressed me with a certain awe. Looked at so, the slight figure in its white dress seemed to be stepping down into the room from some slight visionary altitude, looking with that which had seemed to me at first anxiety, which I sometimes represented to myself now as a wistful curiosity, as if she were looking for the life which might have been hers. Where was the existence that had belonged to her, the sweet household place, the infant she had left? She would no more recognise the man who thus came to look at her as through a veil with a mystic reverence, than I could recognise her. I could never be her child to her, any more than she could be a mother to me.

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Thus time passed on for several quiet days. There was nothing to make us give any special heed to the passage of time, life being very uneventful and its habits unvaried. My mind was very much preoccupied by my father's tenants. He had a great deal of property in the town which was so near us,—streets of small houses, the best-paying property (I was assured) of any. I was very anxious to come to some settled conclusion: on the one hand, not to let myself be carried away by sentiment; on the other, not to allow my strongly roused feelings to fall into the blank of routine, as his had done. I was seated one evening in my own sitting-room busy with this matter,—busy with calculations as to cost and profit, with an anxious desire to convince him, either that his profits were greater than justice allowed, or that they carried with them a more urgent duty than he had conceived.

It was night, but not late, not more than ten o'clock, the household still astir. Everything was quiet—not the solemnity of midnight silence, in which there is always something of mystery, but the soft-breathing quiet of the evening, full of the faint habitual sounds of a human dwelling, a consciousness of life about. And I was very busy with my figures, interested, feeling no room in my mind for any other thought. The singular experience which had startled me so much had passed over very quickly, and there had been no return. I had ceased to think of it: indeed I had never thought of it save for the moment, setting it down after it was over to a physical cause without much difficulty. At this time I was far too busy to have thoughts to spare for anything, or room for imagination: and when suddenly in a moment, without any warning, the first symptom returned, I started with it into determined resistance, resolute not to be fooled by any mock influence which could resolve itself into the action of nerves or ganglions. The first symptom, as before, was that my heart sprang up with a bound, as if a cannon had been fired at my ear. My whole being responded with a start. The pen fell out of my fingers, the figures went out of my head as if all faculty had departed: and yet I was conscious for a time at least of keeping my self-control. I was like the rider of a frightened horse, rendered almost wild by something which in the mystery of its voiceless being it has seen, something on the road which it will not pass, but wildly plunging, resisting every persuasion, turns from, with ever increasing passion. The rider himself after a time becomes infected with this inexplicable desperation of terror, and I suppose I must have done so: but for a time I kept the upper hand. I would not allow myself to spring up as I wished, as my impulse was, but sat there doggedly, clinging to my books, to my table, fixing myself on I did not mind what, to resist the flood of sensation, of emotion, which was sweeping through me, carrying me away. I tried to continue my calculations. I tried to stir myself up with

recollections of the miserable sights I had seen, the poverty, the helplessness. I tried to work myself into indignation; but all through these efforts I felt the contagion growing upon me, my mind falling into sympathy with all those straining faculties of the body, startled, excited, driven wild by something I knew not what. It was not fear. I was like a ship at sea straining and plunging against wind and tide, but I was not afraid. I am obliged to use these metaphors, otherwise I could give no explanation of my condition, seized upon against my will, and torn from all those moorings of reason to which I clung with desperation—as long as I had the strength.

When I got up from my chair at last, the battle was lost, so far as my powers of self-control were concerned. I got up, or rather was dragged up, from my seat, clutching at these material things round me as with a last effort to hold my own. But that was no longer possible; I was overcome. I stood for a moment looking round me feebly, feeling myself begin to babble with stammering lips, which was the alternative of shrieking, and which I seemed to choose as a lesser evil. What I said was, “What am I to do?” and after a while, “What do you want me to do?” although throughout I saw no one, heard no voice, and had in reality not power enough in my dizzy and confused brain to know what I myself meant. I stood thus for a moment looking blankly round me for guidance, repeating the question, which seemed after a time to become almost mechanical. What do you want me to do? though I neither knew to whom I addressed it nor why I said it. Presently—whether in answer, whether in mere yielding of nature, I cannot tell—I became aware of a difference: not a lessening of the agitation, but a softening, as if my powers of resistance being exhausted, a gentler force, a more benignant influence, had room. I felt myself consent to whatever it was. My heart melted in the midst of the tumult; I seemed to give myself up, and move as if drawn by some one whose arm was in mine, as if softly swept along, not forcibly, but with an utter consent of all my faculties to do I knew not what, for love of I knew not whom. For love—that was how it seemed—not by force, as when I went before. But my steps took the same course: I went through the dim passages in an exaltation indescribable, and opened the door of my father’s room.

