

Guest's Confession

Henry James

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Proofreading by Sarah Koch (SKoch28879@aol.com)

PART FIRST.

I.

"ARRIVE half past eight. Sick. Meet me."

The telegraphic brevity of my step-brother's missive gave that melancholy turn to my thoughts which was the usual result of his communications. He was to have come on the Friday; what had made him start off on Wednesday? The terms on which we stood were a perpetual source of irritation. We were utterly unlike in temper and taste and opinions, and yet, having a number of common interests, we were obliged, after a fashion, to compromise with each other's idiosyncrasies. In fact, the concessions were all on my side. He was altogether too much my superior in all that makes the man who counts in the world for me not to feel it, and it cost me less to let him take his way than to make a stand for my dignity. What I did through indolence and in some degree, I confess, through pusillanimity, I had a fancy to make it appear (by dint of much whistling, as it were, and easy thrusting of my hands into my pockets) that I did through a sort of generous condescension. Edgar cared little enough upon what recipe I compounded a salve for my vanity, so long as he held his own course; and I am afraid I played the slumbering giant to altogether empty benches. There had been, indeed, a vague tacit understanding that he was to treat me, in form, as a man with a mind of his own, and there was occasionally something most incisively sarcastic in his observance of the treaty. What made matters the worse for me, and the better for him, was an absurd physical disparity; for Musgrave was like nothing so much as Falstaff's description of Shallow, a man made after supper of a cheese-paring. He was a miserable invalid, and was perpetually concerned with his stomach, his lungs, and his liver, and as he was both doctor and patient in one, they kept him very busy. His head was grotesquely large for his diminutive figure, his eye fixed and salient, and his complexion liable to flush with an air of indignation and suspicion. He practised a most resolute little strut on a most attenuated pair of little legs.

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For myself, I was tall, happily; for I was broad enough, if I had been shorter, to have perhaps incurred that invidious monosyllabic epithet which haunted Lord Byron. As compared with Edgar, I was at least fairly good-looking; a stoutish, blondish, indolent, amiable, rather gorgeous young fellow might have served as my personal formula. My patrimony, being double that of my stepbrother (for we were related by my mother), was largely lavished on the adornment of this fine person. I dressed in fact, as I recollect, with a sort of barbaric splendor, and I may very well have passed for one of the social pillars of a small watering-place.

L – was in those days just struggling into fame, and but that it savored overmuch of the fresh paint lately lavished upon the various wooden barracks in which visitors were to be accommodated, it yielded a pleasant mixture of rurality and society. The vile taste and the sovereign virtue of the spring were fairly established, and Edgar was not the man to forego the chance of trying the waters and abusing them. Having heard that the hotel was crowded, he wished to secure a room at least a week beforehand; the upshot of which was, that I came down on the 19th of July with the mission to retain and occupy his apartment till the 26th. I passed, with people in general, and with Edgar in particular, for so very idle a person that it seemed almost a duty to saddle me with some wholesome errand. Edgar had, first and always, his health to attend to, and then that neat little property and those everlasting accounts, which he was never weary of contemplating, verifying, and overhauling. I had made up my mind to make over his room to him, remain a day or two for civility's sake and then leave him to his cups. Meanwhile, on the 24th, it occurred to me that I ought really to see something of the place. The weather had been too hot for going about, and, as yet, I had hardly left the piazza of the hotel. Towards afternoon the clouds gathered, the sun was obscured, and it seemed possible even for a large, lazy man to take a walk. I went along beside the river, under the trees, rejoicing much in the midsummer prettiness of all the land and in the sultry afternoon stillness. I was discomposed and irritated, and all for no better reason than that Edgar was coming. What was Edgar that his comings and goings should affect me? Was I, after all, so excessively his younger brother? I would turn over a new leaf! I almost wished things would come to a crisis between us, and that in the glow of exasperation I might say or do something unpardonable. But there was small chance of my quarrelling with Edgar for vanity's sake. Somehow, I didn't believe in my own egotism, but I had an indefeasible respect for his. I was fatally good-natured, and I should continue to do his desire until I began to do that of some one else. If I might only fall in love and exchange my master for a mistress, for some charming goddess of unreason who would declare that Mr. Musgrave was simply intolerable and that was an end of it!

So, meditating vaguely, I arrived at the little Episcopal chapel, which stands on the margin of the village where the latter begins to melt away into the large river-side landscape. The door was slightly ajar: there came through it into the hot outer stillness the low sound of an organ, the rehearsal, evidently, of the organist or of some gentle amateur. I was warm with walking, and this glimpse of the cool musical dimness within prompted me to enter and rest and listen. The body of the church was empty; but a feeble glow of color was diffused through the little yellow and crimson windows upon the pews and the cushioned pulpit. The organ was erected in a small gallery facing the chancel, into which the ascent was by a short stairway directly from the church. The sound of my tread was apparently covered by the music, for the player continued without heeding me, hidden as she was behind a little blue silk curtain on the edge of the gallery. Yes, that gentle, tentative, unprofessional touch came from a feminine hand. Uncertain as it was, however, it wrought upon my musical sensibilities with a sort of provoking force. The air was familiar, and, before I knew it, I had begun to furnish the vocal accompaniment, first gently, then boldly. Standing with my face to the organ, I awaited the effect of my venture. The only perceptible result was that, for a moment, the music faltered and the curtains were stirred. I saw nothing, but I had been seen, and, reassured apparently by my aspect, the organist resumed the chant. Slightly mystified, I felt urged to sing my best, the more so that, as I continued, the player seemed to borrow confidence and emulation from my voice. The notes rolled out bravely, and the little vault resounded. Suddenly there seemed to come to the musician, in the ardor of success, a full accession of vigor and skill. The last chords were struck with a kind of triumphant intensity, and their cadence was marked by a clear soprano voice. Just at the close, however, voice and music mere swallowed up in the roll of a huge thunder-clap. At the same instant, the storm-drops began to strike the chapel-windows, and we were sheeted in a summer rain. The rain was a bore; but, at least, I should have a look at the organist, concerning whom my curiosity had suddenly grown great. The thunder-claps followed each other with such

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violence that it was vain to continue to play. I waited, in the confident belief that that charming voice half a dozen notes had betrayed it denoted a charming woman. After the lapse of some moments, which seemed to indicate a graceful and appealing hesitancy, a female figure appeared at the top of the little stairway and began to descend. I walked slowly down the aisle. The stormy darkness had rapidly increased, and at this moment, with a huge burst of thunder, following a blinding flash, a momentary midnight fell upon our refuge. When things had become visible again, I beheld the fair musician at the foot of the steps, gazing at me with all the frankness of agitation. The little chapel was rattling to its foundations.

"Do you think there is any danger?" asked my companion.

I made haste to assure her there was none. "The chapel has nothing in the nature of a spire, and even if it had, the fact of our being in a holy place ought to insure us against injury."

She looked at me wonderingly, as if to see whether I was in jest. To satisfy her, I smiled as graciously as I might. Whereupon, gathering confidence, "I think we have each of us," she said, "so little right to be here that we can hardly claim the benefit of sanctuary."

"Are you too an interloper?" I asked.

She hesitated a moment. "I'm not an Episcopalian," she replied; "I'm a good Unitarian."

"Well, I'm a poor Episcopalian. It's six of one and half a dozen of the other." There came another long, many-sheeted flash and an immediate wild reverberation. My companion, as she stood before me, was vividly illumined from head to foot. It was as if some fierce natural power had designed to interpose her image on my soul forever, in this merciless electric glare. As I saw her then, I have never ceased to see her since. I have called her fair, but the word needs explanation. Singularly pleasing as she was, it was with a charm that was all her own. Not the charm of beauty, but of a certain intense expressiveness, which seems to have given beauty the go-by in the very interest of grace. Slender, meagre, without redundancy of outline or brilliancy of color, she was a person you might never have noticed, but would certainly never forget. What there was was so charming, what there might be so interesting! There was none of the idleness of conscious beauty in her clear gray eyes; they seemed charged with the impatience of a restless mind. Her glance and smile, her step and gesture, were as light and distinct as a whispered secret. She was nervous, curious, zealous, slightly imperious, and delicately elegant withal; without which, possibly, she might have seemed a trifle too positive. There is a certain sweet unreason in a picturesque toilet. She was dressed in a modish adjustment of muslins and lace, which denoted the woman who may have fancied that even less beauty might yet please. While I drew my conclusions, they were eminently flattering, my companion was buttoning her gloves and looking anxiously at the dripping windows. Wishing, as far as I might, to beguile her impatience, I proceeded to apologize for the liberty I had taken in singing to her music. "My best excuse," I said, "is your admirable playing, and my own most sensitive ear!"

"You might have frightened me away," she answered. "But you sang too well for that, better than I played. In fact, I was afraid to stop, I thought you might be one of the the hierarchy."

"A bishop!"

"A bishop, a dean, a deacon, or something of that sort."

"The sexton, perhaps."

"Before the sexton I should have succumbed. I take it his business would have been to eject me as a meddlesome heretic. I came in for no better reason than that the church door was ajar."

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"As a church door ought always to be."

She looked at me a moment. "No; see what comes of it."

"No great harm, it seems to me."

"O, that's very well for us! But a church shouldn't be made a place of convenience."

I wished, in the interest of our growing intimacy, to make a point. "If it is not a place of convenience," I ventured to propound, deprecating offence with a smile, "what is it?"

It was an observation I afterwards made, that in cases when many women drop their eyes and look prettily silly or prudishly alarmed, this young lady's lucid glance would become more unaffectedly direct and searching.

"Indeed," she answered, "you *are* but an indifferent Episcopalian! I came in because the door was open, because I was warm with my walk, and because, I confess, I have an especial fondness for going into churches on week-days. One does it in Europe, you know; and it reminds me of Europe."

I cast a glance over the naked tabernacle, with the counterfeit graining scarcely dry on its beams and planks, and a strong aroma of turpentine and putty representing the odor of sanctity. She followed my glance; our eyes met, and we laughed. From this moment we talked with a freedom tempered less by the sanctity of the spot than by a certain luxury of deference with which I felt prompted to anticipate possible mistrust. The rain continued to descend with such steady good-will that it seemed needful to accept our situation frankly and conjure away the spirit of awkwardness. We spoke of L —, of the people there, of the hot weather, of music. She had as yet seen little of the place, having been confined to her apartments by domestic reasons. I wondered what her domestic reasons were. She had come forth at last to call upon a friend at one of the boarding-houses which adorned this suburb of the village. Her friend being out, but likely soon to return, she had sought entertainment in a stroll along the road, and so had wandered into the chapel. Our interview lasted half an hour. As it drew to a close, I fancied there had grown up between us some delicate bond, begotten of our mutual urbanity. I might have been indiscreet; as it was, I took my pleasure in tracing the gradual evanescence of my companion's sense of peril. As the moments elapsed, she sat down on the bench with an air of perfect equanimity, and looked patiently at the trickling windows. The still small voice of some familiar spirit of the Lord, haunting the dedicated vault, seemed to have audibly blessed our meeting. At last the rain abated and suddenly stopped, and through a great rift in the clouds there leaped a giant sunbeam and smote the trickling windows. Through little gaudy lozenges the chapel was flooded with prismatic light. "The storm is over," said my companion. She spoke without rising, as if she had been cheated of the sense of haste. Was it calculated civility, or was it momentary self-oblivion? Whatever it was, it lasted but a moment. We were on our feet and moving toward the door. As we stood in the porch, honest gallantry demanded its rights.

"I never knew before," I said, "the possible blessings of a summer rain."

She proceeded a few steps before she answered. Then glancing at the shing sky, already blue and free, "In ten minutes," she said, "there will be no trace of it!"

"Does that mean," I frankly demanded, "that we are not to meet again as friends?"

"Are we to meet again at all?"

"I count upon it."

"Certainly, then, not as enemies!" As she walked away, I implored those restrictions of modern civilization which forbade me to stand and gaze at her.

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Who was she? What was she? questions the more intense as, in the absence of any further evidence than my rapid personal impression, they were so provokingly vain. They occupied me, however, during the couple of hours which were to elapse before my step-brother's arrival. When his train became due, I went through the form, as usual, of feeling desperately like treating myself to the luxury of neglecting his summons and leaving him to shift for himself; as if I had not the most distinct prevision of the inevitable event, of my being at the station half an hour too early, of my calling his hack and making his bargain and taking charge of his precious little hand-bag, full of medicine-bottles, and his ridiculous bundle of umbrellas and canes. Somehow, this evening, I felt unwontedly loath and indocile; but I contented myself with this bold flight of the imagination.

It is hard to describe fairly my poor step-brother's peculiar turn of mind, to give an adequate impression of his want of social charm, to put it mildly, without accusing him of wilful malevolence. He was simply the most consistent and incorruptible of egotists. He was perpetually affirming and defining and insuring himself, insisting upon a personal right or righting a personal wrong. And above all, he was a man of conscience. He asked no odds, and he gave none. He made honesty something unlovely, but he was rigidly honest. He demanded simply his dues, and he collected them to the last farthing. These things gave him a portentous solemnity. He smiled perhaps once a month, and made a joke once in six. There are jokes of his making which, to this day, give me a shiver when I think of them. But I soon perceived, as he descended from the train, that there would be no joke that evening. Something had happened. His face was hard and sombre, and his eye bright and fierce. "A carriage," he said, giving me his hand stiffly. And when we were seated and driving away, "First of all," he demanded, "are there any mosquitoes? A single mosquito would finish me. And is my room habitable, on the shady side, away from the stairs, with a view, with a hair-mattress?" I assured him that mosquitoes were unknown, and that his room was the best, and his mattress the softest in the house. Was he tired? how had he been?

