The Great Condition

Henry James

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"Ah there, confound it!" said Bertram Braddle when he had once more frowned, so far as he could frown, over his telegram. "I *must* catch the train if I'm to have my morning clear in town. And it's a most abominable nuisance!"

"Do you mean on account of a *her*?" asked, after a minute's silent sympathy, the friend to whom in the hall of the hotel, still bestrewn with the appurtenances of the newly disembarked he had thus querulously addressed himself.

He looked hard for an instant at Henry Chilver, but the hardness was not all produced by Chilver's question. His annoyance at not being able to spend his night at Liverpool was visibly the greatest that such a privation can be conceived as producing, and might have seemed indeed to transcend the limits of its occasion. "I promised her the second day out that, no matter at what hour we should get in, I would see her up to London and save her having to take a step by herself."

"And you piled up the assurance" Chilver somewhat irrelevantly laughed "with each successive day!"

"Naturally for what is there to do between New York and Queenstown but pile up? And now, with this pistol at my head" crumpling the telegram with an angry fist, he tossed it into the wide public chimney−place "I leave her to scramble through to−morrow as she can. She has to go on to Brighton and she doesn't know " And Braddle's quickened sense of the perversity of things dropped to a moment's helpless communion with the aggravating face of his watch.

"She doesn't know ?" his friend conscientiously echoed.

"Oh, she doesn't know anything! Should you say it's too late to ask for a word with her? "

Chilver, with his eyes on the big hotel−clock, wondered. "Lateish isn't it? when she must have been gone this quarter of an hour to her room."

"Yes, I'm bound to say she *has* managed *that* for herself!" and Braddle stuck back his watch. "So that, as I haven't time to write, there's nothing for me but to wire her ever so apologetically the first thing in the morning from town."

"Surely as for the steamer special there are now only about five minutes left."

"Good then I join you," said Braddle with a sigh of submission. "But where's the brute who took my things? Yours went straight to the station?"

"No they're still out there on the cab from which I set you down. And there's your chap with your stuff" Chilver's eye had just caught the man "he's ramming it into the lift. Collar him before it goes up." Bertram Braddle, on this, sprang forward in time; then while at an office−window that opened into an inner sanctuary he explained his case to a neatly fitted priestess whose cold eyes looked straight through nonsense, putting it before her that he should after all not require the room he had telegraphed for, his companion only turned uneasily about at a distance and made no approach to the arrested four−wheeler that, at the dock, had received both the gentlemen and their effects. "I join you I join you," Braddle repeated as he brought back his larger share of these.

Chilver appeared meanwhile to have found freedom of mind for a decision. "But, my dear fellow, shall I too then go?"

Braddle stared. "Why, I thought you so eminently *had* to."

"Not if I can be of any use to you. I mean by stopping over and offering my I admit very inferior aid "

"To Mrs Damerel?" Braddle took in his friend's sudden and as it presented itself singularly obliging change of plan. "Ah, you want to be of use to *her*?"

"Only if it will take her off your mind till you see her again. I don't mind telling you now," Chilver courageously continued, "that I'm not positively in such a hurry. I said I'd catch the train because I thought you wanted to be alone with her."

The young men stood there now a trifle rigidly, but very expressively, face to face: Bertram Braddle, the younger but much the taller, smooth, handsome and heavy, with the composition of his dress so elaborately informal, his pleasant monocular scowl so religiously fixed, his hat so despairingly tilted, and his usual air innocent enough, however of looking down from some height still greater as every one knew about the rich, the bloated Braddles than that of his fine stature; Chilver, slight and comparatively colourless, rather sharp than bright, but with in spite of a happy brown moustache, scantily professional, but envied by the man whose large, empty, sunny face needed, as some one had said, a little planting no particular 'looks' save those that dwelt in his intelligent eyes. "And what then did you think I wanted to do?"

"Exactly what you say. To present yourself in a taking light to deepen the impression you've been at so much trouble to make. But if you don't care for my stopping !" And tossing away the end of his cigarette with a gesture of good−humoured renouncement, Chilver moved across the marble slabs to the draughty portal that kept swinging from the street.

There were porters, travellers, other impediments in his way, and this gave Braddle an appreciable time to watch his receding back before it disappeared; the prompt consequence of which was an "I say, Chilver!" launched after him sharply enough to make him turn round before passing out. The speaker had not otherwise stirred, and the interval of space doubtless took something from the straightness of their further mute communication. This interval, the next minute, as Chilver failed to return, Braddle diminished by gaining the door in company with a

porter whose arm he had seized on the way. "Take this gentleman's things off the cab and put on mine." Then as he turned to his friend: "Go and tell the young woman there that you'll have the room I've given up."

Chilver laid upon him a hand still interrogative enough not to be too grateful. "Are you very sure it's all right?"

Braddle's face simply followed for a moment, in the outer lamplight, the progress of the operation he had decreed. "Do you think I'm going to allow you to make out that I'm afraid?"

"Well, my dear chap, why shouldn't you be?" Henry Chilver, with this retort, did nothing; he only, with his hands in his pockets, let the porter and the cabman bestir themselves. "I simply wanted to be civil."

"Oh, I'll risk it!" said the younger man with a free enough laugh. "Be awfully attentive, you know."

"Of course it won't be anything like the same thing to *her* ," Chilver went on.

"Of course not, but explain. Tell her I'm wiring, writing. Do everything, in short. Good−bye."

"Good−bye, good−bye, old man." And Chilver went down with him to the rearranged cab. "So many thanks."

"Thanks?" said the other as he got in.

"I mean because I'm hang it! just tired enough to be glad to go to bed."

"Oh!" came rather dryly from Braddle out of the window of the cab.

"Shan't I go with you to the station?" his companion asked.

"Dear no much obliged!"

"Well, you shall have my report!" Chilver continued.

"Ah, I shall have Mrs Damerel's!" Braddle answered as the cab drove away.