He was seated there at his table as usual, the light of the lamp falling on his white hair: he looked up with some surprise at the sound of the opening door. “Phil,” he said, and, with a look of wondering apprehension on his face, watched my approach. I went straight up to him, and put my hand on his shoulder. “Phil, what is the matter? What do you want with me? What is it?” he said.

“Father, I can’t tell you. I come not of myself. There must be something in it, though I don’t know what it is. This is the second time I have been brought to you here.”

“Are you going?” he stopped himself. The exclamation had been begun with an angry intention. He stopped, looking at me with a scared look, as if perhaps it might be true.

“Do you mean mad? I don’t think so. I have no delusions that I know of. Father, think—do you know any reason why I am brought here? for some cause there must be.”

I stood with my hand upon the back of his chair. His table was covered with papers, among which were several letters with the broad black border which I had before observed. I noticed this now in my excitement without any distinct associations of thoughts, for that I was not capable of; but the black border caught my eye. And I was conscious that he, too, gave a hurried glance at them, and with one hand swept them away.

“Philip,” he said, pushing back his chair, “you must be ill, my poor boy. Evidently we have not been treating you rightly: you have been more ill all through than I supposed. Let me persuade you to go to bed.”

"I am perfectly well," I said. "Father, don't let us deceive one another. I am neither a man to go mad nor to see ghosts. What it is that has got the command over me I can't tell: but there is some cause for it. You are doing something or planning something with which I have a right to interfere."

He turned round squarely in his chair with a spark in his blue eyes. He was not a man to be meddled with. "I have yet to learn what can give my son a right to interfere. I am in possession of all my faculties, I hope."

"Father," I cried, "won't you listen to me? no one can say I have been undutiful or disrespectful. I am a man, with a right to speak my mind, and I have done so; but this is different. I am not here by my own will. Something that is stronger than I has brought me. There is something in your mind which disturbs—others. I don't know what I am saying. This is not what I meant to say: but you know the meaning better than I. Some one—who can speak to you only by me—speaks to you by me; and I know that you understand."

He gazed up at me, growing pale, and his under lip fell. I, for my part, felt that my message was delivered. My heart sank into a stillness so sudden that it made me faint. The light swam in my eyes: everything went round with me. I kept upright only by my hold upon the chair; and in the sense of utter weakness that followed, I dropped on my knees I think first, then on the nearest seat that presented itself, and covering my face with my hands, had hard ado not to sob, in the sudden removal of that strange influence, the relaxation of the strain.

There was silence between us for some time then he said, but with a voice slightly broken, "I don't understand you, Phil. You must have taken some fancy into your mind which my slower intelligence—Speak out what you want to say. What do you find fault with? Is it all—all that woman Jordan?"

He gave a short forced laugh as he broke oW and shook me almost roughly by the shoulder, saying, "Speak out! what—what do you want to say?"

"It seems, sir, that I have said everything." My voice trembled more than his, but not in the same way. "I have told you that I did not come by my own will—quite otherwise. I resisted as long as I could: now all is said. It is for you to judge whether it was worth the trouble or not."

He got up from his seat in a hurried way. "You would have me as—mad as yourself," he said, then sat down again as quickly. "Come, Phil: if it will please you, not to make a breach, the first breach, between us, you shall have your way. I consent to your looking into that matter about the poor tenants.

Your mind shall not be upset about that, even though I don't enter into all your views."

"Thank you," I said; "but, father, that is not what it is."

"Then it is a, piece of folly," he said, angrily. "I suppose you mean—but this is a matter in which I choose to judge for myself."

"You know what I mean," I said, as quietly as I could, "though I don't myself know; that proves there is good reason for it. Will you do one thing for me before I leave you? Come with me into the drawing-room—"

"What end," he said, with again the tremble in his voice, "is to be served by that?"

"I don't very well know; but to look at her, you and I together, will always do something for us, sir. As for breach, there can be no breach when we stand there."

He got up, trembling like an old man, which he was, but which he never looked like save at moments of emotion like this, and told me to take the light; then stopped when he had got half-way across the room. "This is a piece of theatrical sentimentality," he said. "No, Phil, I will not

go. I will not bring her into any such— Put down the lamp, and if you will take my advice, go to bed.”

“At least,” I said, “I will trouble you no more, father, to-night. So long as you understand, there need be no more to say.”