"Don't ask me. I'm in an extremely critical state. Tired? Tired is a word for well people! When I'm tired I shall go to bed and die. Thank God, so long as I have any work to do, I can hold up my head! I haven't slept in a week. It's singular, but I'm never so well disposed for my duties as when I haven't slept! But be so good, for the present, as to ask me no questions. I shall immediately take a bath and drink some arrow-root; I have brought a package in my bag, I suppose I can get them to make it. I'll speak about it at the office. No, I think, on the whole, I'll make it in my room; I have a little machine for boiling water. I think I shall drink half a glass of the spring to-night, just to make a beginning."

All this was said with as profound a gravity as if he were dictating his will. But I saw that he was at a sort of white-heat exasperation, and I knew that in time I should learn where the shoe pinched. Meanwhile, I attempted to say something cheerful and frivolous, and offered some information as to who was at the hotel and who was expected; "No one you know or care about, I think."

"Very likely not. I'm in no mood for gossip."

"You seem nervous," I ventured to say.

"Nervous? Call it frantic! I'm not blessed with your apathetic temperament, nor with your elegant indifference to money-matters. Do you know what's the matter with me? I've lost twenty thousand dollars."

I, of course, demanded particulars; but, for the present, I had to content myself with the naked fact. "It's a mighty serious matter," said Edgar. "I can't talk of it further till I have bathed and changed my linen. The thermometer has been at ninety-one in my rooms in town. I've had this pretty piece of news to keep me cool."

I left him to his bath, his toilet, and his arrow-root and strolled about pondering the mystery of his disaster. Truly, if Edgar had lost money, shrewdness was out of tune. Destiny must have got up early to outwit my step-brother. And yet his misfortune gave him a sort of unwonted grace, and I believe I wondered for five minutes whether there was a chance of his being relaxed and softened by it. I had, indeed, a momentary vision of lending him

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money, and taking a handsome revenge as a good-natured creditor. But Edgar would never borrow. He would either recover his money or grimly do without it. On going back to his room I found him dressed and refreshed, screwing a little portable kettle upon his gas-burner.

"You can never get them to bring you water that really boils," he said. "They don't know what it means. You're altogether wrong about the mosquitoes; I'm sure I heard one, and by the sound, he's a monster. But I have a net folded up in my trunk, and a hook and ring which I mean to drive into the ceiling."

"I'll put up your net. Meanwhile, tell me about your twenty thousand dollars."

He was silent awhile, but at last he spoke in a voice forcibly attuned to composure. "You're immensely tickled, I suppose, to find me losing money! That comes of worrying too much and handling my funds too often. Yes, I *have* worried too much." He paused, and then, suddenly, he broke out into a kind of fury. "I hate waste, I hate shiftlessness, I hate nasty mismanagement! I hate to see money bring in less than it may. My imagination loves a good investment. I respect my property, I respect other people's. But your own honesty is all you'll find in this world, and it will go no farther than you're there to carry it. You've always thought me hard and suspicious and grasping. No, you never said so; should I have cared if you had? With your means, it's all very well to be a fine gentleman, to skip the items and glance at the total. But, being poor and sick, I have to be close. I wasn't close enough. What do you think of my having been cheated? cheated under my very nose? I hope I'm genteel enough now!"

"I should like to see the man!" I cried.

"You shall see him. All the world shall see him. I've been looking into the matter. It has been beautifully done. If I were to be a rascal, I should like to be just such a one."

"Who is your rascal?"

"His name is John Guest."

I had heard the name, but had never seen the man.

"No, you don't know him," Edgar went on. "No one knows him but I. But I know him well. He had things in his hands for a week, while I was debating a transfer of my New Jersey property. In a week this is how he mixed matters."

"Perhaps, if you had given him time," I suggested, "he meant to get them straight again."

"O, I shall give him time. I mean he shall get 'em straight, or I shall twist him so crooked his best friend won't know him."

"Did you never suspect his honesty?"

"Do you suspect mine?"

"But you have legal redress?"

"It's no thanks to him. He had fixed things to a charm, he had done his best to cut me off and cover his escape. But I've got him, and he shall disgorge!"

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I hardly know why it was; but the implacable firmness of my brother's position produced in my mind a sort of fantastic reaction in favor of Mr. John Guest. I felt a sudden gush of the most inconsequent pity. "Poor man!" I exclaimed. But to repair my weakness, I plunged into a series of sympathetic questions and listened attentively to Edgar's statement of his wrongs. As he set forth the case, I found myself taking a whimsical interest in Mr. Guest's own side of it, wondering whether he suspected suspicion, whether he dreaded conviction, whether he had an easy conscience, and how he was getting through the hot weather. I asked Edgar how lately he had discovered his loss and whether he had since communicated with the criminal.

"Three days ago, three nights ago, rather; for I haven't slept a wink since. I have spoken of the matter to no one; for the present I need no one's help, I can help myself. I haven't seen the man more than three or four times; our dealings have generally been by letter. The last person you'd suspect. He's as great a dandy as you yourself, and in better taste, too. I was told ten days ago, at his office, that he had gone out of town. I suppose I'm paying for his champagne at Newport."

II.

On my proposing, half an hour later, to relieve him of my society and allow him to prepare for rest, Edgar declared that our talk had put an end to sleep and that he must take a turn in the open air. On descending to the piazza, we found it in the deserted condition into which it usually lapsed about ten o'clock; either from a wholesome desire on the part of our fellow-lodgers to keep classic country hours, or from the soporific influences of excessive leisure. Here and there the warm darkness was relieved by the red tip of a cigar in suggestive proximity to a light corsage. I observed, as we strolled along, a lady of striking appearance, seated in the zone of light projected from a window, in conversation with a gentleman. "Really, I'm afraid you'll take cold," I heard her say as we passed. "Let me tie my handkerchief round your neck." And she gave it a playful twist. She was a pretty woman, of middle age, with great freshness of toilet and complexion, and a picturesque abundance of blond hair, upon which was coquettishly poised a fantastic little hat, decorated with an immense pink rose. Her companion was a seemingly affable man, with a bald head, a white waistcoat, and a rather florid air of distinction. When we passed them a second time, they had risen and the lady was preparing to enter the house. Her companion went with her to the door; she left him with a great deal of coquettish by-play, and he turned back to the piazza. At this moment his glance fell upon my step-brother. He started, I thought, and then, replacing his hat with an odd, nervous decision, came towards him with a smile. "Mr. Musgrave!" he said.

Edgar stopped short, and for a moment seemed to lack words to reply. At last he uttered a deep, harsh note: "Mr. Guest!"

In an instant I felt that I was in the presence of a "situation." Edgar's words had the sound of the "click" upon the limb of the entrapped fox. A scene was imminent; the actors were only awaiting their cues. Mr. Guest made a half-offer of his hand, but, perceiving no response in Edgar's, he gracefully dipped it into his pocket. "You must have just come!" he murmured.

"A couple of hours ago."

Mr. Guest glanced at me, as if to include me in the operation of his urbanity, and his glance stirred in my soul an impulse of that kindness which we feel for a man about to be executed. It's no more than human to wish to shake hands with him. "Introduce me, Edgar," I said.

"My step-brother," said Edgar, curtly. "This is Mr. Guest, of whom we have been talking."

I put out my hand; he took it with cordiality. "Really," he declared, "this is a most unexpected a circumstance."

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"Altogether so to me," said Edgar.

"You've come for the waters, I suppose," our friend went on. "I'm sorry your health continues a unsatisfactory."

Edgar, I perceived, was in a state of extreme nervous exacerbation, the result partly of mere surprise and partly of keen disappointment. His plans had been checked. He had determined to do thus and so, and he must now extemporize a policy. Well, as poor, pompous Mr. Guest wished it, so he should have it! "I shall never be strong," said Edgar.

"Well, well," responded Mr. Guest, "a man of your parts may make a little strength serve a great purpose."

My step-brother was silent a moment, relishing secretly, I think, the beautiful pertinence of this observation. "I suppose I can defend my rights," he rejoined.

"Exactly! What more does a man need?" and he appealed to me with an insinuating smile. His smile was singularly frank and agreeable, and his glance full of a sort of conciliating gallantry. I noted in his face, however, by the gaslight, a haggard, jaded look which lent force to what he went on to say. "I have been feeling lately as if I hadn't even strength for that. The hot weather, an overdose of this abominable water, one thing and another, the inevitable premonitions of a mortality, have quite pulled me down. Since my arrival here, ten days ago, I have really been quite a the invalid. I've actually been in bed. A most unprecedented occurrence!"

"I hope you're better," I ventured to say.

"Yes, I think I'm myself again, thanks to capital nursing. I think I'm myself again!" He repeated his words mechanically, with a sort of exaggerated gayety, and began to wipe his forehead with his handkerchief. Edgar was watching him narrowly, with an eye whose keenness it was impossible to veil; and I think Edgar's eye partly caused his disquiet. "The last thing I did, by the way, before my indisposition, was to write you ten lines, Mr. Musgrave, on a little matter of business."

"I got your letter," said Edgar, grimly.

Mr. Guest was silent a moment. "And I hope my arrangements have met your approval?"

"We shall talk of that," said Edgar.

At this point, I confess, my interest in the situation had become painful. I felt sick. I'm not a man of ready-made resolution, as my story will abundantly prove. I am discountenanced and bullied by disagreeable things. Poor Mr. Guest was so infallibly booked for exposure that I instinctively retreated. Taking advantage of his allusion to business, I turned away and walked to the other end of the piazza. This genial gentleman, then, was embodied fraud! this sayer of civil things was a doer of monstrously shabby ones! that irreproachable white waistcoat carried so sadly spotted a conscience! Whom had he involved in his dishonor? Had he a wife, children, friends? Who was that so prosperously pretty woman, with her flattering solicitude for his health? I stood for some time reflecting how guilt is not the vulgar bugaboo we fancy it, that it has organs, senses, affections, passions, for all the world like those of innocence. Indeed, from my cursory observation of my friend, I had rarely seen innocence so handsomely featured. Where, then, was the line which severed rectitude from error? Was manhood a baser thing than I had fancied, or was sin a thing less base? As I mused thus, my disgust ebbed away, and the return of the wave brought an immense curiosity to see what it had come to betwixt guilt and justice. Had Edgar launched his thunder? I retraced my steps and rejoined my companions. Edgar's thunder was apparently still in the clouds; but there had been a premonitory flash of lightning. Guest stood before him, paler than before, staring defiantly, and stammering out some fierce denial. "I don't understand you," he said. "If you mean what you seem to mean, you mean rank insult."

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"I mean the truth," said Edgar. "It's a pity the truth should be insulting."

Guest glared a moment, like a man intently taking thought for self-defence. But he was piteously unmasked. His genial smile had taken flight and left mere vulgar confusion. "This is between ourselves, sir," he cried, angrily turning to me.

"A thousand pardons," I said, and passed along. I began to be doubtful as to the issue of the quarrel. Edgar had right on his side, but, under the circumstances, he might not have force. Guest was altogether the stouter, bigger, weightier person. I turned and observed them from a distance. Edgar's thunderbolt had fallen and his victim stood stunned. He was leaning against the balustrade of the piazza, with his chin on his breast and his eyes sullenly fixed on his adversary, demoralized and convicted. His hat had dropped upon the floor. Edgar seemed to have made a proposal; with a passionate gesture he repeated it. Guest slowly stooped and picked up his hat, and Edgar led the way toward the house. A series of small sitting-rooms opened by long windows upon the piazza. These were for the most part lighted and empty. Edgar selected one of them, and, stopping before the window, beckoned to me to come to him. Guest, as I advanced, bestowed upon me a scowl of concentrated protest. I felt, for my own part, as if I were horribly indelicate. Between Edgar and him it was a question of morals, but between him and myself it was, of course, but one of manners. "Be so good as to walk in," said Edgar, turning to me with a smile of unprecedented suavity. I might have resisted his dictation; I couldn't his petition.

"In God's name, what do you mean to do?" demanded Guest.

"My duty!" said Edgar. "Go in."

We passed into the room. The door of the corridor was open; Guest closed it with a passionate kick. Edgar shut the long window and dropped the curtain. In the same fury of mortification, Guest turned out one of the two burners of the chandelier. There was still light enough, however, for me to see him more distinctly than on the piazza. He was tallish and stoutish, and yet sleek and jaunty. His fine blue eye was a trifle weak, perhaps, and his handsome grizzled beard was something too foppishly trimmed; but, on the whole, he was a most comely man. He was dressed with the punctilious elegance of a man who loved luxury and appreciated his own good points. A little moss-rosebud figured in the lappet of his dark-blue coat. His whole person seemed redolent of what are called the "feelings of a gentleman." Confronted and contrasted with him under the lamp, my step-brother seemed wofully mean and grotesque; though for a conflict of forces that lay beneath the surface, he was visibly the better equipped of the two. He seemed to tremble and quiver with inexorable purpose. I felt that he would heed no admonitory word of mine, that I could not in the least hope to blunt the edge of his resentment, and that I must on the instant decide either to stand by him or leave him. But while I stood thus ungraciously gazing at poor Guest, the instant passed. Curiosity and a mingled sympathy with each to say nothing of a touch of that relish for a fight inherent in the truly masculine bosom sealed my lips and arrested my steps. And yet my heart paid this graceful culprit the compliment of beating very violently on his behalf.

"I wish you to repeat before my brother," said Edgar, "the three succinct denials to which you have just treated me."

Guest looked at the ceiling with a trembling lip. Then dropping upon the sofa, he began to inspect his handsome finger-nails mechanically, in the manner of one who hears in some horrible hush of all nature the nearing footsteps of doom. "Come, repeat them!" cried Edgar. "It's really delicious. You never wrote to Stevens that you had my assent in writing to the sale of the bonds. You never showed Stevens my telegram from Boston, and assured him that my 'Do as you think best' was a permission to raise money on them. If it's not forgery sir, it's next door to it, and a very flimsy partition between."