2

The fatigue of which Chilver had spoken sought relief for the time in a good deal of rather pointless activity, and it was not for an hour after he had taken possession of his room that he lay down to close his eyes. He moved, before this, in his narrow limits, up and down and to and fro; he left his smaller portmanteau gaping but unpacked; he fumbled in his dressing−bag for a book and dropped with it into a chair. But when in this position he let his attention very soon wander and his lids finally droop, it was not at all that sleep had overcome him. Something had overcome him, on the contrary, that, a quarter of an hour later, made him jump up and consult the watch he had transferred from his pocket to his bedside as his only step toward undressing. He quickly restored it to its receptacle and, catching up his hat, left the room and took his course down stairs. Here, for another quarter of an hour, he wandered, waited, looked about. He had been rather positive to his comrade on the question of Mrs Damerel's possible, impossible, reappearance; but his movements, for some time, could have been explained only by an unquenched imagination that, late though the hour, she might 'nip' down so in fact he mentally phrased it: well, for what? To indulge it was conceivable an appetite unappeased by the five and twenty meals (Braddle had seen them all served to her on deck) of the rapid voyage. He kept glancing into the irresponsive

coffee−room and peeping through the glass door of a smaller blank, bright apartment in which a lonely, ugly lady, hatted and coated and hugging a bundle of shawls, sat glaring into space with an anxiety of her own. When at last he returned to his room, however, it was quite with the recognition that such a person as Mrs Damerel wouldn't at all at that hour be knocking about the hotel. On the other hand his vigil still encouraged the reflection what appeared less like her than her giving them the slip, on their all leaving the dock, so unceremoniously; making her independent dash for a good room at the inn the very moment the Customs people had passed her luggage? It was perhaps the fatiguing futility of this question that at last sent Henry Chilver to bed and to sleep.

That restorative proved the next morning to have considerably cleared and settled his consciousness. He found himself immediately aware of being in no position to say what was or was not 'like' Mrs Damerel. He knew as little about her as Braddle knew, and it was his conviction that Braddle's ignorance had kept regular step with all the rest of the conditions. These conditions were, to begin with, that, seated next her at table for the very first repast, Bertram had struck up with her a friendship of which the leaps and bounds were, in the social, the sentimental sphere, not less remarkable than those with which the great hurrying ship took its way through the sea. They were, further, that, unlike all the other women, so numerous and, in the fine weather, so 'chatty', she had succeeded in incurring the acquaintance of nobody in the immense company but themselves. Three or four men had more or less made up to her, but with none of the ladies had she found it inevitable to exchange, to his observation and oh, his attention, at least, had been deep! three words. The great fact above all had been as it now glimmered back to him that he had studied her not so much in her own demonstrations, which had been few and passive, as in those of his absolutely alienated companion. He had been reduced to contemplation resignedly remote, since Braddle now monopolised her, and had thus seen her largely through his surprise at the constancy of Braddle's interest. The affinities hitherto in other cases recognised by his friend he had generally made out as of an order much less fine. There were lots of women on the ship who might easily have been supposed to be a good deal more his affair. Not one of them had, however, by any perversity corresponding with that of the connection under his eyes, become in any degree Chilver's own. He had the feeling, on the huge crowded boat, of making the voyage in singular solitude, a solitude mitigated only by the amusement of finding Braddle so mashed' and of wondering what would come of it. Much less, up to that moment, had come of the general American exposure than each, on their sailing westward for the more and more prescribed near view, had freely foretold to the other as the least they were likely to get off with. The near view of the big queer country had at last, this summer, imposed itself: so many other men had got it and were making it, in talk, not only a convenience but a good deal of a nuisance, that it appeared to have become, defensively, as necessary as the electric light in the flat one might wish to let; as to which the two friends, after their ten bustling weeks, had now in fact grown to feel that they could press the American button with the best.

But they had been on the whole Chilver at least had been disappointed in the celebrated (and were they not *all*, in the United States, celebrated?) native women. He didn't quite know what he had expected: something or other, at any rate, that had not taken place. He felt as if he had carried over in his portmanteau a court−suit or a wedding−garment and were bringing it back untouched, unfolded, in creases unrelieved and almost painfully aware of themselves. They had taken lots of letters most of them, some fellow who knew had told them, awfully good ones; they had been to Washington and Boston and Newport and Mount Desert, walking round and round the vociferous whirlpool, but neither tumbling in nor feeling at any moment, as it appeared, at all dangerously dizzy; so that here in relation to Mrs Damerel was the oddity of an impression vertiginous only after everything might have been supposed to be well over. This lady was the first female American they had met, of almost any age, who was not celebrated; yet she was the one who suggested most to Chilver something he now imagined himself originally to have gone forth expecting to feel. She was a person to whom they couldn't possibly have had a letter; she had never in her life been to Newport; she was on her way to England for the first time; she was, in short, most inconsistently, though indeed quite unblushingly, obscure. She was only charming in a new way. It was newer, somehow, than any of the others that were so fresh. Yet what should he call it if he were trying in a foolish flight of analysis to somebody else to describe it? When he asked himself this he was verily brought, from one thing to another, to recognising that it was probably in fact as old as the hills. All that was new in it was that he was in love with her; and moreover without in the least knowing her, so completely, so heroically, from the point of honour, had he, for all the six days, left her to poor Braddle. Well, if he should now

take her up to town he would be a little less ignorant. He liked, naturally, to think he should be of use to her, but he flattered himself he kept the point of honour well in view. To Braddle given Braddle's uneasiness he should be equally of use.

3

This last appearance was in a short time abundantly confirmed; not only when, in London, after the discharge of his mission, he submitted to his friend a detailed account of that happy transaction, but ten days later, on Braddle's own return from Brighton, where he had promptly put in a week a week of which, visibly, the sole and irresistible motive was Mrs Damerel, established there as a sequel to Chilver's attendance on her from Liverpool to Euston and from Euston, within the hour so immediately that she got off before her other friend had had time to turn up at either station to Victoria. This other friend passed in London, while at Brighton, the inside of a day, rapping with a familiar stick at an hour supposedly not dedicated, in those grey courts, to profane speculation the door of the dingy Temple chambers in which, after the most extravagant holiday of his life, Henry Chilver had found it salutary to sit and imagine himself 'reading'. But Braddle had always been, portentously, a person of free mornings his nominal occupation that of looking after his father's 'interests', and his actual that of spending, though quite without scandal, this personage's money, of which, luckily, there seemed an abundance. What came from him on this occasion connected itself with something that had passed between them on their previous meeting, the one immediately following the incident at Liverpool. Chilver had at that time been rather surprised to hear his friend suddenly bring out: "You don't then think there's anything 'off' about her?"

"Off?" Chilver could at least be perfectly vague. "Off what?"

"What's the beastly phrase? 'Off colour'. I mean do you think she's all right?"

"Are you in love with her?" Chilver after a moment demanded.

"Damn it, of course I'm in love with her!" Braddle joylessly articulated.

"Well then, doesn't that give you ?"

"Give me what?" he asked with impatience at his companion's pause.

"Well, a sort of searching light "

"For reading her clear?" Braddle broke in. "How can you ask as a man of the world anything so idiotic? Where did you ever discover that being in love makes a searching light, makes anything but a most damnable and demoralising darkness? One has been in love with creatures such that one's condition has lighted nothing in the world but one's asininity. *I* have at any rate. And so have you!"

"No, I've never been really in love at all," said Chilver good−humouredly.