He gave me a very curt “good-night,” and turned back to his papers—the letters with the black edge, either by my imagination or in reality, always keeping uppermost. I went to my own room for my lamp, and then alone proceeded to the silent shrine in which the portrait hung. I at least would look at her to-night. I don’t know whether I asked myself, in so many words, if it were she who—or if it was any one—I knew nothing; but my heart was drawn with a softness—born, perhaps, of the great weakness in which I was left after that visitation—to her, to look at her, to see perhaps if there was any sympathy, any approval in her face. I set down my lamp on the table where her little work-basket still was: the light threw a gleam upward upon her,—she seemed more than ever to be stepping into the room, coming down towards me, coming back to her life. Ah no! her life was lost and vanished: all mine stood between her and the days she knew. She looked at me with eyes that did not change. The anxiety I had seen at first seemed now a wistful subdued question; but that difference was not in her look but in mine.

I need not linger on the intervening time. The doctor who attended us usually, came in next day “by accident,” and we had a long conversation. On the following day a very impressive yet genial gentleman from town lunched with us—a friend of my father’s, Dr Something; but the introduction was hurried, and I did not catch his name. He, too, had a long talk with me afterwards—my father being called away to speak to some one on business. Dr drew me out on the subject of the dwellings of the poor. He said he heard I took great interest in this question, which had come so much to the front at the present moment. He was interested in it too, and wanted to know the view I took. I explained at considerable length that my view did not concern the general subject, on which I had scarcely thought, so much as the individual mode of management of my father’s estate. He was a most patient and intelligent listener, agreeing with me on some points, differing in others; and his visit was very pleasant. I had no idea until after of its special object: though a certain puzzled look and slight shake of the head when my father returned, might have thrown some light upon it. The report of the medical experts in my case must, however, have been quite satisfactory, for I heard nothing more of them. It was, I think, a fortnight later when the next and last of these strange experiences came.

This time it was morning, about noon,—a wet and rather dismal spring day. The half-spread leaves seemed to tap at the window, with an appeal to be taken in; the primroses, that showed golden upon the grass at the roots of the trees, just beyond the smooth-shorn grass of the lawn, were all drooped and sodden among their sheltering leaves. The very growth seemed dreary—the sense of spring in the air making the feeling of winter a grievance, instead of the natural effect which it had conveyed a few months before. I had been writing letters, and was cheerful enough, going back among the associates of my old life, with, perhaps, a little longing for its freedom and independence, but at the same time a not ungrateful consciousness that for the moment my present tranquillity might be best.

This was my condition—a not unpleasant one—when suddenly the now well-known symptoms of the visitation to which I had become subject suddenly seized upon me,—the leap of the heart; the sudden, causeless, overwhelming physical excitement, which I could neither ignore nor allay. I was terrified beyond description, beyond reason, when I became conscious that this was about to begin over again: what purpose did it answer, what good was in it? My father indeed understood the meaning of it, though I did not understand: but it was little agreeable to be thus

made a helpless instrument without any will of mine, in an operation of which I knew nothing; and to enact the part of the oracle unwillingly, with suffering and such a strain as it took me days to get over. I resisted, not as before, but yet desperately, trying with better knowledge to keep down the growing passion. I hurried to my room and swallowed a dose of a sedative which had been given me to procure sleep on my first return from India. I saw Morpheus in the hall, and called him to talk to him, and cheat myself, if possible, by that means. Morpheus lingered, however, and, before he came, I was beyond conversation. I heard him speak, his voice coming vaguely through the turmoil which was already in my ears, but what he said I have never known. I stood staring, trying to recover my power of attention, with an aspect which ended by completely frightening the man. He cried out at last that he was sure I was ill, that he must bring me something; which words penetrated more or less into my maddened brain. It became impressed upon me that he was going to get some one—one of my father's doctors, perhaps—to prevent me from acting, to stop my interference,—and that if I waited a moment longer I might be too late. A vague idea seized me at the same time, of taking refuge with the portrait—going to its feet, throwing myself there, perhaps, till the paroxysm should be over. But it was not there that my footsteps were directed. I can remember making an effort to open the door of the drawing-room, and feeling myself swept past it, as if by a gale of wind. It was not there that I had to go. I knew very well where I had to go,—once more on my confused and voiceless mission to my father, who understood, although I could not understand.