Guest leaned back on the sofa, with his hands grasping his knees. "You might have let things stand a week or so," he said, with unnatural mildness. "You might have had common patience. Good God, there's a gentlemanly way

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of doing things! A man doesn't begin to roar for a pinch. I would have got things square again."

"O, it would have been a pity to spoil them! It was such a pretty piece of knavery! Give the devil his due!"

"I would have rearranged matters," Guest went on. "It was just a temporary convenience. I supposed I was dealing with a man of common courtesy. But what are you to say to a gentleman who says, 'Sir, I trust you,' and then looks through the keyhole?"

"Upon my word, when I hear you scuttling through the window," cried Edgar, "I think it's time I should break down the door. For God's sake, don't nauseate me with any more lies! You know as well as you sit there, that you had neither chance nor means nor desire to redeem your fraud. You'd cut the bridge behind you! You thought you'd been knowing enough to eat your cake and have it, to lose your virtue and keep your reputation, to sink half my property through a trap-door and then stand whistling and looking t' other way while I scratched my head and wondered what the devil was in it! Sit down there and write me your note for twenty thousand dollars at twenty days."

Guest was silent a moment. "Propose something reasonable," he said, with the same tragic gentleness.

"I shall let the law reason about it."

Guest gave a little start and fixed his eyes on the ground. "The law wouldn't help you," he answered, without looking up.

"Indeed! do you think it would help *you*? Stoddard and Hale will help me. I spoke to them this morning."

Guest sprang to his feet. "Good heavens! I hope you mentioned no names."

"Only one!" said Edgar.

Guest wiped his forehead and actually tried to smile. "That was your own, of course! Well, sir, I hope they advised you to a temper justice with mercy."

"They are not parsons, Mr. Guest; they are lawyers. They accept the case."

Guest dropped on the sofa, buried his face in his hands, and burst into tears. "O my soul!" he cried. His soul, poor man! was a rough term for name and fame and comfort and all that made his universe. It was a pitiful sight.

"Look here, Edgar," I said. "Don't press things too hard. I'm not a parson either"

"No, you've not that excuse for your sentimentality!" Edgar broke out. "Here it is, of course! Here come folly and fear and ignorance maunding against the primary laws of life! Is rascality alone of all things in the world to be handled without gloves? Didn't he press me hard? He's danced his dance, let him pay the piper! Am I a child, a woman, a fool, to stand and haggle with a swindler? Am I to go to the wall to make room for impudent fraud? Not while I have eyes to know black from white! I'm a decent man. I'm this or I'm nothing. For twenty years I've done my best for order and thrift and honesty. I've never yielded an inch to the detestable sharp practice that meets one nowadays at every turn. I've hated fraud as I hate all bad economy; I've no more patience with it than a bull with a red rag. Fraud is fraud; it's waste, it's wantonness, it's chaos; and I shall never give it the go-by. When I catch it, I shall hold it fast, and call all honest men to see how vile and drivelling a thing it is!"

Guest sat rigidly fixed, with his eyes on the carpet. "Do you expect to get your money?" he finally demanded.

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"My money be hanged! I expect to let people know how they may be served if they intrust their affairs to you! A man's property, sir, is a man's person. It's as if you had given me a blow in the chest!"

Guest came towards him and took him by the button-hole. "Now see here," he said, with the same desperate calmness. "You call yourself a practical man. Don't go on like one of those d d long-haired reformers. You're off the track. Don't attempt too much. Don't make me confoundedly uncomfortable out of pure fantasticality. Come, sir, you're a man of the world." And he patted him gently on the shoulder. "Give me a chance. I confess to not having been quite square. There! My very dear sir, let me get on my legs again."

"0, you confess!" cried Edgar. "That's a vast comfort. You'll never do it again! Not if I know it. But other people, eh? Suppose I had been a decent widow with six children, and not a penny but that! You'd confess again, I suppose. Would your confession butter their bread! Let your confession be public!"

"My confession *is* public!" and Guest, with averted eyes, jerked his head towards me.

"0, my step-brother! Why, he's the most private creature in the world. Cheat him and he'll thank you! David, I retain you as a witness that Mr. Guest has confessed."

"Nothing will serve you then? You mean to prosecute?"

"I mean to prosecute."

The poor man's face flushed crimson, and the great sweat-drops trickled from his temples. "0 you blundering brute!" he cried. "Do you know what you mean when you say that? Do we live in a civilized world?"

"Not altogether," said Edgar. "But I shall help it along."

"Have you lived among decent people? Have you known women whom it was an honor to please? Have you cared for name and fame and love? Have you had a dear daughter?"

"If I had a dear daughter," cried Edgar, flinching the least bit at this outbreak, "I trust my dear daughter would have kept me honest! Not the sin, then, but the detection unfits a man for ladies' society! Did you kiss your daughter the day you juggled away my bonds?"

"If it will avail with you, I didn't. Consider her feelings. My fault has been that I have been too tender a father, that I have loved the poor girl better than my own literal integrity. I became embarrassed because I hadn't the heart to tell her that she must spend less money. As if to the wisest, sweetest girl in the world a whisper wouldn't have sufficed! As if five minutes of her divine advice wouldn't have set me straight again! But the stress of my embarrassment was such "

"Embarrassment!" Edgar broke in. "That may mean anything. In the case of an honest man it may be a motive for leniency; in that of a knave it's a ground for increased suspicion."

Guest, I felt, was a good-natured sinner. Just as he lacked rectitude of purpose, he lacked rigidity of temper, and he found in the mysteries of his own heart no clew to my step-brother's monstrous implacability. Looking at him from head to foot with a certain dignity, a reminiscence of his former pomposity, "I do you the honor, sir," he said, "to believe you are insane."

"Stuff and nonsense! you believe nothing of the sort," cried Edgar.

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I saw that Guest's opposition was acting upon him as a lively irritant. "Isn't it possible," I asked, "to adopt some compromise? You're not as forgiving a man under the circumstances as I should be."

"In these things," retorted Edgar, without ceremony, "a forgiving man is a fool."

"Well, take a fool's suggestion. You can perhaps get satisfaction without taking your victim into court. Let Mr. Guest write his confession."

Guest had not directly looked at me since we entered the room. At these words he slowly turned and gave me a sombre stare by which the brilliancy of my suggestion seemed somewhat obscured. But my interference was kindly meant, and his reception of it seemed rather ungrateful. At best, however, I could be but a thorn in his side. I had done nothing to earn my sport. Edgar hereupon flourished his hand as if to indicate the superfluity of my advice. "All in good time, if you please. If I'm insane, there's a method in my madness!" He paused, and his eyes glittered with an intensity which might indeed, for the moment, have seemed to be that of a disordered brain. I wondered what was coming. "Do me the favor to get down on your knees." Guest jerked himself up as if he had received a galvanic shock. "Yes, I know what I say, on your knees. Did you never say your prayers? You can't get out of a tight place without being squeezed. I won't take less. I sha'n't [sic] feel like an honest man till I've seen you there at my feet."

There was in the contrast between the inflated self-complacency of Edgar's face as he made this speech, and the blank horror of the other's as he received it, something so poignantly grotesque that it acted upon my nerves like a mistimed joke, and I burst into irrepressible laughter. Guest walked away to the window with some muttered imprecation, pushed aside the curtain, and stood looking out. Then, with a sudden turn, he marched back and stood before my brother. He was drenched with perspiration. "A moment," said Edgar. "You're very hot. Take off your coat." Guest, to my amazement, took it off and flung it upon the floor. "Your shirt-sleeves will serve as a kind of sackcloth and ashes. Fold your hands, so. Now, beg my pardon."

It was a revolting sight, this man of ripe maturity and massive comeliness on his two knees, his pale face bent upon his breast, his body trembling with the effort to keep his shameful balance; and above him Edgar, with his hands behind his back, solemn and ugly as a miniature idol, with his glittering eyes fixed in a sort of rapture on the opposite wall. I walked away to the window. There was a perfect stillness, broken only by Guest's hard breathing. I have no notion how long it lasted; when I turned back into the room he was still speechless and fixed, as if he were ashamed to rise. Edgar pointed to a blotting-book and inkstand which stood on a small table against the wall. "See if there is pen and paper!" I obeyed and made a clatter at the table, to cover our companion's retreat. When I had laid out a sheet of paper he was on his feet again. "Sit down and write," Edgar went on. Guest picked up his coat and busied himself mechanically with brushing off the particles of dust. Then he put it on and sat down at the table.

"I dictate," Edgar began. "I hereby, at the command of Edgar Musgrave, Esq., whom I have grossly wronged, declare myself a swindler." At these words, Guest laid down the pen and sank back in his chair, emitting long groans, like a man with a violent toothache. But he had taken that first step which costs, and after a moment's rest he started afresh. "I have on my bended knees, in the presence of Mr. Musgrave and his step-brother, expressed my contrition; in consideration of which Mr. Musgrave forfeits his incontestable right to publish his injury in a court of justice. Furthermore, I solemnly declare myself his debtor in the sum of twenty thousand dollars; which, on his remission of the interest, and under pain of exposure in a contrary event, I pledge myself to repay at the earliest possible moment. I thank Mr. Musgrave for his generosity."

Edgar spoke very slowly, and the scratching of Guest's pen kept pace with his words. "Now sign and date," he said; and the other, with a great heroic dash, consummated this amazing document. He then pushed it away, and rose and bestowed upon us a look which I long remembered. An outraged human soul was abroad in the world, with which henceforth I felt I should have somehow to reckon.

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Edgar possessed himself of the paper and read it coolly to the end, without blushing. Happy Edgar! Guest watched him fold it and put it into his great morocco pocket-book. "I suppose," said Guest, "that this is the end of your generosity."

"I have nothing further to remark," said Edgar.

"Have *you*, by chance, anything to remark, Mr. Step-brother?" Guest demanded, turning to me, with a fierceness which showed how my presence galled him.

I had been, to my own sense, so abjectly passive during the whole scene that, to reinstate myself as a responsible creature, I attempted to utter an original sentiment. "I pity you," I said.

But I had not been happy in my choice. "Faugh, you great hulking brute!" Guest roared, for an answer.

The scene at this point might have passed into another phase, had it not been interrupted by the opening of the door from the corridor. "A lady!" announced a servant, flinging it back.

The lady revealed herself as the friend with whom Guest had been in conversation on the piazza. She was apparently, of his nature, not a person to mind the trifles of her friend's being accompanied by two unknown gentlemen, and she advanced, shawled as if for departure, and smiling reproachfully. "Ah, you ungrateful creature," she cried, "you've lost my rosebud!"

Guest came up smiling, as they say. "Your own hands fastened it! Where is my daughter?"

"She's coming. We've been looking for you, high and low. What on earth have you been doing here? Business? You've no business with business. You came here to rest. Excuse me, gentlemen! My carriage has been waiting this ten minutes. Give me your arm."

It seemed to me time we should disembarass the poor man of our presence. I opened the window and stepped out upon the piazza. Just as Edgar had followed me, a young lady hastily entered the room.

"My dearest father!" she exclaimed.

Looking at her unseen from without, I recognized with amazement my charming friend of the Episcopal chapel, the woman to whom I felt it now with a sort of convulsion I had dedicated a sentiment.

III.

My discovery gave me that night much to think of, and I thought of it more than I slept. My foremost feeling was one of blank dismay as if Misfortune, whom I had been used to regard as a good-natured sort of goddess, who came on with an easy stride, letting off signals of warning to those who stood in her path, should have blinded her lantern and muffled her steps in order to steal a march on poor me, of all men in the world! It seemed a hideous practical joke. "If I had known, if I had only known!" I kept restlessly repeating. But towards morning, "Say I had known," I asked myself, "could I have acted otherwise? I might have protested by my absence; but would I not thus have surrendered poor Guest to the vengeance of a very Shylock? Had not that suggestion of mine divested [sic] the current of Edgar's wrath and saved his adversary from the last dishonor? Without it, Edgar would have held his course and demanded his pound of flesh!" Say what I would, however, I stood confronted with this acutely uncomfortable fact, that by lending a hand at that revolting interview, I had struck a roundabout blow at the woman to whom I owed a signally sweet impression. Well, my blow would never reach her, and I would devise some kindness that should! So I consoled myself, and in the midst of my regret I found a still further

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compensation in the thought that chance, rough-handed though it had been, had forged between us a stouter bond than any I had ventured to dream of as I walked sentimental a few hours before. Her father's being a rascal threw her image into more eloquent relief. If she suspected it, she had all the interest of sorrow; if not, she wore the tender grace of danger.

The result of my meditations was that I determined to defer indefinitely my departure from L –. Edgar informed me, in the course of the following day, that Guest had gone by the early train to New York, and that his daughter had left the hotel (where my not having met her before was apparently the result of her constant attendance on her father during his illness) and taken up her residence with the lady in whose company we had seen her. Mrs. Beck, Edgar had learned this lady's name to be; and I fancied it was upon her that Miss Guest had made her morning call. To begin with, therefore, I knew where to look for her, "That's the charming girl," I said to Edgar, "whom you might have plunged into disgrace."

"How do you know she's charming?" he asked.

"I judge by her face."

"Humph! Judge her father by his face and *he's* charming."

I was on the point of assuring my step–brother that no such thing could be said of him; but in fact he had suddenly assumed a singularly fresh and jovial air. "I don't know what it is," he said, "but I feel like a trump; I haven't stood so firm on my legs in a twelvemonth. I wonder whether the waters have already begun to act. Really, I'm elated. Suppose, in the afternoon of my life, I were to turn out a sound man. It winds me up, sir. I shall take another glass before dinner."