"The less credit to you then to have in two or three cases I recall made such a fool of yourself. I, at all events I don't mind your knowing," Braddle went on "am harder hit, far and away, than I've ever been. But I don't in the least pretend to place her or to have a free judgment about her. I've already since we landed had two letters from her, and I go down to−morrow to see her. That *may* assist me it ought to to make her out a little better. But I've a gruesome feeling that it won't!"

"Then how can I help you?" Chilver inquired with just irritation enough to make him, the next moment though

his interlocutor, interestingly worried but really most inexpert, had no answer for the question sorry to have shown it. "If you've heard from her," he continued, "did she send me a message?"

"None whatever."

"Nor say anything about me?"

"Not a word."

"Ah!" said Henry Chilver while their eyes again met with some insistence. He somehow liked Mrs Damerel's silence after the hours he had spent with her; but his state of mind was again predominantly of not wanting Braddle to see in him any emotion. "A woman may surely be called all right, it seems to me, when she's pretty and clever and good."

"'Good'?" Braddle echoed. "How do you know she's good?"

"Why, confound you, she's such a lady."

"*Isn't* she?" Braddle took it up with equal promptitude and inconsequence. Then he recovered himself. "All the same, one has known ladies !"

"Yes, one has. But she's quite the best thing that, in the whole time, we've come across."

"Oh, by a long shot. Think of those women on the ship. It's only that she's so poor," Braddle added.

Chilver hesitated. "Is she so awfully?"

"She has evidently to count her shillings."

"Well, if she had been bad she'd be rich," Chilver returned after another silence. "So what more do you want?"

"Nothing. Nothing," Braddle repeated.

"Good−bye, then."

"Good−bye."

On which the elder man had taken leave; so that what was inevitably to follow had to wait for their next meeting. Mrs Damerel's victim betrayed on this second occasion still more markedly the state of a worried man, and his friend measured his unrest by his obvious need of a patient ear, a need with which Chilver's own nature, this interlocutor felt, would not in the same conditions have been acquainted. Even while he wondered, however, at the freedom his visitor used, Chilver recognised that had it been a case of more or less fatuous happiness Braddle would probably have kept the matter to himself. His host made the reflection that *he* , on the other hand, might have babbled about a confidence, but would never have opened his mouth about a fear. Braddle's fear, like many fears, had a considerable queerness, and Chilver, in presence of it and even before a full glimpse, had begun to describe it to himself as a fixed idea. It was as if according to Braddle, there had been something in Mrs Damerel's history that she ought really to have told a fellow before letting him in so far.

"But how far?"

"Why, hang it, I'd marry her to−morrow."

Chilver waited a moment. "Is what you mean that she'd marry *you* ?"

"Yes, blest if I don't believe she certainly would."

"You mean if you'd let her off ?"

"Yes," Braddle concurred; "the obligation of letting me know the particular thing that, whatever it is, right or wrong, I've somehow got it so tormentingly into my head that she keeps back."

"When you say 'keeps back', do you mean that you've questioned her?"

"Oh, not about *that*!" said Braddle with beautiful simplicity.

"Then do you expect her to volunteer information "

"That may damage her so awfully with me?" Braddle had taken it up intelligently, but appeared sufficiently at a loss as to what he expected. "I'm sure she knows well enough I want to know."

"I don't think I understand what you're talking about," Chilver replied after a longish stare at the fire.

"Well, about something or other in her life; some awkward passage, some beastly episode or accident; the things that do happen, that often *have* happened, to women you might think perfectly straight come now! and that they very often quite successfully hide. You know what I'm driving at: some chapter in the book difficult to read aloud some unlucky page she'd like to tear out. God forgive me, some slip."

Chilver, quitting the fire, had taken a turn round the room. "Is it your idea," he presently inquired, "that there may have been only *one*? I mean one 'slip'." He pulled up long enough in front of them to give his visitor's eyes time to show a guess at possible derision, then he went on in another manner. "No, no; I really don't understand. You seem to me to see her as a column of figures each in itself highly satisfactory, but which, when you add them up, make only a total of doubt."

"That's exactly it!" Braddle spoke almost with admiration of this neat formula. "She hasn't really *any* references."

"But, my dear man, it's not as if you were engaging a housemaid."

Braddle was arrested but a moment. "It's much worse. For any one else I shouldn't mind !"

"What I don't grasp," his companion broke in, "is your liking her so much as to 'mind' so much, without by the same stroke liking her enough not to mind at all."

Braddle took in without confusion this approach to subtlety. "But suppose it should be something rather awful?"

It was his confidant, rather, who was a trifle disconcerted. "Isn't it just as easy besides being much more comfortable to suppose there's nothing?"

"No. If it had been, don't you see that I *would* have supposed it? There's something. I don't know what there is; but there's something."

"Then ask her."

Braddle wondered. "Would *you*?"

"Oh dear, no!"

"Then *I* won't!" Braddle returned with an odd air of defiance that made his host break into a laugh. "Suppose," he continued, "she should swear there's nothing."

"The chance of that is just why it strikes me you might ask her."

"I 'might'? I thought you said one shouldn't."

"*I* shouldn't. But I haven't your ideas."

"Ah, but you don't know her."

Chilver hesitated. "Precisely. And what you mean is that, even if she should swear there's nothing, you wouldn't believe her?"

Braddle appeared to give a silent and even somewhat diffident assent. "There's nothing I should hate like that. I should hate it still more than being as I am. If you had seen more of her," he pursued, "you would know what I mean by her having no references. Her whole life has been so extraordinarily so conveniently, as one might say away from everything."

"I see so conveniently for *her*. Beyond verification."

"Exactly; the record's inaccessible. It's all the 'great West'. We saw something of the great West, and I thought it rather *too* great. She appears to have put in a lot of California and the Sandwich Islands. I may be too particular, but I don't fancy a Sandwich Islands past. Even for her husband and for her little girl for their having lived as little as for their having died she has nothing to show. She hasn't so much as a photograph, a lock of hair or an announcement in a newspaper."

Chilver thought. "But perhaps she wouldn't naturally leave such things about the sitting−room of a Brighton lodging."

"I dare say not. But it isn't only such things. It's tremendously odd her never having even by mere chance knocked against anything or any one that one has ever heard of or could if one should want to get at."

Again Henry Chilver reflected. "Well, that's what struck me as especially nice, or rather as very remarkable in her her being, with all her attraction, one of the obscure seventy millions; a mere little almost nameless tossed−up flower out of the huge mixed lap of the great American people. I mean for the charming person she is. I doubt if, after all, any other huge mixed lap "

"Yes, if she were English, on those lines," Braddle sagaciously interrupted, "one wouldn't look at her, would one? I say, fancy her English!"

Chilver was silent a little. "What you don't like is her music."

His visitor met his eyes. "Why, it's awfully good."

"Is it? I mean her having, as you told me on the boat, given lessons."