Yet as it was daylight, and all was clear, I could not help noting one or two circumstances on my way. I saw some one sitting in the hall as if waiting—a woman, a girl, a black-shrouded figure, with a thick veil over her face: and asked myself who she was, and what she wanted there? This question, which had nothing to do with my present condition, somehow got into my mind, and was tossed up and down upon the tumultuous tide like a stray log on the breast of a fiercely rolling stream, now submerged, now coming uppermost, at the mercy of the waters. It did not stop me for a moment, as I hurried towards my father's room, but it got upon the current of my mind. I flung open my father's door, and closed it again after me, without seeing who was there or how he was engaged. The full clearness of the daylight did not identify him as the lamp did at night. He looked up at the sound of the door, with a glance of apprehension; and rising suddenly, interrupting some one who was standing speaking to him with much earnestness and even vehemence, came forward to meet me. "I cannot be disturbed at present," he said quickly; "I am busy." Then seeing the look in my face, which by this time he knew, he too changed colour. "Phil," he said, in a low, imperative voice, "wretched boy, go away—go away; don't let a stranger see you—"

"I can't go away," I said. "It is impossible. You know why I have come. I cannot, if I would. It is more powerful than I—"

"Go, sir," he said; "go at once—no more of this folly. I will not have you in this room. Go—go!"

I made no answer. I don't know that I could have done so. There had never been any struggle between us before; but I had no power to do one thing or another. The tumult within me was in full career. I heard indeed what he said, and was able to reply; but his words, too, were like straws tossed upon the tremendous stream. I saw now with my feverish eyes who the other person present was. It was a woman, dressed also in mourning similar to the one in the hall; but this a middle-aged woman, like a respectable servant. She had been crying, and in the pause caused by this encounter between my father and myself, dried her eyes with a handkerchief, which she rolled like a ball in her hand, evidently in strong emotion. She turned and looked at me

as my father spoke to me, for a moment with a gleam of hope, then falling back into her former attitude.

My father returned to his seat. He was much agitated too, though doing all that was possible to conceal it. My inopportune arrival was evidently a great and unlooked-for vexation to him. He gave me the only look of passionate displeasure I have ever had from him, as he sat down again: but he said nothing more.

“You must understand,” he said, addressing the woman, “that I have said my last words on this subject. I don’t choose to enter into it again in the presence of my son, who is not well enough to be made a party to any discussion. I am sorry that you should have had so much trouble in vain; but you were warned beforehand, and you have only yourself to blame. I acknowledge no claim, and nothing you can say will change my resolution. I must beg you to go away. All this is very painful and quite useless. I acknowledge no claim.”

“Oh, sir,” she cried, her eyes beginning once more to flow, her speech interrupted by little sobs. “Maybe I did wrong to speak of a claim. I’m not educated to argue with a gentleman. Maybe we have no claim. But if it’s not by right, oh, Mr Canning, won’t you let your heart be touched by pity? She don’t know what I’m saying, poor dear. She’s not one to beg and pray for herself as I’m doing for her. Oh, sir, she’s so young! She’s so lone in this world—not a friend to stand by her, nor a house to take her in! You are the nearest to her of any one that’s left in this world. She hasn’t a relation—not one so near as you oh!” she cried, with a sudden thought, turning quickly round upon me, “this gentleman’s your son! Now I think of it, it’s not your relation she is, but his, through his mother! That’s nearer, nearer! Oh, sir! you’re young; your heart should be more tender. Here is my young lady that has no one in the world to look to her. Your own flesh and blood: your mother’s cousin—your mother’s—”

My father called to her to stop, with a voice of thunder. “Philip, leave us at once. It is not a matter to be discussed with you.”

And then in a moment it became clear to me what it was. It had been with difficulty that I had kept myself still. My breast was labouring with the fever of an impulse poured into me, more than I could contain. And now for the first time I knew why. I hurried towards him, and took his hand, though he resisted, into mine. Mine were burning, but his like ice: their touch burnt me with its chill, like fire. “This is what it is?” I cried. “I had no knowledge before. I don’t know now what is being asked of you. But, father—understand! You know, and I know now, that some one sends me—some one—who has a right to interfere.”

He pushed me away with all his might. “You are mad,” he cried. “What right have you to think? Oh, you are mad—mad! I have seen it coming on—”

The woman, the petitioner, had grown silent, watching this brief conflict with the terror and interest with which women watch a struggle between men. She started and fell back when she heard what he said, but did not take her eyes off me, following every movement I made. When I turned to go away, a cry of indescribable disappointment and remonstrance burst from her, and even my father raised himself up and stared at my withdrawal, astonished to find that he had overcome me so soon and easily. I paused for a moment, and looked back on them, seeing them large and vague through the mist of fever. “I am not going away,” I said. “I am going for another messenger—one you can’t gainsay.”