To do Miss Guest a kindness, I reflected, I must see her again. How to compass an interview and irradiate my benevolence, it was not easy to determine. Sooner or later, of course, the chances of watering–place life would serve me. Meanwhile, I felt most agreeably that here was something more finely romantic than that feverish dream of my youth, treating Edgar some fine day to the snub direct. Assuredly, I was not in love; I had cherished a youthful passion, and I knew the signs and symptoms; but I was in a state of mind that really gave something of the same zest to consciousness. For a couple of days I watched and waited for my friend in those few public resorts in which the little world of L – used most to congregate, the drive, the walk, the post–office, and the vicinage of the spring. At last, as she was nowhere visible, I betook myself to the little Episcopal chapel, and strolled along the road, past a scattered cluster of decent boarding–houses, in one of which I imagined her hidden. But most of them had a shady strip of garden stretching toward the river, and thitherward, of course, rather than upon the public road, their inmates were likely to turn their faces. A happy accident at last came to my aid. After three or four days at the hotel, Edgar began to complain that the music in the evening kept him awake and to wonder whether he might find tolerable private lodgings. He was more and more interested in the waters. I offered, with alacrity, to make inquiries for him, and as a first step, I returned to the little colony of riverside boarding–houses. I began with one I had made especial note of, the smallest, neatest, and most secluded. The mistress of the establishment was at a neighbor's, and I was requested to await her return. I stepped out of the long parlor window, and began hopefully to explore the garden. My hopes were brightly rewarded. In a shady summer–house, on a sort of rustic embankment, overlooking the stream, I encountered Miss Guest and her coquettish duenna. She looked at me for a moment with a dubious air, as if to satisfy herself that she was distinctly expected to recognize me, and then, as I stood proclaiming my hopes in an appealing smile, she bade me a frank good–morning. We talked, I lingered, and at last, when the proper moment came for my going my way again, I sat down and paid a call.in form.

"I see you know my name," Miss Guest said, with the peculiar the almost boyish directness which seemed to be her most striking feature; "I can't imagine how you learned it, but if you'll be so good as to tell me your own, I'll introduce you to Mrs. Beck. You must learn that she's my deputed chaperon, my she–dragon, and that I'm not to

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know you unless she knows you first and approves."

Mrs. Beck poised a gold eye-glass upon her pretty *retrousse* nose, not sorry, I think, to hold it there a moment with a plump white hand and acquit herself of one of her most effective manoeuvres, and glanced at me with mock severity. "He's a harmless-looking young man, my dear," she declared, "and I don't think your father would object." And with this odd sanction I became intimate with Miss Guest, intimate as, by the soft operation of summer and rural juxtaposition, an American youth is free to become with an American maid. I had told my friends, of course, the purpose of my visit, and learned, with complete satisfaction, that there was no chance for Mr. Musgrave, as they occupied the only three comfortable rooms in the house, two as bedrooms, the third as a common parlor. Heaven forbid that I should introduce Edgar *dans cette galere*. I inquired elsewhere, but saw nothing I could recommend, and, on making my report to him, found him quite out of conceit of his project. A lady had just been telling him horrors of the local dietary and making him feel that he was vastly well off with the heavy bread and cold gravy of the hotel. It was then too, I think, he first mentioned the symptoms of that relapse which subsequently occurred. He would run no risks.

I had prepared Miss Guest, I fancy, to regard another visit as a matter of course. I paid several in rapid succession; for, under the circumstances, it would have been a pity to be shy. Her father, she told me, expected to be occupied for three or four weeks in New York, so that for the present I was at ease on that score. If I was to please, I must go bravely to work. So I burned my ships behind me, and blundered into gallantry with an ardor over which, in my absence, the two ladies must have mingled their smiles. I don't suppose I passed for an especially knowing fellow; but I kept my friends from wearying of each other (for such other chance acquaintances as the place afforded they seemed to have little inclination), and by my services as a retailer of the local gossip, a reader of light literature, an explorer and suggester of drives and strolls, and, more particularly, as an oarsman in certain happy rowing-parties on the placid river whose slow, safe current made such a pretty affectation of Mrs. Beck's little shrieks and shudders, I very fairly earned my welcome. That detestable scene at the hotel used to seem a sort of horrid fable as I sat in the sacred rural stillness, in that peaceful streamside nook, learning what a divinely honest girl she was, this daughter of the man whose dishonesty I had so complacently attested. I wasted many an hour in wondering on what terms she stood with her father's rankling secret, with his poor pompous peccability in general, if not with Edgar's particular grievance. I used to fancy that certain momentary snatches of reverie in the midst of our gayety, and even more, certain effusions of wilful and excessive gayety at our duller moments, portended some vague torment in her filial heart. She would quit her place and wander apart for a while, leaving me to gossip it out with Mrs. Beck, as if she were oppressed by the constant need of seeming interested in us. But she would come back with a face that told so few tales that I always ended by keeping my compassion in the case for myself, and being reminded afresh, by my lively indisposition to be thus grossly lumped, as it were, with the duenna, of how much I was interested in the damsel. In truth, the romance of the matter apart, Miss Guest was a lovely girl. I had read her dimly in the little chapel, but I had read her aright. Felicity in freedom, that was her great charm. I have never known a woman so simply and sincerely original, so finely framed to enlist the imagination and hold expectation in suspense, and yet leave the judgment in such blissful quietude. She had a genius for frankness; this was her only coquetry and her only cleverness, and a woman could not have acquitted herself more naturally of the trying and ungracious *role* of being expected to be startling. It was the pure personal accent of Miss Guest's walk and conversation that gave them this charm; everything she did and said was gilded by a ray of conviction; and to a respectful admirer who had not penetrated to the sources of spiritual motive in her being, this sweet, natural, various emphasis of conduct was ineffably provoking. Her creed, as I guessed it, might have been resumed in the simple notion that a man should do his best; and nature had treated her, I fancied, to some brighter vision of uttermost manhood than illumined most honest fellows' consciences. Frank as she was, I imagined she had a remote reserve of holiest contempt. She made me feel deplorably ignorant and idle and unambitious, a foolish, boyish spendthrift of time and strength and means; and I speedily came to believe that to win her perfect favor was a matter of something more than undoing a stupid wrong, doing, namely, some very pretty piece of right. And she was poor Mr. Guest's daughter, withal! Truly, fate was a master of irony.

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I ought in justice to say that I had Mrs. Beck more particularly to thank for my welcome, and for the easy terms on which I had become an *habitué* of the little summer-house by the river. How could I know how much or how little the younger lady meant by her smiles and hand-shakes, by laughing at my jokes and consenting to be rowed about in my boat? Mrs. Beck made no secret of her relish for the society of a decently agreeable man, or of her deeming some such pastime the indispensable spice of life; and in Mr. Guest's absence, I was graciously admitted to competition. The precise nature of their mutual sentiments Mr. Guest's and hers I was slightly puzzled to divine, and in so far as my conjectures seemed plausible, I confess they served as but a scanty offset to my knowledge of the gentleman's foibles. This lady was, to my sense, a very artificial charmer, and I think that a goodly portion of my admiration for Miss Guest rested upon a little private theory that for her father's sake she thus heroically accepted a companion whom she must have relished but little. Mrs. Beck's great point was her "preservation." It was rather too great a point for my taste, and partook too much of the nature of a physiological curiosity. Her age really mattered little, for with as many years as you pleased one way or the other, she was still a triumph of juvenility. Plump, rosy, dimpled, frizzled, with rings on her fingers and rosettes on her toes, she used to seem to me a sort of fantastic vagary or humorous experiment of time. Or, she might have been fancied a strayed shepherdess from some rococo Arcadia, which had melted into tradition during some profane excursion of her own, so that she found herself saddled in our prosy modern world with this absurdly perpetual prime. All this was true, at least of her pretty face and figure; but there was another Mrs. Beck, visible chiefly to the moral eye, who seemed to me excessively wrinkled and faded and world-wise, and whom I used to fancy I could hear shaking about in this enamelled envelope, like a dried nut in its shell. Mrs. Beck's morality was not Arcadian; or if it was, it was that of a shepherdess with a keen eye to the state of the wool and the mutton market, and a lively perception of the possible advantages of judicious partnership. She had no design, I suppose, of proposing to me a consolidation of our sentimental and pecuniary interests, but she performed her duties of duenna with such conscientious precision that she shared my society most impartially with Miss Guest. I never had the good fortune of finding myself alone with this young lady. She might have managed it, I fancied, if she had wished, and the little care she took about it was a sign of that indifference which stirs the susceptible heart to effort. "It's really detestable," I at last ventured to seize the chance to declare, "that you and I should never be alone."

Miss Guest looked at me with an air of surprise. "Your remark is startling," she said, "unless you have some excellent reason for demanding this interesting seclusion."

My reason was not ready just yet, but it speedily ripened. A happy incident combined at once to bring it to maturity and to operate a diversion for Mrs. Beck. One morning there appeared a certain Mr. Crawford out of the West, a worthy bachelor who introduced himself to Mrs. Beck and claimed cousinship. I was present at the moment, and I could not but admire the skill with which the lady gauged her aspiring kinsman before saying yea or nay to his claims. I think the large diamond in his shirt-front decided her; what he may have lacked in elegant culture was supplied by this massive ornament. Better and brighter than his diamond, however, was his frank Western *bonhomie*, his simple friendliness, and a certain half-boyish modesty which made him give a humorous twist to any expression of the finer sentiments. He was a tall, lean gentleman, on the right side of forty, yellow-haired, with a somewhat arid complexion, an irrepressible tendency to cock back his hat and chew his toothpick, and a spasmodic liability, spasmodically repressed when in a sedentary posture, to a centrifugal movement of the heels. He had a clear blue eye, in which simplicity and shrewdness contended and mingled in so lively a fashion that his glance was the oddest dramatic twinkle. He was a genial sceptic. If he disbelieved much that he saw, he believed everything he fancied, and for a man who had seen much of the rougher and baser side of life, he was able to fancy some very gracious things of men, to say nothing of women. He took his place as a very convenient fourth in our little party, and without obtruding his eccentricities, or being too often reminded of a story, like many cooler humorists, he treated us to a hundred anecdotes of his adventurous ascent of the ladder of fortune. The upshot of his history was that he was now owner of a silver mine in Arizona, and that he proposed in his own words to "lay off and choose." Of the nature of his choice he modestly waived specification; it of course had reference to the sex of which Mrs. Beck was an ornament. He lounged about meanwhile with his hands in his pockets, watching the flies buzz with that air of ecstatically suspended resolve proper to a man who has sunk a shaft deep into the very stuff that dreams are made of. But in spite of shyness he exhaled an atmosphere of

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regretful celibacy which might have relaxed the conjugal piety of a more tenderly mourning widow than Mrs. Beck. His bachelor days were evidently numbered, and unless I was vastly mistaken, it lay in this lady's discretion to determine the residuary figure. The two were just nearly enough akin to save a deal of time in courtship.

Crawford had never beheld so finished a piece of ladyhood, and it pleased and puzzled him and quickened his honest grin very much as a remarkably neat mechanical toy might have done. Plain people who have lived close to frank nature often think more of a fine crisp muslin rose than of a group of dewy petals of garden growth. Before ten days were past, he had begun to fumble tenderly with the stem of this unfading flower. Mr. Crawford's *petits soins* had something too much of the ring of the small change of the Arizona silver-mine, consisting largely as they did of rather rudimentary nosegays compounded by amateur florists from the local front-yards, of huge bundles of "New York candy" from the village store, and of an infinite variety of birch-bark and bead-work trinkets. He was no simpleton, and it occurred to me, indeed, that if these offerings were not the tokens and pledges of a sentiment, they were the offset and substitute of a sentiment; but if they were profuse for that, they were scanty for this. Mrs. Beck, for her part, seemed minded to spin the thread of decision excessively fine. A silver-mine was all very well, but a lover fresh from the diggings was to be put on probation. Crawford lodged at the hotel, and our comings and goings were often made together. He indulged in many a dry compliment to his cousin, and, indeed, declared that she was a magnificent little woman. It was with surprise, therefore, that I learned that his admiration was divided. "I've never seen one just like her," he said; "one so out and out a woman, smiles and tears and everything else! But Clara comes out with her notions, and a man may know what to expect. I guess I can afford a wife with a notion or so! Short of the moon, I can give her what she wants." And I seemed to hear his hands producing in his pockets that Arizonian tinkle which served with him as the prelude to renewed utterance. He went on, "And tells me I mustn't make love to my grandmother. That's a very pretty way of confessing to thirty-five. She's a bit of coquette, is Clara!" I handled the honest fellow's illusions as tenderly as I could, and at last he eyed me askance with a knowing air. "You praise my cousin," he said, "because you think I want you to. On the contrary, I want you to say something against her. If there is anything, I want to know it." I declared I knew nothing in the world; whereupon Crawford, after a silence, heaved an impatient sigh.

"Really," said I, laughing, "one would think you were disappointed."

"I wanted to draw you out," he cried; "but you're too confoundedly polite. I suppose Mrs. Beck's to be my fate; it's borne in on me. I'm being roped in fast. But I only want a little backing to hang off awhile. Look here," he added suddenly, "let's be frank!" and he stopped and laid his hand on my arm. "That other young lady isn't so pretty as Mrs. Beck, but it seems to me I'd kind of trust her further. You didn't know I'd noticed her. Well, I've taken her in little by little, just as she gives herself out. Jerusalem! there's a woman. But you know it, sir, if I'm not mistaken; and that's where the shoe pinches. First come, first served. I want to act on the square. Before I settle down to Mrs. Beck, I want to know distinctly whether you put in a claim to Miss Guest."

The question was unexpected and found me but half prepared. "A claim?" I said. "Well, yes, call it a claim!"