"That certainly is not what I most like her to have done I mean on account of some of the persons she may have given them *to*; but when her voice broke down she had to do something. She had sung in public though only in concerts; but that's another thing. She lost her voice after an illness. I don't know what the illness was. It was after

her husband's death. She plays quite wonderfully better, she says, really, than she sang; so she has that resource. She gave the lessons in the Sandwich Islands. She admits that, fighting for her own hand, as she says, she has kept some queer company. I've asked her for details, but she only says she'll tell me 'some day'. Well, *what* day, don't you know? Finally she inherited a little money she says from a distant cousin. I don't call *that* distant setting her up. It isn't much, but it made the difference, and there she is. She says she's afraid of London; but I don't quite see in what sense. She heard about her place at Brighton from some 'Western friends'. But how can I go and ask them?"

"The Western friends?" said Chilver.

"No, the people of the house about the other people. The place is rather beastly, but it seems all right. At any rate she likes it. If there's an awful hole on earth it's Brighton, but she thinks it 'perfectly fascinating'. Now isn't that a rum note? She's the most extraordinary mixture."

Chilver had listened with an air of strained delicacy to this broken trickle of anguish, speaking to the point only when it appeared altogether to have ceased. "Well, my dear man, what is it, may I ask in all sympathy, you would like me, in the circumstances, to do? Do you want me to sound her for you?"

"Don't be *too* excruciatingly funny," Braddle after a moment replied.

"Well then, clear the thing up."

"But how?"

"By making her let you know the worst."

"And by what means if I don't ask her?"

"Simply by proposing."

"Marriage?"

"Marriage, naturally."

"You consider," Braddle inquired, "that that will infallibly make her speak?"
"Not infallibly, but probably."

Braddle looked all round the room. "But if it shouldn't?"

His friend took another turn about. "Well risk it!"

4

Henry Chilver remained for a much longer time than he would have expected in ignorance of the effect of that admonition; two full months elapsed without bringing him news. Something, he meanwhile reasoned, he *should* know ought to know: it was due to him assuredly that Bertram Braddle shouldn't quite apart from the distance travelled in the company of Mrs Damerel go so far even with *him* without recognising the propriety of going further. But at last, as the weeks passed, he arrived at his own estimate of a situation which had clearly nothing

more to give him. It was a situation that had simply ceased to be one. Braddle was afraid and had remained afraid, just as he was ashamed and had remained ashamed. He had bolted, in his embarrassment, to Australia or the Cape; unless indeed he had dashed off once more to America, this time perhaps in quest of his so invidious 'references'. Was he looking for tracks in the great West or listening to twaddle in the Sandwich Islands? In any case Mrs Damerel would be alone, and the point of honour, for Chilver himself, would have had its day. The sharpest thing in his life at present was the desire to see her again, and he considered that every hour without information made a difference for the question of avoiding her from delicacy. Finally, one morning, with the first faint winter light, it became vivid to him that the dictate of delicacy was positively the other way was that, on the basis of Braddle's disappearance, he should make her some sign of recollection. He had not forgotten the address observed on one of her luggage−labels the day he had seen her up from Liverpool. Mightn't he, for instance, run down to her place that very morning? Braddle couldn't expect ! What Braddle couldn't expect, however, was lost in the suppressed sound with which, on passing into his sitting−room and taking up his fresh letters, he greeted the superscription of the last of the half−dozen just placed on his table. The envelope bore the postmark of Brighton, and if he had languished for information the very first lines the note was only of a page were charged with it. Braddle announced his engagement to Mrs Damerel, spoke briefly, but with emphasis, of their great happiness and their early nuptials, and hoped very much his correspondent would be able to come down and see them for a day.

Henry Chilver, it may be stated, had, for reasons of feeling he felt somehow so deeply refuted to wait a certain time to answer. What had Mrs Damerel's lover, he wondered, succeeded at last in extracting from her? She had made up her mind as to what she could safely do she had let him know the worst and he had swallowed it down? What *was* it, the queer suppressed chapter; what was the awkward page they had agreed to tear out together? Chilver found himself envying his friend the romance of having been sustained in the special effort, the extreme sacrifice, involved in such an understanding. But he had for many days, on the whole vision, odd impatiences that were followed by odder recoveries. One of these variations was a sudden drop of the desire to be in presence of the woman for the sight of whom he had all winter consistently been yearning. What was most marked, however, was the shake he had vigorously to give himself on perceiving his thoughts again and again take the direction that poor Braddle had too successfully imparted to them. His curiosity about the concession she might have made to Braddle's was an assumption without Braddle's excuses that she had really had something to conceal till she was sure of her man. This was idiotic, because the idea was one that never would have originated with himself.

He did at last fix a day, none the less, and went down; but there, on the spot, his imagination was, to his surprise, freshly excited by the very fact that there were no apparent signs of a drama. It was as if he could see, after all, even face to face with her, what had stirred within the man she had for a time only imperfectly subdued. Why should she have tried to be so simple too simple? She overdid it, she ignored too much. Clear, soft, sweet, yet not a bit silly, she might well strike a fellow as having had more history than she what should one call it? owned up to. There were moments when Chilver thought he got hold of it in saying to himself that she was too clever to be merely what she was. There was something in her that, more than anything ever in any one, gratified his taste and seemed to him to testify to the happiest exercise of her own; and such things brought up the puzzle of how so much taste could have landed her simply where she was. Where she was well, was doubtless where she would find comfort, for the man she had accepted was now visibly at peace, even though he had not yet, as appeared, introduced her to his people. The fact of which Chilver was at last as at first most conscious was the way she succeeded in withholding from his own penetration every trace of the great question she had had out with her intended, who yet couldn't have failed one would quite have defied him to give it to her somehow that he had on two occasions allowed his tongue to betray him to the other person he most trusted. Braddle, whose taste was not his strong point, had probably mentioned this indiscretion to her as a drollery; or else she had simply questioned him, got it out of him. This made their guest a participant, but there was something beautiful and final in the curtain that, on her side, she had dropped. It never gave, all day, the faintest stir. That affected Chilver as the mark of what there might be behind.

Yet when in the evening his friend went with him to the station for the visitor had declined to sleep and was taking the last train back he had, after they had walked two or three times up and down the platform, the greatest mystification of all. They were smoking; there were ten minutes to spare, and they moved to and fro in silence. They had been talking all day mainly in Mrs Damerel's company, but the circumstance that neither spoke at present was not the less marked. Yet if Chilver was waiting for something on his host's part he could scarcely have said for what. He was aware now that if Mrs Damerel had, as he privately phrased it, 'spoken', it was scarcely to be expected that the man with a standpoint altered by a definite engagement would at the present stage at least repeat to him her words. He felt, however, as the fruitless moments ebbed, a trifle wronged, at all events disappointed: since he had been dragged into the business, as he always for himself expressed it, it would only have been fair to throw a sop to his conjecture. What, moreover, was Braddle himself so perversely and persistently mum for without an allusion that should even serve as a penance unless to draw out some advance which might help him to revert with an approach to grace? Chilver nevertheless made no advance, and at last as, ceasing to stroll, they stood at the open door of an empty compartment, the train was almost immediately to start. At this moment they exchanged a long, queer stare.