My father rose. He called out to me threateningly, “I will have nothing touched that is hers. Nothing that is hers shall be profaned—”

I waited to hear no more: I knew what I had to do. By what means it was conveyed to me I cannot tell; but the certainty of an influence which no one thought of calmed me in the midst of

my fever. I went out into the hall, where I had seen the young stranger waiting. I went up to her and touched her on the shoulder. She rose at once, with a little movement of alarm, yet with docile and instant obedience, as if she had expected the summons. I made her take off her veil and her bonnet, scarcely looking at her, scarcely seeing her, knowing how it was: I took her soft, small, cool, yet trembling hand into mine; it was so soft and cool, not cold, it refreshed me with its tremulous touch. All through I moved and spoke like a man in a dream, swiftly, noiselessly, all the complications of waking life removed, without embarrassment, without reflection, without the loss of a moment. My father was still standing up, leaning a little forward as he had done when I withdrew, threatening, yet terror-stricken, not knowing what I might be about to do, when I returned with my companion. That was the one thing he had not thought of. He was entirely undefended, unprepared. He gave her one look, flung up his arms above his head, and uttered a distracted cry, so wild that it seemed the last outcry of nature—"Agnes!" then fell back like a sudden ruin, upon himself, into his chair.

I had no leisure to think how he was, or whether he could hear what I said. I had my message to deliver. "Father," I said, labouring with my panting breath, "it is for this that heaven has opened, and one whom I never saw, one whom I know not, has taken possession of me. Had we been less earthly we should have seen her—herself, and not merely her image. I have not even known what she meant. I have been as a fool without understanding. This is the third time I have come to you with her message, without knowing what to say. But now I have found it out. This is her message. I have found it out at last."

There was an awful pause—a pause in which no one moved or breathed. Then there came a broken voice out of my father's chair. He had not understood, though I think he heard what I said. He put out two feeble hands. "Phil—I think I am dying—has she—has she come for me?" he said.

We had to carry him to his bed. What struggles he had gone through before I cannot tell. He had stood fast, and had refused to be moved, and now he fell—like an old tower, like an old tree. The necessity there was for thinking of him saved me from the physical consequences which had prostrated me on a former occasion. I had no leisure now for any consciousness of how matters went with myself.

His delusion was not wonderful, but most natural. She was clothed in black from head to foot, instead of the white dress of the portrait. She had no knowledge of the conflict, of nothing but that she was called for, that her fate might depend on the next few minutes. In her eyes there was a pathetic question, a line of anxiety in the lids, an innocent appeal in the looks. And the face the same: the same lips, sensitive, ready to quiver; the same innocent, candid brow; the look of a common race, which is more subtle than mere resemblance. How I knew that it was so, I cannot tell, nor any man. It was the other—the elder—ah no! not elder; the ever young, the Agnes to whom age can never come—she who they say was the mother of a man who never saw her—it was she who led her kinswoman, her representative, into our hearts.

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My father recovered after a few days: he had taken cold, it was said, the day before—and naturally, at seventy, a small matter is enough to upset the balance even of a strong man. He got quite well; but he was willing enough afterwards to leave the management of that ticklish kind of property which involves human wellbeing in my hands, who could move about more freely, and see with my own eyes how things were going on. He liked home better, and had more pleasure in

his personal existence in the end of his life. Agnes is now my wife, as he had, of course, foreseen. It was not merely the disinclination to receive her father's daughter, or to take upon him a new responsibility, that had moved him, to do him justice. But both these motives had told strongly. I have never been told, and now will never be told, what his griefs against my mother's family, and specially against that cousin, had been; but that he had been very determined, deeply prejudiced, there can be no doubt. It turned out after, that the first occasion on which I had been mysteriously commissioned to him with a message which I did not understand, and which for that time he did not understand, was the evening of the day on which he had received the dead man's letter, appealing to him—to him, a man whom he had wronged—on behalf of the child who was about to be left friendless in the world. The second time, further letters, from the nurse who was the only guardian of the orphan, and the chaplain of the place where her father had died, taking it for granted that my father's house was her natural refuge—had been received. The third I have already described, and its results.

For a long time after, my mind was never without a lurking fear that the influence which had once taken possession of me might return again. Why should I have feared to be influenced—to be the messenger of a blessed creature, whose wishes could be nothing but heavenly? Who can say? Flesh and blood is not made for such encounters: they were more than I could bear. But nothing of the kind has ever occurred again.

Agnes had her peaceful domestic throne established under the picture. My father wished it to be so, and spent his evenings there in the warmth and light, instead of in the old library, in the narrow circle cleared by our lamp out of the darkness, as long as he lived. It is supposed by strangers that the picture on the wall is that of my wife; and I have always been glad that it should be so supposed. She who was my mother, who came back to me and became as my soul for three strange moments and no more, but with whom I can feel no credible relationship as she stands there, has retired for me into the tender regions of the unseen. She has passed once more into the secret company of those shadows, who can only become real in an atmosphere fitted to modify and harmonise all differences, and make all wonders possible—the light of the perfect day.