"Any way," he rejoined, "I've no chance. She'd never look at me. But I want to have her put out of my own head, so that I can concentrate on Mrs. B. If you're not in love with her, my boy, let me tell you you ought to be! If you are, I've nothing to do but to wish you success. If you're not, upon my word, I don't know but what I would go in! She could but refuse me. Modesty is all very well; but after all, it's the handsomest thing you can do by a woman to offer yourself. As a compliment alone, it would serve. And really, a compliment with a round million isn't so bad as gallantry goes hereabouts. You're young and smart and good-looking, and Mrs. Beck tells me you're rich. If you succeed, you'll have more than your share of good things. But Fortune has her favorites, and they're not always such nice young men. If you're in love, well and good! If you're not, by Jove, I am!"

This admonition was peremptory. My companion's face in the clear starlight betrayed his sagacious sincerity. I felt a sudden satisfaction in being summoned to take my stand. I performed a rapid operation in sentimental arithmetic, combined my factors, and established my total. It exceeded expectation. "Your frankness does you

honor," I said, "and I'm sorry I can't make a kinder return. But I'm madly in love!"

PART SECOND.

IV.

MY situation, as I defined it to Crawford, was not purely delightful. Close upon my perception of the state of my heart followed an oppressive sense of the vanity of my pretensions. I had cut the ground from under my feet; to offer myself to Miss Guest, would be to add insult to injury. I may truly say, therefore, that, for a couple of days, this manifest passion of mine rather saddened than exalted me. For a dismal forty-eight hours I left the two ladies unvisited. I even thought of paying a supreme tribute to delicacy and taking a summary departure. Some day, possibly, Miss Guest would learn with grief and scorn what her father had to thank me for; and then later, as resentment melted into milder conjecture, she would read the riddle of my present conduct and do me justice, guess that I had loved her, and that, to punish myself, I had renounced her forever. This fantastic magnanimity was followed by a wholesome reaction. I was punished enough, surely, in my regret and shame; and I wished now not to suffer, but to act. Viewing the matter reasonably, she need never learn my secret; if by some cruel accident she should, the favor I had earned would cover that I had forfeited. I stayed, then, and tried to earn this precious favor; but I encountered an obstacle more serious, I fancied, than even her passionate contempt would have been, her serene and benevolent indifference. Looking back at these momentous days, I get an impression of a period of vague sentimental ferment and trouble, rather than of definite utterance and action; though I believe that by a singular law governing human conduct in certain cases, the very modesty and humility of my passion expressed itself in a sort of florid and hyperbolical gallantry; so that, in so far as my claims were inadmissible, they might pass, partly as a kind of compensatory homage, and partly as a jest. Miss Guest refused to pay me the compliment of even being discomposed, and pretended to accept my addresses as an elaborate device for her amusement. There was a perpetual assurance in her tone of her not regarding me as a serious, much less as a dangerous, man. She could not have contrived a more effective irritant to my resolution; and I confess there were certain impatient moods when I took a brutal glee in the thought that it was not so very long since, on a notable occasion, my presence had told. In so far as I *was* serious, Miss Guest frankly offered to accept me as a friend, and laughingly intimated, indeed, that with a little matronly tuition of her dispensing, I might put myself into condition to please some simple maiden in her flower. I was an excellent, honest fellow; but I was excessively young and as she really wished to befriend me, she would risk the admonition I was decidedly frivolous. I lacked "character." I was fairly clever, but I was more clever than wise. I liked overmuch to listen to my own tongue. I had done nothing; I was idle; I had, by my own confession, never made an effort; I was too rich and too indolent; in my very good-nature there was nothing moral, no hint of principle; in short, I was boyish. I must forgive a woman upon whom life had forced the fatal habit of discrimination. I suffered this genial scepticism to expend itself freely, for her candor was an enchantment. It was all true enough. I had been indolent and unambitious; I had made no effort; I had lived in vulgar ignorance and ease; I had in a certain frivolous fashion tried life at first hand, but my shallow gains had been in proportion to my small hazards. But I was neither so young nor so idle as she chose to fancy, and I could at any rate prove I was constant. Like a legendary suitor of old, I might even slay my dragon. A monstrous accident stood between us, and to dissipate its evil influence would be a fairly heroic feat.

Mr. Guest's absence was prolonged from day to day, and Laura's tone of allusion to her father tended indeed to make a sort of invincible chimera of her possible discovery of the truth. This fond filial reference only brought out the more brightly her unlikeness to him. I could as little fancy her doing an act she would need to conceal as I could fancy her arresting exposure by a concession to dishonor. If I was a friend, I insisted on being a familiar one; and while Mrs. Beck and her cousin floated away on perilous waters, we dabbled in the placid shallows of disinterested sentiment. For myself, I sent many a longing glance toward the open sea, but Laura remained firm in her preference for the shore. I encouraged her to speak of her father, for I wished to hear all the good that could be told of him. It sometimes seemed to me that she talked of him with a kind of vehement tenderness designed to

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obscure, as it were, her inner vision. Better had she said to herself? that she should talk fond nonsense about him than that she should harbor untender suspicions. I could easily believe that the poor man was a most lovable fellow, and could imagine how, as Laura judged him in spite of herself, the sweet allowances of a mother had grown up within the daughter. One afternoon Mrs. Beck brought forth her photograph-book, to show to her cousin. Suddenly, as he was turning it over, she stayed his hand and snatched one of the pictures from its place. He tried to recover it and a little tussle followed, in the course of which she escaped, ran to Miss Guest, and thrust the photograph into her hand. "You keep it," she cried; "he's not to see it." There was a great crying out from Crawford about Mrs. Beck's inconstancy and his *right* to see the picture, which was cut short by Laura's saying with some gravity that it was too childish a romp for a man of forty and a woman of thirty! Mrs. Beck allowed us no time to relish the irony of this attributive figure; she caused herself to be pursued to the other end of the garden, where the amorous frolic was resumed over the following pages of the album. "Who is it?" I asked. Miss Guest, after a pause, handed me the card.

"Your father!" I cried precipitately.

"Ah, you've seen him?" she asked.

"I know him by his likeness to you."

"You prevent my asking you, as I meant, if he doesn't look like a dear good man. I do wish he'd drop his stupid business and come back."

I took occasion hereupon to ascertain whether she suspected his embarrassments. She confessed to a painful impression that something was wrong. He had been out of spirits for many days before his return to town; nothing indeed but mental distress could have affected his health, for he had a perfect constitution. "If it comes to that," she went on, after a long silence, and looking at me with an almost intimate confidence, "I wish he would give up business altogether. All the business in the world, for a man of his open, joyous temper, doesn't pay for an hour's depression. I can't bear to sit by and see him imbibited and spoiled by this muddle of stocks and shares. Nature made him a happy man; I insist on keeping him so. We are quite rich enough, and we need nothing more. He tries to persuade me that I have expensive tastes, but I've never spent money but to please him. I have a lovely little dream which I mean to lay before him when he comes back; it's very cheap, like all dreams, and more practicable than most. He's to give up business and take me abroad. We're to settle down quietly somewhere in Germany, in Italy, I don't care where, and I'm to study music seriously. I'm never to marry; but as he grows to be an old man, he's to sit by a window, with his cigar, looking out on the Arno or the Rhine, while I play Beethoven and Rossini."

"It's a very pretty programme," I answered, "though I can't subscribe to certain details. But do you know," I added, touched by a forcible appeal to sympathy in her tone, "although you refuse to believe me anything better than an ingenuous fool, this liberal concession to my interest in your situation is almost a proof of respect."

She blushed a little, to my great satisfaction. "I surely respect you," she said, "if you come to that! Otherwise we should hardly be sitting here so simply. And I think, too," she went on, "that I speak to you of my father with peculiar freedom, because because, somehow, you remind me of him." She looked at me as she spoke with such penetrating candor that it was my turn to blush. "You are genial, and gentle, and essentially honest, like him; and like him," she added with a half-smile, "you're addicted to saying a little more than it would be fair to expect you to stand to. You ought to be very good friends. You'll find he has your own *jeunesse de cœur*."

I murmured what I might about the happiness of making his acquaintance; and then, to give the conversation a turn, and really to test the force of this sympathetic movement of hers, I boldly mentioned my fancy that he was an admirer of Mrs. Beck. She gave me a silent glance, almost of gratitude, as if she needed to unburden her heart. But she did so in few words. "He does admire her," she said. "It's my duty, it's my pleasure, to respect his illusions. But I confess to you that I hope this one will fade." She rose from her seat and we joined our

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companions; but I fancied, for a week afterwards, that she treated me with a certain gracious implication of deference. Had I ceased to seem boyish? I struck a truce with urgency and almost relished the idea of being patient.

A day or two later, Mr. Guest's "illusions" were put before me in a pathetic light. It was a Sunday; the ladies were at church, and Crawford and I sat smoking on the piazza. "I don't know how things are going with you," he said; "you're either perfectly successful or desperately resigned. But unless it's rather plainer sailing than in my case, I don't envy you. I don't know where I am, anyway! She will and she won't. She may take back her word once too often, I can tell her that! You see, she has two strings to her bow. She likes my money, but she doesn't like *me*." Now, it's all very well for a woman to relish a fortune, but I'm not prepared to have my wife despise my *person!*" said Crawford with feeling. "The alternative, you know, is Mr. Guest, that girl's father. I suppose he's handsome, and a wit, and a dandy; though I must say an old dandy, to my taste, is an old fool. She tells me a dozen times an hour that he's a fascinating man. I suppose if I were to leave her alone for a week, I might seem a fascinating man. I wish to heaven she wasn't so confoundedly taking. I can't give her up; she amuses me too much. There was once a little actress in Galveston, but Clara beats that girl! If I could only have gone in for some simple wholesome girl who doesn't need to count on her fingers to know the state of her heart!"

That evening as we were gathered in the garden, poor Crawford approached Laura Guest with an air of desperate gallantry, as if from a desire to rest from the petty torment of Mrs. Beck's sentimental mutations. Laura liked him, and her manner to him had always been admirable in its almost sisterly frankness and absence of provoking arts; yet I found myself almost wondering, as they now strolled about the garden together, whether there was any danger of this sturdy architect of his own fortunes putting out my pipe. Mrs. Beck, however, left me no chance for selfish meditation. Her artless and pointless prattle never lacked a purpose; before you knew it she was, in vulgar parlance, "pumping" you, trying to pick your pocket of your poor little receipt for prosperity. She took an intense delight in imaginatively bettering her condition, and one was forced to carry bricks for her castles in the air.

"You needn't be afraid of my cousin," she said, laughing, as I followed his red cigar-tip along the garden-paths. "He admires Laura altogether too much to make love to her. There's modesty! Don't you think it's rather touching in a man with a million of dollars? I don't mind telling you that he has made love to me, that being no case for modesty. I suppose you'll say that my speaking of it is. But what's the use of being an aged widow, if one can't tell the truth?"

"There's comfort in being an aged widow," I answered gallantly, "when one has two offers a month."

"I don't know what you know about my offers; but even two swallows don't make a summer! However, since you've mentioned the subject, tell me frankly what you think of poor Crawford. Is he at all presentable? You see I like him, I esteem him, and I'm afraid of being blinded by my feelings. Is he so dreadfully rough? You see I like downright simple manliness and all that; but a little polish does no harm, even on fine gold. I do wish you'd take hold of my poor cousin and teach him a few of the amenities of life. I'm very fond of the amenities of life; it's very frivolous and wicked, I suppose, but I can't help it. I have the misfortune to be sensitive to ugly things. Can one really accept a man who wears a green cravat? Of course you can make him take it off; but you'll be knowing all the while that he pines for it, that he would put it on if he could. Now that's a symbol of that dear, kind, simple fellow, a heart of gold, but a green cravat! I've never heard a word of wisdom about that matter yet. People talk about the sympathy of souls being the foundation of happiness in marriage. It's pure nonsense. It's not the great things, but the little, that we dispute about, and the chances are terribly against the people who have a different taste in colors."

It seemed to me that, thus ardently invoked, I might hazard the observation, "Mr. Guest would never wear a green cravat."

"What do you know about Mr. Guest's cravats?"

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"I've seen his photograph, you know."

"Well, you do him justice. You should see him in the life. He looks like a duke. I never saw a duke, but that's my notion of a duke. Distinction, you know; perfect manners and tact and wit. If I'm right about it's [sic] being perfection in small things that assures one's happiness, I might well, in two words, I might be very happy with Mr. Guest!"

"It's Crawford and soul, then," I proposed, smiling, "or Guest and manners!"

She looked at me a moment, and then with a toss of her head and a tap of her fan, "You wretch!" she cried, "you want to make me say something very ridiculous. I'll not pretend I'm not worldly. I'm excessively worldly. I always make a point of letting people know it. Of course I know very well my cousin's rich, and that so long as he's good he's none the worse for that. But in my quiet little way I'm a critic, and I look at things from a high ground. I compare a rich man who is simply a good fellow to a perfect gentleman who has simply a nice little fortune. Mr. Guest has a nice property, a very nice property. I shouldn't have to make over my old bonnets. You may ask me if I'm not afraid of Laura. But you'll marry Laura and carry her off!"

I found nothing to reply for some moments to this little essay in "criticism"; and suddenly Mrs. Beck, fancying perhaps that she was indiscreetly committing herself, put an end to our interview. "I'm really very kind," she cried, "to be talking so graciously about a lover who leaves me alone for a month and never even drops me a line. It's not such good manners after all. If you're not jealous of Mr. Crawford, I am of Miss Guest. We'll go down and separate them."

Miss Guest's repose and dignity were decidedly overshadowed. I brought her the next afternoon a letter from the post-office, superscribed in a hand I knew, and wandered away while she sat in the garden and read it. When I came back she looked strangely sad. I sat down near her and drew figures in the ground with the end of her parasol, hoping that she would do me the honor to communicate her trouble. At last she rose in silence, as if to return to the house. I begged her to remain. "You're in distress," I said, speaking as calmly and coldly as I could, "and I hoped it might occur to you that there is infinite sympathy close at hand. Instead of going to your own room to cry, why not stay here and talk of it with me?"