"Well, good−bye," said the elder man.

"Good−bye." Chilver still waited before entering the carriage, but just as he was about to give up his companion added: "You see I followed your advice. I took the risk."

"Oh about the question we discussed?" Chilver broke now, on the instant, into friendly response. "See then how right I was."

Braddle looked up and down the train. "I don't know."

"You're not satisfied?"

"Satisfied?" Still Braddle looked away.

"With what she has told you."

Braddle faced him again. "She has told me nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. She has accepted me that's all. Not a bit else. So you see you *weren't* so right."

"Oh oh!" exclaimed Chilver protestingly. The guard at this moment interposing with a "Take your seats, please!" and sharply, on his entering the carriage, shutting the door on him, he continued the conversation from the window, on which he rested his elbows. During the movement his protest had changed to something else. "Ah, but won't she yet ?"

"Let me have it? I'm sure I don't know. All I can say is that nothing has come from her."

"Then it's because there *is* nothing."

"I hope so," said Braddle from the platform.

"So you see," Chilver called out as the train moved, "I *was* right!" And he leaned forth as the distance grew and Braddle stood motionless and grave, gaily insisting and taking leave with his waving hand. But when he drew in his head and dropped into a seat he rather collapsed, tossing his hat across the compartment and sinking back into a corner and an attitude from which, staring before him and not even lighting another cigarette, he never budged

till he reached Victoria.

A fortnight later the footfall of Mrs Damerel's intended was loud on the old staircase in the Temple and the knob of his stick louder still on the old door. "It's only that it has rather stuck in my crop," he presently explained, "that I let you leave Brighton the other day with the pretension that you had been 'right', as you called it, about the risk attending the particular step that I took. I can't help it if I want you to know for it bores me that you're so pleased that you weren't in the least right. You were most uncommonly wrong."

"Wrong?"

"Wrong."

Chilver looked vaguely about as if suddenly in search of something, then moved with an odd general inconsequence to the window. "As the day's so fine, do you mind our getting out of this beastly stuffy place into the Gardens? We can talk there." His hat was apparently what he had been looking for, and he took it up, and with it some cigarettes. Braddle, though seemingly disconcerted by what threatened to be practically a change of subject, replied that he didn't care a hang; so that, leaving the room, they passed together down to the court and through other battered courts and crooked ways. The dim London sunshine in the great surrounded garden had a kindness, and the hum of the town was as hindered and yet as present as the faint sense of spring. The two men stopped together before a bench, but neither for the moment sat down. "Do you mean she *has* told you?" Chilver at last brought out.

"No it's just what she hasn't done."

"Then how the deuce am I wrong?"

"She has admitted that there *is* something."

Chilver markedly wondered. "Something? What?"

"That's just what I want to know."

"Then you *have* asked her?"

Braddle hesitated. "I couldn't resist my curiosity, my anxiety call it what you will. I've been too worried. I put it to her the day after you were down there."

"And how did you put it?"

"Oh, just simply, brutally, disgustingly. I said: 'Isn't there something about yourself something or other that has happened to you that you're keeping back?'"

Chilver was attentive, but not solemn. "Well?"

"Oh, she admitted it."

"And in what terms?"

"'Well, since you really drive me to the wall, there *is* something.' "

Chilver continued to consider. "And is that all she says?"

"No she says she *will* tell me."

"Ah well, then!" And Chilver spoke with a curious in fact, a slightly ambiguous little renewed sound of superiority.

"Yes," his friend ruefully returned, "but not, you see, for six months."

"Oh, I see! I see!" Chilver thoughtfully repeated. "So you've got to wait which I admit perfectly that you must find rather a bore. Yet if *she's* willing," he went on with more cheer and as if still seeking a justification of his original judgment "if *she's* willing, you see, I wasn't so much out."

Bertram Braddle demurred. "But she isn't willing."

His interlocutor stared. "I thought you said she proposed it."

"Proposed what?"

"Why, the six months' wait to make sure of you."

"Ah, but she'll *be* sure of me, after she has married me. The delay she asks for is not for our marriage," Braddle explained, "but only from the date of our marriage for the information."

"A−ah!" Chilver murmured, as if only now with a full view. "She means she'll speak when you *are* married."

"When we are. And then only on a great condition."
"How great?"

"Well, that if after the six months I still want it very much. She argues, you know, that I *sha'n't* want it."

"You won't then you won't!" cried Chilver with a laugh at the odd word and passing his arm into his friend's to make him walk again. They talked and they talked; Chilver kept his companion's arm and they quite had the matter out.

"What's that, you know," Braddle asked, "but a way to get off altogether?"

"You mean for you to get off from knowing?"

"Ah no, for *her* "

"To get off from telling? It *is* that, rather, of course," Chilver conceded. "But why shouldn't she get off if you should be ready to let her?"

"Oh, but if I shouldn't be?" Braddle broke in.

"Why then, if she promises, she'll tell you."

"Yes, but by that time the knot will be tight."

"And what difference will that make if you don't mind? She argues, as you say, that after that amount of marriage, of experience of her, you won't care !"

"What she does tell me may *be*?" Braddle smoked a moment in silence. "But suppose it should be one of those things " He dropped again.

"Well, what things?"

"That a man can't like in *any* state of satisfaction."

"I don't know what things you mean."

"Come, I say you do! Suppose it should be something really awful."

"Well, her calculation is that, awful or not," Chilver said, "she'll have sufficiently attached you to make you willing either totally to forego her disclosure or else easily to bear it."

"Oh, I know her calculation which is very charming as well as very clever and very brave. But my danger "

"Oh, you think too much of your danger!"

Braddle stopped short. "*You* don't!"

Chilver, however, who had coloured, spent much of the rest of the time they remained together in assuring him that he allowed this element all its weight. Only he came back at the last to what, practically, he had come back to in their other talks. "I don't quite see why she doesn't strike you as worth almost *any* risk."

"Do you mean that that's the way she strikes you?"

"Oh, I've not to tell you at this time of day," said Chilver, "how well I think of her."

His companion was now seated on a bench from which he himself had shortly before risen. "Ah, but I don't suppose you pretend to know her."

"No certainly not, I admit. But I don't see how *you* should either, if you come to that."