She gave me a brilliant, searching gaze; I met it steadily and felt that I was turning pale with the effort not to obey the passionate impulse of self-denunciation. She began slowly to walk away from the house, and I felt that a point was gained. "It's your father, of course," I said. It was all I could say. She silently handed me his unfolded letter. It ran as follows: MY DEAREST DAUGHTER: I have sold the house and everything in it, except your piano and books, of course at a painful sacrifice. But I needed ready money. Forgive your poor blundering, cruel father. My old luck has left me; but only *trust me*, and we shall be happy again."

Her eyes, fortunately, were wandering while I read; for I felt myself blushing to my ears.

"It's not the loss of the house," she said at last; "though of course we were fond of it. I grew up there, my mother died there. It's the trouble it indicates. Poor dear father! Why does he talk of 'luck'? I detest the word! Why does he talk of forgiving him and trusting him? There's a wretched tone about it all. If he would only come back and let me look at him!"

"Nothing is more common in business," I answered, "than a temporary embarrassment demanding ready money. Of course it must be met at a sacrifice. One throws a little something overboard to lighten the ship, and the ship sails ahead. As for the loss of the house, nothing could be better for going to Italy, you know. You've no excuse left for staying here. If your father will forgive me the interest I take in his affairs, I strongly recommend his leaving business and its sordid cares. Let him go abroad and forget it all."

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Laura walked along in silence, and I led the way out of the garden into the road. We followed it slowly till we reached the little chapel. The sexton was just leaving it, shouldering the broom with which he had been sweeping it for the morrow's services. I hailed him and gained his permission to go in and try the organ, assuring him that we were experts. Laura said that she felt in no mood for music; but she entered and sat down in one of the pews. I climbed into the gallery and attacked the little instrument. We had had no music since our first meeting, and I felt an irresistible need to recall the circumstances of that meeting. I played in a simple fashion, respectably enough, and fancied, at all events, that by my harmonious fingers I could best express myself. I played for an hour, in silence, choosing what I would, without comment or response from my companion. The summer twilight overtook us; when it was getting too dark to see the keys, I rejoined Miss Guest. She rose and came into the aisle. "You play very well," she said, simply; "better than I supposed."

Her praise was sweet; but sweeter still was a fancy of mine that I perceived in the light gloom just the glimmer of a tear. "In this place," I said, "your playing once moved me greatly. Try and remember the scene distinctly."

"It's easily remembered," she answered, with an air of surprise.

"Believe, then, that when we parted, I was already in love with you."

She turned away abruptly. "Ah, my poor music!"

The next day, on my arrival, I was met by Mrs. Beck, whose pretty forehead seemed clouded with annoyance. With her own fair hand she button-holed me. "You apparently," she said, "have the happiness to be in Miss Guest's confidence. What on earth is going on in New York? Laura received an hour ago a letter from her father. I found her sitting with it in her hand as cheerful as a Quakeress in meeting. 'Something's wrong, my dear,' I said; 'I don't know what. In any case, be assured of my sympathy.' She gave me the most extraordinary stare. 'You'll be interested to know,' she said, 'that my father has lost half his property.' Interested to know! I verily believe the child meant an impertinence. What is Mr. Guest's property to me? Has he been speculating? Stupid man!" she cried, with vehemence.

I made a brief answer. I discovered Miss Guest sitting by the river, in pale contemplation of household disaster. I asked no questions. She told me of her own accord that her father was to return immediately, "to make up a month's sleep," she added, glancing at his letter. We spoke of other matters, but before I left her, I returned to this one. "I wish you to tell your father this," I said. "That there is a certain gentleman here, who is idle, indolent, ignorant, frivolous, selfish. That he has certain funds for which he is without present use. That he places them at Mr. Guest's absolute disposal in the hope that they may partially relieve his embarrassment." I looked at Laura as I spoke and watched her startled blush deepen to crimson. She was about to reply; but before she could speak, "Don't forget to add," I went on, "that he hopes his personal faults will not prejudice Mr. Guest's acceptance of his offer, for it is prompted by the love he bears his daughter."

"You must excuse me," Laura said, after a pause. "I had rather not tell him this. He would not accept your offer."

"Are you sure of that?"

"I shouldn't allow him."

"And why not, pray? Don't you, after all, like me well enough to suffer me to do you so small a service?"

She hesitated; then gave me her hand with magnificent frankness. "I like you too well to suffer you to do me just that service. We take that from *les indifferents*."

V.

Before the month was out, Edgar had quarrelled with the healing waters of L –. His improvement had been most illusory; his old symptoms had returned in force, and though he now railed bitterly at the perfidious spring and roundly denounced the place, he was too ill to be moved away. He was altogether confined to his room. I made a conscience of offering him my company and assistance, but he would accept no nursing of mine. He would be tended by no one whom he could not pay for his trouble and enjoy a legal right to grumble at. "I expect a nurse to be a nurse," he said, "and not a fine gentleman, waiting on me in gloves. It would be fine work for me, lying here, to have to think twice whether I might bid you not to breathe so hard." Nothing had passed between us about John Guest, though the motive for silence was different on each side. For Edgar, I fancied, our interview with him was a matter too solemn for frequent allusion; for me it was a detestable thought. But wishing now to assure myself that, as I supposed, he had paid his ugly debt, I asked Edgar, on the evening I had extorted from Miss Guest those last recorded words of happy omen, whether he had heard from our friend in New York. It was a very hot night; poor Edgar lay sweltering under a sheet, with open windows. He looked pitifully ill, and yet somehow more intensely himself than ever. He drew a letter from under his pillow. "This came to-day," he said. "Stevens writes me that Guest yesterday paid down the twenty thousand dollars in full. It's quick work. I hope he's not robbed Peter to pay Paul."

"Mr. Guest has a conscience," I said; and I thought bitterly of the reverse of the picture. "I'm afraid he has half ruined himself to do it."

"Well, ruin for ruin, I prefer his. I've no doubt his affairs have gone to the dogs. The affairs of such a man must, sooner or later! I believe, by the way, you've been cultivating the young lady. What does the papa say to that?"

"Of course," I said, without heeding his question, "you've already enclosed him the little paper."

Edgar turned in his bed. "Of course I've done no such thing!"

"You mean to keep it?" I cried.

"Of course I mean to keep it. Where else would be his punishment?"

There was something vastly grotesque in the sight of this sickly little mortal erecting himself among his pillows as a dispenser of justice, an appraiser of the wages of sin; but I confess that his attitude struck me as more cruel even than ludicrous. I was disappointed. I had certainly not expected Edgar to be generous, but I had expected him to be just, and in the heat of his present irritation he was neither. He was angry with Guest for his excessive promptitude, which had given a sinister twist to his own conduct. "Upon my word," I cried, "you're a veritable Shylock!"

"And you're a veritable fool! Is it set down in the bond that I'm to give it up to him? The thing's mine, to have and to hold forever. The scoundrel would be easily let off indeed! This bit of paper in my hands is to keep him in order and prevent his being too happy. The thought will be wholesome company, a *memento mori* to his vanity"

"He's to go through life, then, with possible exposure staring him in the face?"

Edgar's great protuberant eyes expanded without blinking. "He has committed his fate to Providence."

I was revolted. "You may have the providential qualities, but you have not the gentlemanly ones, I formally protest. But, after a decent delay, he'll of course demand the document."

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"Demand it? He shall have it then, with a vengeance!"

"Well, I wash my hands of further complicity! I shall inform Mr. Guest that I count for nothing in this base negation of his right."

Edgar paused a moment to stare at me in my unprecedented wrath. Then making me a little ironical gesture of congratulation, "Inform him of what you please. I hope you'll have a pleasant talk over it! You made rather a bad beginning, but who knows, if you put your heads together to abuse me, you may end as bosom friends! I've watched you, sir!" he suddenly added, propping himself forward among his pillows; "you're in love!" I may wrong the poor fellow, but it seemed to me that in these words he discharged the bitterness of a lifetime. He too would have hoped to please, and he had lived in acrid assent to the instinct which told him such hope was vain. In one way or another a man pays his tax to manhood. "Yes, sir, you're grossly in love! What do I know about love, you ask? I know a drivelling lover when I see him. You've made a clever choice. Do you expect John Guest to give the girl away? He's a good-natured man, I know; but really, considering your high standard of gentlemanly conduct, you ask a good deal."

Edgar had been guilty on this occasion of a kind of reckless moral self-exposure, which seemed to betray a sense that he should never need his reputation again. I felt as if I were standing by something very like a death-bed, and forbearingly, without rejoinder, I withdrew. He had simply expressed more brutally, however, my own oppressive belief that the father's aversion stood darkly massed in the rear of the daughter's indifference. I had, indeed, for the present, the consolation of believing that with Laura the day of pure indifference was over; and I tried hard to flatter myself that my position was tenable in spite of Mr. Guest. The next day as I was wandering on the hotel piazza, communing thus sadly with my hopes, I met Crawford, who, with his hands in his pockets and his hat on the bridge of his nose, seemed equally a sullen probationer of fate.

"I'm going down to join our friends," I said; "I expected to find you with them."

He gave a gloomy grin. "My nose is out of joint," he said; "Mr. Guest has come back." I turned pale, but he was too much engaged with his own trouble to observe it. "What do you suppose my cousin is up to? She had agreed to drive with me and I had determined to come home, once for all, engaged or rejected. As soon as she heard of Guest's arrival, she threw me overboard and tripped off to her room, to touch up her curls. Go down there now and you'll find her shaking them at Mr. Guest. By the Lord, sir, she can whistle for me now! If there was a decently good-looking woman in this house, I'd march straight up to her and offer myself. You're a happy man, my boy, not to have a d d fool to interfere with you, and not to be in love with a d d fool either."

I had no present leisure to smooth the turbid waters of poor Crawford's passion; but I remembered a clever remark in a French book, to the effect that even the best men and Crawford was one of the best are subject to a momentary need not to respect what they love. I repaired alone to the house by the river, and found Laura in the little parlor which she shared with Mrs. Beck. The room was flooded with the glow of a crimson sunset, and she was looking out of the long window at two persons in the garden. In my great desire to obtain some firm assurance from her before her father's interference should become a certainty, I lost no time. "I've been able to think of nothing," I said, "but your reply to that poor offer of mine. I've been flattering myself that it really means something, means, possibly, that if I were to speak here now all that I long to speak, you would listen to me more kindly. Laura," I cried, passionately, "I repent of all my follies and I love you!"

She looked at me from head to foot with a gaze almost strange in its intensity. It betrayed trouble, but, I fancied, a grateful trouble. Then, with a smile, "My father has come," she said. The words set my heart a beating, and I had a horrible fancy that they were maliciously uttered. But as she went on I was reassured. "I want him to see you, though he knows nothing of your offer."

Guest's Confession

Somehow, by her tone, my mind was suddenly illumined with a delicious apprehension of her motive. She had heard the early murmur of that sentiment whose tender essence resents compulsion. "Let me feel then," I said, "that I am not to stand or fall by *his* choice."

"He's sure to like you," she answered; "don't you remember my telling you so? He judges better of men than of women," she added sadly, turning away from the window.

Mr. Guest had been advancing toward the house, side by side with Mrs. Beck. Before they reached it the latter was met by two ladies who had been ushered into the garden from the front gate, and with whom, with an air of smothered petulance, perceptible even at a distance, she retraced her steps toward the summer-house. Her companion entered our little parlor alone from the piazza. He stepped jauntily and looked surprisingly little altered by his month's ordeal. Mrs. Beck might still have taken him for a duke, or, at least, for an earl. His daughter immediately introduced me. "Happy to make your acquaintance, sir," he exclaimed, in a voice which I was almost shocked to find how well I knew. He offered his hand. I met it with my own, and the next moment we were fairly face to face. I was prepared for anything. Recognition faltered for a mere instant in his eyes; then I felt it suddenly leap forth in the tremendous wrench of his hand, "Ah, you *you* YOU!"

"Why, you know him!" exclaimed Laura.

Guest continued to wring my hand, and I felt to my cost that he was shocked. He panted a moment for breath, and then burst into a monstrous laugh. I looked askance at Laura; her eyes were filled with wonder. I felt that for the moment anger had made her father reckless, and anything was better than that between us the edge of our secret should peep out. "We have been introduced," I said, trying to smile. Guest dropped my hand as if it burned him, and walked the length of the room.

"You should have told me!" Laura added, in a tone of almost familiar reproach.

"Miss Guest," I answered, hardly knowing what I said, "the world is so wide "

"Upon my soul, I think it's damnable narrow!" cried Guest, who had turned very pale.

I determined then that he should know the worst. "I'm here with a purpose, Mr. Guest," I said; "I love your daughter."

He stopped short, fairly glaring at me. Laura stepped toward him and laid her two hands on his arm. "Something is wrong," she said, "very wrong! It's your horrible money-matters! Weren't you really then so generous?" and she turned to me.

Guest laid his other hand on hers as they rested on his arm and patted them gently. "My daughter," he said solemnly, "do your poor father a favor. Dismiss him forever. Turn him out of the house," he added, fiercely.

"You wrong your daughter," I cried, "by asking her to act so blindly and cruelly."

"My child," Guest went on, "I expect you to obey!"

There was a silence. At last Laura turned to me, excessively pale. "Will you do me the very great favor," she said, with a trembling voice, "to leave us?"

I reflected a moment. "I appreciate your generosity; but in the interest of your own happiness, I beg you not to listen to your father until I have had a word with him alone."

Guest's Confession

She hesitated and looked, as if for assent, at her father. "Great heavens, girl!" he cried, "you don't mean you love him!" She blushed to her hair and rapidly left the room.

Guest took up his hat and removed a speck of dust from the ribbon by a fillip of his finger-nail. "Young man," he said, "you waste words!"

"Not, I hope, when, with my hand on my heart, I beg your pardon."

"Now that you have something to gain. If you respect me, you should have protested before. If you don't, you've nothing to do with me or mine."

"I allow for your natural resentment, but you might keep it within bounds. I religiously forget, ignore, efface the past. Meet me half-way! When we met a month ago, I already loved your daughter. If I had dreamed of your being ever so remotely connected with her, I would have arrested that detestable scene even by force, brother of mine though your adversary was!"

Guest put on his hat with a gesture of implacable contempt. "That's all very well! You don't know me, sir, or you'd not waste your breath on *ifs*! The thing's done. Such as I stand here, I've been *dishonored!*" And two hot tears sprang into his eyes. "Such as I stand here, I carry in my poor, sore heart the vision of your great, brutal, staring, cruel presence. And now you ask me to accept that presence as perpetual! Upon my soul, I'm a precious fool to talk about it."

I made an immense effort to remain calm and courteous. "Is there nothing I can do to secure your good-will? I'll make any sacrifice."

"Nothing but to leave me at once and forever. Fancy my living with you for an hour! Fancy, whenever I met your eyes, my seeing in them the reflection of that piece of business! And your walking about looking wise and chuckling! My precious young man," he went on with a scorching smile, "if you knew how I hated you, you'd give me a wide berth."

I was silent for some moments, teaching myself the great patience which I foresaw I should need. "This is after all but the question of our personal relations, which we might fairly leave to time. Not only am I willing to pledge myself to the most explicit respect"

"Explicit respect!" he broke out. "I should relish that vastly! Heaven deliver me from your explicit respect!"

"I can quite believe," I quietly continued, "that I should get to like you. Your daughter has done me the honor to say that she believed you would like me."

"Perfect! You've talked it all over with her?"

"At any rate," I declared roundly, "I love her, and I have reason to hope that I may render myself acceptable to her. I can only add, Mr. Guest, that much as I should value your approval of my suit, if you withhold it I shall try my fortune without it!"

"Gently, impetuous youth!" And Guest laid his hand on my arm and lowered his voice. "Do you dream that if my daughter ever so faintly suspected the truth, she would even look at you again?"

"The truth? Heaven forbid she should dream of it! I wonder that in your position you should allude to it so freely."

Guest's Confession

"I was prudent once; I shall treat myself to a little freedom now. Give it up, I advise you. She may have thought you a pretty young fellow; I took you for one myself at first; but she'll keep her affection for a man with the bowels of compassion. She'll never love a coward, sir. Upon my soul, I'd sooner she married your beautiful brother. *He*, at least, had a grievance. Don't talk to me about my own child. She and I have an older love than yours; and if she were to learn that I've been weak Heaven help me! she would only love me the more. She would feel only that I've been outraged."

I confess that privately I flinched, but I stood to it bravely. "Miss Guest, doubtless, is as perfect a daughter as she would be a wife. But allow me to say that a woman's heart is not so simple a mechanism. Your daughter is a person of a very fine sense of honor, and I can imagine nothing that would give her greater pain than to be reduced to an attitude of mere compassion for her father. She likes to believe that men are strong. The sense of respect is necessary to her happiness. We both wish to assure that happiness. Let us join hands to preserve her illusions."

I saw in his eye no concession except to angry perplexity. "I don't know what you mean," he cried, "and I don't want to know. If you wish to intimate that my daughter is so very superior a person that she'll despise me, you're mistaken! She's beyond any compliment you can pay her. You can't frighten me now; I don't care for things." He walked away a moment and then turned about with flushed face and trembling lip. "I'm broken, I'm ruined! I don't want my daughter's respect, nor any other woman's. It's a burden, a mockery, a snare! What's a woman worth who can be kind only while she believes? Ah, ah!" and he began to rub his hands with a sudden air of helpless senility, "I should never be so kissed and coddled and nursed. I can tell her what I please; I sha' n't [sic] mind what I say now. I've ceased to care, all in a month! Reputation's a farce; a pair of tight boots, worn for vanity. I used to have a good foot, but I shall end my days in my slippers. I don't care for anything!"

This mood was piteous, but it was also formidable, for I was scantily disposed to face the imputation of having reduced an amiable gentleman, in however strictly just a cause, to this state of plaintive cynicism. I could only hope that time would repair both his vanity and his charity, seriously damaged as they were. "Well," I said, taking my hat, "a man in love, you know, is obstinate. Confess, yourself, that you'd not think the better of me for accepting dismissal philosophically. A single word of caution, keep cool; don't lose your head; don't speak recklessly to Laura. I protest that, for myself, I'd rather my mistress shouldn't doubt of her father."

Guest had seated himself on the sofa with his hat on, and remained staring absently at the carpet, as if he were deaf to my words. As I turned away, Mrs. Beck crossed the piazza and stood on the threshold of the long window. Her shadow fell at Mr. Guest's feet; she sent a searching glance from his face to mine. He started, stared, rose, stiffened himself up, and removed his hat. Suddenly he colored to the temples, and after a second's delay there issued from behind this ruby curtain a wondrous imitation of a smile. I turned away, reassured. "My case is not hopeless," I said to myself. "You *do* care for something, yet." Even had I deemed it hopeless, I might have made my farewell. Laura met me near the gate, and I remember thinking that trouble was vastly becoming to her.

"Is your quarrel too bad to speak of?" she asked.

"Allow me to make an urgent request. Your father forbids me to think of you, and you, of course, to think of me. You see," I said, mustering a smile, "we're in a delightfully romantic position, persecuted by a stern parent. He will say hard things of me; I say nothing about your believing them, I leave that to your own discretion. But don't contradict them. Let him call me cruel, pusillanimous, false, whatever he will. Ask no questions; they will bring you no comfort. Be patient, be a good daughter, and wait!"

Her brow contracted painfully over her intensely lucid eyes, and she shook her head impatiently. "Let me understand. Have you really done wrong?"

Guest's Confession

I felt that it was but a slender sacrifice to generosity to say Yes, and to add that I had repented. I even felt gratefully that whatever it might be to have a crime to confess to, it was not "boyish."

For a moment, I think, Laura was on the point of asking me a supreme question about her father, but she suppressed it and abruptly left me.

My step-brother's feeble remnant of health was now so cruelly reduced that the end of his troubles seemed near. He was in constant pain, and was kept alive only by stupefying drugs. As his last hour might strike at any moment, I was careful to remain within call, and for several days saw nothing of father or daughter. I learned from Crawford that they had determined to prolong their stay into the autumn, for Mr. Guest's "health." "I don't know what's the matter with his health," Crawford grumbled. "For a sick man he seems uncommonly hearty, able to sit out of doors till midnight with Mrs. B., and always as spick and span as a bridegroom. I'm the invalid of the lot," he declared; "the climate don't agree with me." Mrs. Beck, it appeared, was too fickle for patience; he would be made a fool of no more. If she wanted him, she must come and fetch him; and if she valued her chance, she must do it without delay. He departed for New York to try the virtue of missing and being missed.

On the evening he left us, the doctor told me that Edgar could not outlast the night. At midnight, I relieved the watcher and took my place by his bed. Edgar's soundless and motionless sleep was horribly like death. Sitting watchful by his pillow, I passed an oppressively solemn night. It seemed to me that a part of myself was dying, and that I was sitting in cold survival of youthful innocence and of the lavish self-surrender of youth. There is a certain comfort in an ancient grievance, and as I thought of having heard for the last time the strenuous quaver of Edgar's voice, I could have wept as for the effacement of some revered horizon-line of life. I heard his voice again, however; he was not even to die without approving the matter. With the first flash of dawn and the earliest broken bird-note, he opened his eyes and began to murmur disconnectedly. At length he recognized me, and, with me, his situation. "Don't go on tiptoe, and hold your breath, and pull a long face," he said; "speak up like a man. I'm doing the biggest job I ever did yet, you'll not interrupt me; I'm dying. One two, three four; I can almost count the ebbing waves. And to think that all these years they've been breaking on the strand of the universe! It's only when the world's din is shut out, at the last, that we hear them. I'll not pretend to say I'm not sorry; I've been a man of this world. It's a great one; there's a vast deal to do in it, for a man of sense. I've not been a fool, either. Write that for my epitaph, *He was no fool!* except when he went to L -. I'm not satisfied yet. I might have got better, and richer. I wanted to try galvanism, and to transfer that Pennsylvania stock. Well, I'm to be transferred myself. If dying's the end of it all, it's as well to die worse as to die better. At any rate, while time was mine, I didn't waste it. I went over my will, pen in hand, for the last time, only a week ago, crossed the *t*'s and dotted the *i*'s. I've left you nothing. You need nothing for comfort, and of course you expect nothing for sentiment. I've left twenty thousand dollars to found an infirmary for twenty indigent persons suffering from tumor in the stomach. *There's* sentiment! There will be no trouble about it, for my affairs are in perfect shape. Twenty snug little beds in my own little house in Philadelphia. They can get five into the dining-room." He was silent awhile, as if with a kind of ecstatic vision of the five little beds in a row. "I don't know that there is anything else," he said, at last, "except a few old papers to be burned. I hate leaving rubbish behind me; it's enough to leave one's mouldering carcass!"

At his direction I brought a large tin box from a closet and placed it on a chair by his bedside, where I drew from it a dozen useless papers and burned them one by one in the candle. At last, when but three or four were left, I laid my hand on a small sealed document labelled *Guest's Confession*. My hand trembled as I held it up to him, and as he recognized it a faint flush overspread his cadaverous pallor. He frowned, as if painfully confused. "How did it come there? I sent it back, I sent it back," he said. Then suddenly with a strangely erroneous recollection of our recent dispute, "I told you so the other day, you remember; and you said I was too generous. And what did you tell me about the daughter? You're in love with her? Ah yes! What a muddle!"

I respected his confusion. "You say you've left me nothing," I answered. "Leave me this."

Guest's Confession

For all reply, he turned over with a groan, and relapsed into stupor. The nurse shortly afterwards came to relieve me; but though I lay down, I was unable to sleep. The personal possession of that little scrap of paper acted altogether too potently on my nerves and my imagination. In due contravention of the doctor, Edgar outlasted the night and lived into another day. But as high noon was clashing out from the village church, and I stood with the doctor by his bedside, the latter, who had lifted his wrist a little to test his pulse, released it, not with the tenderness we render to suffering, but with a more summary reverence. Suffering was over.

By the close of the day I had finished my preparations for attending my step-brother's remains to burial in Philadelphia, among those of his own people; but before my departure, I measured once more that well-trodden road to the house by the river, and requested a moment's conversation with Mr. Guest. In spite of my attention being otherwise engaged, I had felt strangely all day that I carried a sort of magic talisman, a mystic key to fortune. I was constantly fumbling in my waistcoat-pocket to see whether the talisman was really there. I wondered that, as yet, Guest should not have demanded a surrender of his note; but I attributed his silence to shame, scorn, and defiance, and promised myself a sort of golden advantage by anticipating his claim with the cogent frankness of justice. But as soon as he entered the room I foresaw that Justice must show her sword as well as her scales. His resentment had deepened into a kind of preposterous arrogance, of a temper quite insensible to logic. He had more than recovered his native buoyancy and splendor; there was an air of feverish impudence in his stare, his light swagger, in the very hue and fashion of his crimson necktie. He had an evil genius with blond curls and innumerable flounces.

"I feel it to be a sort of duty," I said, "to inform you that my brother died this morning."

"Your brother? What's your brother to me? He's been dead to me these three days. Is that all you have to say?"

I was irritated by the man's stupid implacability, and my purpose received a check. "No," I answered, "I've several things more to touch upon."

"In so far as they concern my daughter, you may leave them unsaid. She tells me of your offer to *buy off* my opposition. Am I to understand that it was seriously made? You're a coarser young man than I fancied!"

"She told you of my offer?" I cried.

"O, you needn't build upon that! She hasn't mentioned your name since."

I was silent, thinking my own thoughts. I won't answer for it, that, in spite of his caution, I did *not* lay an immaterial brick or two. "You're still irreconcilable?" I contented myself with asking.

He assumed an expression of absolutely jovial contempt. "My dear sir, I detest the sight of you!"

"Have you no question to ask, no demand to make?"

He looked at me a moment in silence, with just the least little twitch and tremor of mouth and eye. His vanity, I guessed on the instant, was determined stoutly to ignore that I held him at an advantage and to refuse me the satisfaction of extorting from him the least allusion to the evidence of his disgrace. He had known bitter compulsion once; he would not do it the honor to concede that it had not spent itself. "No demand but that you will excuse my further attendance."

My own vanity took a hand in the game. Justice herself was bound to go no more than half-way. If he was not afraid of his little paper, he might try a week or two more of bravery. I bowed to him in silence and let him depart. As I turned to go I found myself face to face with Mrs. Beck, whose pretty visage was flushed with curiosity. "You and Mr. Guest have quarrelled," she said roundly.

Guest's Confession

"As you see, madam."

"As I see, madam! But what is it all about?"

"About his daughter."

"His daughter and his ducats! You're a very deep young man, in spite of those boyish looks of yours. Why did you never tell me you knew him? You've quarrelled about money matters."

"As you say," I answered, "I'm very deep. Don't tempt me to further subterfuge."

"He has lost money, I know. Is it much? Tell me that."

"It's an enormous sum!" I said, with mock solemnity.

"Provoking man!" And she gave a little stamp of disgust.

"He's in trouble," I said. "To a woman of your tender sympathies he ought to be more interesting than ever."

She mused a moment, fixing me with her keen blue eye. "It's a sad responsibility to have a heart!" she murmured.

"In that," I said, "we perfectly agree."

VI.