"I don't; but it's exactly what I'm trying for, confound it! Besides," Braddle pursued, "she doesn't put you the great condition."

Chilver took a few steps away; then as he came back. "No; she doesn't!"

"Wait till some woman does," Braddle went on. "Then you'll see how you feel under it then you can talk. If I wasn't so infernally fond of her," he gloomily added, "I wouldn't mind."

"Wouldn't mind what?"

"Why, what she has been. What she has done."
"Oh!" Chilver vaguely ejaculated.

"And I only mind now to the extent of wanting to know." On which Braddle rose from his seat with a heavy sigh. "Hang it, I've got to know, you know!" he declared as they walked on together.

5

Henry Chilver learned, however, in the course of time that he had won no victory on this, after all, rather reasonable ground — learned it from Mrs Damerel herself, who came up to town in the spring and established herself, in the neighbourhood of Kensington Square, in modest but decent quarters, where her late suitor's best friend went to pay her his respects. The great condition had, as each party saw it, been fruitlessly maintained, for neither had, under whatever pressure, found a way to give in. The most remarkable thing of all was that Chilver should so rapidly have become aware of owing his acquaintance with these facts directly to Mrs Damerel. He had, for that matter, on the occasion of his very first call, an impression strangely new to him — the consciousness that they had already touched each other much more than any contact between them explained. They met in the air of a common knowledge, so that when, for instance, almost immediately, without precautions or approaches, she said of Bertram Braddle: "He has gone off — heaven knows where! — to find out about me," he was not in the least struck with the length of the jump. He was instantly sensible, on the contrary, of the greatest pleasure in showing by his reply that he needed no explanation. "And do you think he'll succeed?"

"I don't know. He's so clever."

This, it seemed to Henry Chilver, was a wonderful speech, and he sat there and candidly admired her for it. There were all sorts of things in it — faint, gentle ironies and humilities, and above all the fact that the description was by no means exact. Poor Braddle was not, for such a measure as hers, clever, or markedly wouldn't be for such an undertaking. The words completely, on the part of the woman who might be supposed to have had a kindness for him, gave him away; but surely that was, in the face of his attitude, a mild revenge. It seemed to Chilver that until in her little makeshift suburban drawing−room he found himself alone with Mrs Damerel he himself had not effectively judged this position. He saw it now sharply, supremely, as the only one that had been possible to his friend, but finer still was the general state of perception, quickened to a liberal intensity, that made him so see it. He couldn't have expressed the case otherwise than by saying that poor Braddle had had to be right to be so ridiculously wrong. There might well have been, it appeared, in Mrs Damerel's past a missing link or two; but what was the very office of such a fact — when taken with other facts not a bit less vivid — but to give one a splendid chance to show a confidence? Not the confidence that, as one could only put it to one's self, there had not been anything, but the confidence that, whatever there had been, one wouldn't find that one couldn't — for the sake of the rest — swallow it.

This was at bottom the great result of the first stages of Chilver's now independent, as he felt it to be, acquaintance with Mrs Damerel — a sudden view of any, of every, dim passage, that was more than a tender acceptance of the particular obscurity, that partook really of the nature of affirmation and insistence. It all made her, with everything that for her advantage happened to help it on, extraordinarily touching to him, clothed her in the beauty of her general admission and her general appeal. Were not this admission and this appeal enough, and could anything be imagined more ponderously clumsy, more tactless and even truculent, than to want to gouge out the bleeding details? The charming woman was, to Chilver's view, about of his own age — not altogether so young, therefore, as Braddle, which was doubtless a note, too, in the latter's embarrassment — and that evidently did give time for a certain quantity of more or less trying, of really complicating experience. There it practically was, this experience, in the character of her delicacy, in her kindly, witty, sensitive face, worn fine, too fine perhaps, but only to its increase of expression. She was neither a young fool nor an old one, assuredly; but if the intenser acquaintance with life had made the object of one's affection neither false nor hard, how could one, on the whole, since the story might be so interesting, wish it away? Mrs Damerel's admission was so much evidence of her truth and her appeal so much evidence of her softness. She might easily have hated them both for guessing. She was at all events just faded enough to match the small assortment of Chilver's fatigued illusions — those that he had still, for occasions, in somewhat sceptical use, but that had lost their original violence of colour.

The second time he saw her alone he came back to what she had told him of Bertram Braddle. "If he should succeed — as to what you spoke of, wherever he has gone — would your engagement come on again?"

Mrs Damerel hesitated, but she smiled. "Do you mean whether he'll be likely to wish it?"

"No," said Chilver, with something of a blush; "I mean whether you'll be."

She still smiled. "Dear, no. I consider, you know, that I gave him his chance."

"That you seem to me certainly to have done. Everything between you, then, as I understand it, is at an end?"

"It's very good of you," said Mrs Damerel, "to desire so much to understand it. But I never give," she laughed, "but one chance!"

Chilver met her as he could. "You evidently can't have given any one very many!"

"Oh, you know," she replied, "I don't in the least regard it as a matter of course that, many or few, they should be eagerly seized. Mr Braddle has only behaved as almost any man in his situation would have done."

Chilver at first, on this, only lost himself a while. "Yes, almost any man. I don't consider that the smallest blame attaches to him."

"It would be too monstrous."

Again he was briefly silent, but he had his inspiration. "Yes, let us speak of him gently." Then he added: "You've answered me enough. You're free."

"Free indeed is what I feel," she replied with her light irony, "when I talk to you with this extraordinary frankness."

"Ah, the frankness is mine! It comes from the fact that from the first, through Braddle, I knew. And you knew I knew. And I knew that too. It has made something between us."

"It might have made something rather different from this," said Mrs Damerel.

He wondered an instant. "Different from my sitting here so intimately with you?"

"I mightn't have been able to bear that. I might have hated the sight of you."

"Ah, that would have been only," said Chilver, "if you had really liked me!"

She matched quickly enough the spirit of this. "Oh, but it wasn't so easy to like you little enough!"

"Little enough to endure me? Well, thank heaven, at any rate, we've found a sort of way!" Then he went on with real sincerity: "I feel as if our friend had tremendously helped me. Oh, how easily I want to let him down! There it is."

She breathed, after a moment, her assent in a sigh. "There it is!"