It was a singular fact that Edgar's affairs turned out to be in by no means the exemplary order in which he had flattered himself he placed them. They were very much at sixes and sevens. The discovery, to me, was almost a shock. I might have drawn from it a pertinent lesson on the fallacy of human pretensions. The gentleman whom Edgar had supremely honored (as he seemed to assume in his will) by appointing his executor, responded to my innocent surprise by tapping his forehead with a peculiar smile. It was partly from curiosity as to the value of this explanation, that I helped him to look into the dense confusion which prevailed in my step-brother's estate. It revealed certainly an odd compound of madness and method. I learned with real regret that the twenty eleemosynary beds at Philadelphia must remain a superb conception. I was horrified at every step by the broad license with which his will had to be interpreted. All profitless as I was in the case, when I thought of the comfortable credit in which he had died, I felt like some greedy kinsman of tragedy making impious havoc with a sacred bequest. These matters detained me for a week in New York, where I had joined my brother's executor. At my earliest moment of leisure, I called upon Crawford at the office of a friend to whom he had addressed me, and learned that after three or four dismally restless days in town, he had taken a summary departure for L. [sic] A couple of days later, I was struck with a certain dramatic connection between his return and the following note from Mr. Guest, which I give verbally, in its pregnant brevity:

SIR: I possess a claim on your late brother's estate which it is needless to specify. You will either satisfy it by return of mail or forfeit forever the common respect of gentlemen.

J. G.

Things had happened with the poor man rather as I hoped than as I expected. He had borrowed his recent exaggerated defiance from the transient smiles of Mrs. Beck. They had gone to his head like the fumes of wine, and he had dreamed for a day that he could afford to snap his fingers at the past. What he really desired and hoped of Mrs. Beck I was puzzled to say. In this woful disrepair of his fortunes he could hardly have meant to hold her to a pledge of matrimony extorted in brighter hours. He was infatuated, I believed, partly by a weak, spasmodic

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optimism which represented his troubles as momentary, and enjoined him to hold firm till something turned up, and partly by a reckless and frivolous susceptibility to the lady's unscrupulous blandishments. While they prevailed, he lost all notion of the wholesome truth of things, and would have been capable of any egregious folly. Mrs. Beck was in love with him, in so far as she was capable of being in love; his gallantry, of all gallantries, suited her to a charm; but she reproached herself angrily with this amiable weakness, and prudence every day won back an inch of ground. Poor Guest indeed had clumsily snuffed out his candle. He had slept in the arms of Delilah, and he had waked to find that Delilah had guessed, if not his secret, something uncomfortably like it. Crawford's return had found Mrs. Beck with but a scanty remnant of sentiment and a large accession of prudence, which was graciously placed at his service. Guest, hereupon, as I conjectured, utterly disillusioned by the cynical frankness of her defection, had seen his horizon grow ominously dark, and begun to fancy, as I remained silent, that there was thunder in the air. His pompous waiving, in his note, of allusion both to our last meeting and to my own present claim, seemed to me equally characteristic of his weakness and of his distress. The bitter after-taste of Mrs. Beck's coquetry had, at all events, brought him back to reality. For myself, the real fact in the matter was the image of Laura Guest, sitting pensive, like an exiled princess.

I sent him nothing by return of mail. On my arrival in New York, I had enclosed the precious document in an envelope, addressed it, and stamped it, and put it back in my pocket. I could not rid myself of a belief that by that sign I should conquer. Several times I drew it forth and laid it on the table before me, reflecting that I had but a word to say to have it dropped into the post. Cowardly, was it, to keep it? But what was it to give up one's mistress without a battle? Which was the uglier, my harshness or Guest's? In a holy cause, and holy, you may be sure, I had dubbed mine, were not all arms sanctified? Possession meant peril, and peril to a manly sense, of soul and conscience, as much as of person and fortune. Mine, at any rate, should share the danger. It was a sinister-looking talisman certainly; but when it had failed, it would be time enough to give it up.

In these thoughts I went back to L. [sic] I had taken the morning train; I arrived at noon, and with small delay proceeded to the quiet little house which harbored such world-vexed spirits. It was one of the first days of September, and the breath of autumn was in the air. Summer still met the casual glance; but the infinite light of summer had found its term; it was as if there were a leak in the crystal vault of the firmament through which the luminous ether of June was slowly stealing away.

Mr. Guest, I learned from the servant, had started on a walk, to the mill, she thought, three miles away. I sent in my card to Laura, and went into the garden to await her appearance or her answer. At the end of five minutes, I saw her descend from the piazza and advance down the long path. Her light black dress swept the little box-borders, and over her head she balanced a white parasol. I met her, and she stopped, silent and grave. "I've come to learn," I said, "that absence has not been fatal to me."

"You've hardly been absent. You left a an influence behind, a very painful one. In Heaven's name!" she cried, with vehemence, "what horrible wrong have you done?"

"I have done no horrible wrong. Do you believe me?" She scanned my face searchingly for a moment; then she gave a long, gentle, irrepressible sigh of relief. "Do you fancy that if I had, I could meet your eyes, feel the folds of your dress? I've done that which I have bitterly wished undone; I did it in ignorance, weakness, and folly; I've repented in passion and truth. Can a man do more?"

"I never was afraid of the truth," she answered slowly; "I don't see that I need fear it now. I'm not a child. Tell me the absolute truth!"

"The absolute truth," I said, "is that your father once saw me in a very undignified position. It made such an impression on him that he's unable to think of me in any other. You see I was rather cynically indifferent to his observation, for I didn't know him then as your father."

Guest's Confession

She gazed at me with the same adventurous candor, and blushed a little as I became silent, then turned away and strolled along the path. "It seems a miserable thing," she said, "that two gentle spirits like yours should have an irreparable difference. When good men hate each other, what are they to do to the bad men? You must excuse my want of romance, but I cannot listen to a suitor of whom my father complains. Make peace!"

"Shall peace with him be peace with you?"

"Let me see you frankly shake hands," she said, not directly answering. "Be very kind! You don't know what he has suffered here lately." She paused, as if to conceal a tremor in her voice.

Had she read between the lines of that brilliant improvisation of mine, or was she moved chiefly with pity for his recent sentimental tribulations, pitying them the more that she respected them the less? "He has walked to the mill," I said; "I shall meet him, and we'll come back arm in arm." I turned away, so that I might not see her face pleading for a clemency which would make me too delicate. I went down beside the river and followed the old towing-path, now grassy with disuse. Reaching the shabby wooden bridge below the mill, I stopped midway across it and leaned against the railing. Below, the yellow water swirled past the crooked piers. I took my little sealed paper out of my pocket-book and held it over the stream, almost courting the temptation to drop it; but the temptation never came. I had just put it back in my pocket when I heard a footstep on the planks behind me. Turning round, I beheld Mr. Guest. He looked tired and dusty with his walk, and had the air of a man who had been trying by violent exercise to shake off a moral incubus. Judging by his haggard brow and heavy eyes, he had hardly succeeded. As he recognized me, he started just perceptibly, as if he were too weary to be irritated. He was about to pass on without speaking, but I intercepted him. My movement provoked a flash in his sullen pupil. "I came on purpose to meet you," I said. "I have just left your daughter, and I feel more than ever how passionately I love her. Once more, I demand that you withdraw your opposition."

"Is that your answer to my letter?" he asked, eying me from under his brows.

"Your letter puts me in a position to make my demand with force. I refuse to submit to this absurd verdict of accident. I have just seen your daughter, and I have authority to bring you to reason."

"My daughter has received you?" he cried, flushing.

"Most kindly."

"You scoundrel!"

"Gently, gently. Shake hands with me here where we stand, and let me keep my promise to Laura of our coming back to her arm in arm, at peace, reconciled, mutually forgiving and forgetting, or I walk straight back and put a certain little paper into her hands."

He turned deadly pale, and a fierce oath broke from his lips. He had been beguiled, I think, by my neglect of his letter, into the belief that Edgar had not died without destroying his signature, a belief rendered possible by an indefeasible faith he must have had in my step-brother's probity. "You've kept that thing!" he cried. "The Lord be praised! I'm as honest a man as either of you!"

"Say but two words, 'Take her!' and we shall be honest together again. The paper's yours." He turned away and leaned against the railing of the bridge, with his head in his hands, watching the river.

"Take your time," I continued; "I give you two hours. Go home, look at your daughter, and choose. An hour hence I'll join you. If I find you've removed your veto, I undertake to make you forget you ever offered it: if I find you've maintained it, I expose you."

Guest's Confession

"In either case you lose your mistress. Whatever Laura may think of me, there can be no doubt as to what she will think of you."

"I shall be forgiven. Leave that to me! That's my last word. In a couple of hours I shall take the liberty of coming to learn yours."

"O Laura, Laura!" cried the poor man in his bitter trouble. But I left him and walked away. I turned as I reached the farther end of the bridge, and saw him slowly resume his course. I marched along the road to the mill, so excited with having uttered this brave *ultimatum* that I hardly knew whither I went. But at last I bethought me of a certain shady stream-side nook just hereabouts, which a little exploration soon discovered. A shallow cove, screened from the road by dense clumps of willows, stayed the current a moment in its grassy bend. I had noted it while boating, as a spot where a couple of lovers might aptly disembark and moor their idle skiff; and I was now tempted to try its influence in ardent solitude. I flung myself on the ground, and as I listened to the light gurgle of the tarrying stream and to the softer rustle of the cool gray leafage around me, I suddenly felt that I was exhausted and sickened. I lay motionless, watching the sky and resting from my anger. Little by little it melted away and left me horribly ashamed. How long I lay there I know not, nor what was the logic of my meditations, but an ineffable change stole over my spirit. There are fathomless depths in spiritual mood and motive. Opposite me, on the farther side of the stream, winding along a path through the bushes, three or four cows had come down to drink. I sat up and watched them. A young man followed them, in a red shirt, with his trousers in his boots. While they were comfortably nosing the water into ripples, he sat down on a stone and began to light his pipe. In a moment I fancied I saw the little blue thread of smoke curl up from the bowl. From beyond, just droning through the air, came the liquid rumble of the mill. There seemed to me something in this vision ineffably pastoral, peaceful, and innocent; it smote me to my heart of hearts. I felt a nameless wave of impulse start somewhere in the innermost vitals of conscience and fill me with passionate shame. I fell back on the grass and burst into tears.

The sun was low and the breeze had risen when I rose to my feet. I scrambled back to the road, crossed the bridge, and hurried home by the towing-path. My heart, however, beat faster than my footfalls. I passed into the garden and advanced to the house; as I stepped upon the piazza, I was met by Mrs. Beck. "Answer me a simple question," she cried, laying her hand on my arm.

"I should like to hear you ask one!" I retorted, impatiently.

"Has Mr. Guest lost his mind?"

"For an hour! I've brought it back to him."

"You've a pretty quarrel between you. He comes up an hour ago, as I was sitting in the garden with Mr. Crawford, requests a moment's interview, leads me apart and offers himself. 'If you'll have me, take me now; you won't an hour hence,' he cried. 'Neither now nor an hour hence, thank you,' said I. 'My affections are fixed elsewhere!'"

"You've not lost your head, at any rate," said I; and, releasing myself, I went into the parlor. I had a horrible fear of being too late. The candles stood lighted on the piano, and tea had been brought in, but the kettle was singing unheeded. On the divan facing the window sat Guest, lounging back on the cushions; his hat and stick flung down beside him, his hands grasping his knees, his head thrown back, and his eyes closed. That he should have remained so for an hour, unbrushed and unfurbished, spoke volumes as to his mental state. Near him sat Laura, looking at him askance in mute anxiety. What had passed between them? Laura's urgent glance as I entered was full of trouble, but I fancied without reproach. He had apparently chosen neither way; he had simply fallen there, weary, desperate, and dumb.

"I'm disappointed!" Laura said to me gravely.

Guest's Confession

Her father opened his eyes, stared at me a moment, and then closed them. I answered nothing; but after a moment's hesitation went and took my seat beside Guest. I laid my hand on his own with a grasp of which he felt, first the force, then, I think, the kindness; for, after a momentary spasm of repulsion, he remained coldly passive. He must have begun to wonder. "Be so good," I said to Laura, "as to bring me one of the candles." She looked surprised; but she complied and came toward me, holding the taper, like some pale priestess expecting a portent. I drew out the note and held it to the flame. "Your father and I have had a secret," I said, "which has been a burden to both of us. Here it goes." Laura's hand trembled as she held the candle, and mine as I held the paper; but between us the vile thing blazed and was consumed. I glanced askance at Guest; he was staring wide-eyed at the dropping cinders. When the last had dropped, I took the candle, rose, and carried it back to the piano. Laura dropped on her knees before her father, and, while my back was turned, something passed between them with which I was concerned only in its consequences.

When I looked round, Guest had risen and was passing his fingers through his hair. "Daughter," he said, "when I came in, what was it I said to you?"

She stood for an instant with her eyes on the floor. Then, "I've forgotten!" she said, simply.

Mrs. Beck had passed in by the window in time to hear these last words. "Do you know what you said to me when you came in?" she cried, mirthfully shaking a finger at Guest. He laughed nervously, picked up his hat, and stood looking, with an air of odd solemnity, at his boots. Suddenly it seemed to occur to him that he was dusty and dishevelled. He settled his shirt-collar and levelled a glance at the mirror, in which he caught my eye. He tried hard to look insensible; but it was the glance of a man who felt more comfortable than he had done in a month. He marched stiffly to the door.

"Are you going to dress?" said Mrs. Beck.

"From head to foot!" he cried, with violence.

"Be so good, then, if you see Mr. Crawford in the hall, as to ask him to come in and have a cup of tea."

Laura had passed out to the piazza, where I immediately joined her. "Your father accepts me," I said; "there is nothing left but for you"

Five minutes later, I looked back through the window to see if we were being observed. But Mrs. Beck was busy adding another lump of sugar to Crawford's cup of tea. His eye met mine, however, and I fancied he looked sheepish.