There indeed it was for several days during which this sigh frequently came back to him as a note of patience, of dignity in helpless submission, penetrating beyond any that had ever reached him. She had been put completely in his power, her good name handed over to him, by no act of her own, and in all her manner in presence of the awkward fact there was something that blinked it as little as it braved it. He wondered so hard, with this, why, even after the talk I have just reported, they were each not more embarrassed, that it could only take him a

tolerably short time to discover the reason. If there was something between them it had been between them, in silence and distance, from the first, from even before the moment when his friend, on the ship, by the favour of better opportunity, had tumbled in deep and temporarily blocked, as it were, the passage. Braddle was good−looking, good−humoured, well−connected, rich; and how could she have known of the impression of the man in the background any more than the man in the background could have known of hers? If she had accepted Braddle hadn't it been just to build out, in her situation, at a stroke, the worry of an alternative that was impossible? Of himself she had seen nothing but that he was out of the question, and she had agreed for conscience, for prudence, as a safeguard and a provision, to throw in her lot with a charming, fortunate fellow who was extremely in love. Chilver had, in his meditations, no sooner read these things clear than he had another flash that completed the vision. Hadn't she then, however, having done so much for reason, stood out, with her intended, on the item of the great condition made great precisely by the insistence of each exactly because, after all, that left the door open to her imagination, her dream, her hope? Hadn't her idea been to make for Bertram troubled herself and wavering for the result a calculated difficulty, a real test? Oh, if there was a test, how *he* was ready to meet it! Henry Chilver's insistence would take a different line from that of his predecessor. He stood at the threshold of the door, left open indeed, so that he had only to walk over. By the end of the week he had proposed.

6

It was at his club, one day of the following year, that he next came upon his old friend, whom he had believed, turning the matter often round, he should in time, though the time might be long inevitably meet again on some ground socially workable. That the time might be long had been indicated by a circumstance that came up again as soon as, fairly face to face, they fell, in spite of everything, to talking together. "Ah, you *will* speak to me then," said Chilver, "though you don't answer my letters!"

Braddle showed a strange countenance, partly accounted for by the fact that he was brown, seasoned, a trifle battered and had almost grown thin. But he had still his good monocular scowl, on the strength of which it was really so much less a threat than a positive appeal from a supersubtle world any old friend, recognising it again, would take almost anything from him. Yes indeed, quite anything, Chilver felt after they had been a few minutes together: he had become so quickly conscious of pity, of all sorts of allowances, and this had already operated as such a quickener of his private happiness. He had immediately proposed that they should look for a quiet corner, and they had found one in the smoking−room, always empty in the middle of the afternoon. Here it seemed to him that Braddle showed him what he himself had escaped. He had escaped being as *he* was that was it: 'as *he* was' was a state that covered now, to Chilver's sense, such vast spaces of exclusion and privation. It wasn't exactly that he was haggard or ill; his case was perhaps even not wholly clear to him, and he had still all the rest of his resources; but he was miserably afloat, and he could only be for Chilver the big, sore, stupid monument of his irretrievable mistake. "Did you write me more than once?" he finally asked.

"No but once. But I thought it, I'm bound to say, an awfully good letter, and you took no notice of it, you know, whatever. You never returned me a word."

"I know," said Braddle, smoking hard and looking away; "it reached me at Hawaii. It *was*, I dare say, as good a letter as such a letter could be. I remember I remember: all right; thanks. But I couldn't answer it. I didn't like it, and yet I couldn't trust myself to tell you so in the right way. So I let it alone."

"And we've therefore known nothing whatever about you."

Braddle sat jogging his long foot. "What is it you've wanted to know?"

The question made Chilver feel a little foolish. What *was* it, after all? "Well, what had become of you, and that sort of thing. I supposed," he added, "that you might be feeling as you say, and there was a lot, in connection with you, of course I myself felt, for me to think about. I even hesitated a good deal to write to you at all, and I waited, you remember, don't you? till after my marriage. I don't know what your state of mind may be to−day, but you'll never, my dear chap, get a 'rise' out of me. I bear you no grudge."

His companion, at this, looked at him again. "Do you mean for what I said ?"

"What you said ?"

"About *her*."

"Oh no I mean for the way you've treated us."

"How do you know how I've treated you?" Braddle asked.

"Ah, I only pretend to speak of what I do know! Your not coming near us. You've been in the Sandwich Islands?" Chilver went on after a pause.

"Oh yes."

"And in California?"

"Yes all over the place."

"All the while you've been gone?"

"No, after a time I gave it up. I've been round the world in extraordinary holes."

"And have you come back to England," Chilver asked, "to stay a while?"

"I don't know I don't know!" his friend replied with some impatience.

They kept it up, but with pauses pauses during which, as they listened, in the big, stale, empty room, always dreary in the absence of talk and the silence of the billiard−balls just beyond the loud tick of the clock gave their position almost as much an air of awkward penance as if they had had 'lines' to do or were staying after school. Chilver wondered if it would after all practically fail, his desire that they should remain friends. His wife beautiful creature! would give every help, so that it would really depend on Braddle himself. It might indeed have been as an issue to the ponderation of some such question on his own part that poor Bertram suddenly exclaimed: "I see you're happy I can make *that* out!"

He had said it in a way suggesting that it might make with him a difference for the worse, but Chilver answered none the less good−humouredly. "I'm afraid I can't pretend that I'm in the least miserable. But is it impossible you should come and see us? come and judge, as it were, for yourself?"

Braddle looked graver than ever. "Would it suit your wife?"

"Oh, she's not afraid, I think!" his companion laughed. "You spoke just now," he after a moment continued, "of something that in your absence, in your travels, you 'gave up'. Let me ask you frankly if you meant that you had undertaken inquiries "

"Yes; I 'nosed round', as they say out there; I looked about and tried to pick something." Braddle spoke on a drop of his interlocutor, checked evidently by a certain hardness of defiance in his good eyes; but he couldn't know that Chilver wished to draw him out only to be more sorry for him, hesitating simply because of the desire not to put his proceeding to him otherwise than gracefully. "Awfully low−minded, as well as idiotic, I dare say you'll think it but I'm not prepared to allow that it was not quite my own affair."

"Oh, *she* knew!" said Chilver comfortably enough.

"Knew I shouldn't find out anything? Well, I didn't. So she was right."

Thus they sat for a moment and seemed to smoke at her infallibility. "Do you mean anything objectionable?" Chilver presently inquired.

"Anything at all. Not a scrap. Not a trace of her passage not an echo of her name. That, however that I wouldn't, that I couldn't," Braddle added, "you'll have known for yourself."

"No, I wasn't sure."

"Then *she* was."

"Perhaps," said Chilver. "But she didn't tell me."

His friend hesitated. "Then what *has* she told you?"

"She has told me nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing," said Henry Chilver, smiling as with the enjoyment of his companion's surprise. "But do come and see us," he pursued as Braddle abruptly rose and stood now with a gravity that was almost portentous looking down at him.

"I'm horribly nervous. Excuse me. You make me so," the younger man declared after a pause.

Chilver, who with this had got up soothingly and still laughingly, laid a reassuring hand upon him. "Dear old man take it easy!"

"Thanks about coming to see you," Braddle went on. "I must think of it. Give me time."

"Time? Haven't you had months?"

Braddle turned it over. "Yes; but not on seeing you this way. I'm abominably nervous, at all events. There have been things my silence among them which I haven't known how you'd take."

"Well, you see how."

Braddle's stare was after all rather sightless. "I see but I don't understand. I'll tell you what you might do you might come to *me*."

"Oh, delighted. The old place?"

"The old place." Braddle had taken out his eye−glass to wipe it, and he cocked it characteristically back. "*Our* relation's rather rum, you know."

"Yours and my wife's? Oh, most unconventional; you may depend on it she feels that herself."
Braddle kept fixing him. "Then does *she* want to crow over me?"

"To crow?" Chilver was vague. "About what?"

His interlocutor hesitated. "About having at least got *you*."

"Oh, she's naturally pleased at that; but her satisfaction's after all a thing she can keep within bounds; and to see you again can only, I think, remind her more than anything else of what she did lose and now misses: your general situation, your personal advantages, your connections, expectations, magnificence."

Braddle, on this, after a lingering frown, turned away, looking at his watch and moving for a minute to the window. "When will you come? To−night?"

Chilver thought. "Rather late yes. With pleasure."

His friend presently came back with an expression rather changed. "What I meant just now was what it all makes of my relation and yours the way we go into it."

"Ah, well, that was extraordinary the way we went into it from the first. It was you, permit me to remark," Chilver pleasantly said, "who originally *began* going into it. Since you broke the ice I don't in the least mind its remaining broken."

"Ah, but at that time," Braddle returned, "I didn't know in the least what you were up to."

"And do I now know any more what *you* are? However," Chilver went on, "if you imply that I haven't acted with most scrupulous fairness, we *shall*, my dear fellow, quarrel as much as you please. I pressed you hard for your own interest."

"Oh, my 'interest'!" his companion threw off with another move to some distance; coming back, however, as quickly and before Chilver had time to take this up. "It's all right I've nothing to say. Your letter was very clever and very handsome." Then, "I'm not 'up to' anything," Braddle added with simplicity.

The simplicity just renewed his interlocutor's mirth. "In that case why shouldn't we manage?"

"Manage?"

"To make the best, all round, of the situation."

"I've no difficulty whatever," said Braddle, "in doing that. If I'm nervous I'm still much less so than I was before I went away. And as to my having broken off, I feel more and more how impossible it was I should have done anything else."

"I'm sure of it so we *will* manage."

It was as if this prospect, none the less, was still not clear to Braddle. "Then as you've so much confidence I can ask you why if what you said just now of me is true she shouldn't have paid for me a price that she was going, after all, to find herself ready to pay for *you*."

"A price? What price?"

"Why, the one we've been talking about. That of waiving her great condition." On which, as Chilver was, a moment though without embarrassment silent for this explanation, his interlocutor pursued: "The condition of your waiting "

"Ah," said Chilver, "it remained. She didn't waive it."

Oh, how Braddle looked at him! "You accepted it?"

Chilver gave a laugh at his friend's stare. "Why are you so surprised when all my urgency to *you* was to accept it and when I thought you were going to?" Bertram had flushed, and he was really astonished. "Hadn't you then known?"

"Your letter didn't say that."

"Oh, I didn't go into our terms."

"No," said Braddle with some severity, "you slurred them over. I know what you urged on me and what you thought I was going to do. *I* thought I was going to do it too. But at the scratch I couldn't."

"So you believed *I* wouldn't? "

Poor Braddle was, after all, candid enough. "At the scratch, yes; when it came the question to yourself, and in spite of your extraordinary preaching. I think I took for granted that she must have done for you what she didn't do for me that, liking you all for yourself, don't you see? and therefore so much better, she must have come round."

"For myself, better or worse, I grant you, was the only way she could like me," Chilver replied. "But she didn't come round."

"You married her *with* it?"

This was a question, however it was in particular an emphasis as to the interpretation of which he showed a certain reserve. "With what?"

"Why, damn it, with the condition."

"Oh, yes with the condition." It sounded, on Chilver's lips, positively gay.

"You waited?"

"I waited."

This answer produced between them for the time and, as might be said, by its visible effect on the recipient a hush during which poor Bertram did two or three pointless things: took up an ash−tray that was near them and vaguely examined it, then looked at the clock and at his watch, then again restlessly moved off a few steps and came back. At his watch he gave a second glare. "I say, after all *don't* come to−night."

"You can't stand me?"

"Well, I don't mind telling you you've rather upset me. It's my abject nerves; but they'll settle down in a few days, and then I'll make you a sign. Good−bye."

"Good−bye." Chilver held a minute the hand he had put out. "Don't be too long. My secondary effect on you may perhaps be better."

"Oh, it isn't really you. I mean it's *her*."

"Talking about her? Then we'll talk of something else. You'll give me the account "

"Oh, as I told you, there *was* no account!" Braddle quite artlessly broke in. Chilver laughed out again at this, and his interlocutor went on: "What's the matter is that, though it's none of my business, I can't resist a brutal curiosity a kind of suspense."

"Suspense?" Chilver echoed with good−humoured deprecation.

"Of course I do see you're thoroughly happy."

"Thoroughly."

Braddle still waited. "Then it isn't anything ?"

"Anything?"

"To make a row about. I mean what you know."

"But I *don't* know."

"Not yet? She hasn't told you?"

"I haven't asked."

Braddle wondered. "But it's six months."

"It's seven. I've let it pass."

"Pass?" Braddle repeated with a strange sound.
"So would *you* in my place."

"Oh, no, I beg your pardon!" Braddle almost exultantly declared. "But I give you a year."

"That's what *I've* given," said Chilver serenely.

His companion had a gasp. "Given *her*?"

"I bettered even, in accepting it, the great condition. I allowed her double the time."

Braddle wondered till he turned almost pale. "Then it's because you're afraid."

"To spoil my happiness?"

"Yes and hers."

"Well, my dear boy," said Chilver cheerfully, "it may be that."

"Unless," his friend went on, "you're in the interest of every one, if you'll permit me the expression? magnificently lying." Chilver's slow, good−humoured headshake was so clearly, however, the next moment, a sufficient answer to this that the younger man could only add as dryly as he might: "You'll know when you want to."

"I shall know, doubtless, when I ask. But I feel at present that I shall never ask."

"Never?"

"Never."

Braddle waited a moment. "Then how the devil shall *I* know?"

Something in the tone of it renewed his companion's laughter. "Have you supposed I'd tell you?"

"Well, you ought to, you know. And yes I've believed it."

"But, my good man, I can't ask for *you*."

Braddle turned it over. "Why not, when one thinks of it? You know you owe me something."

"But good heavens! what?"
"Well, some kindness. You know you've all the fun of being awfully sorry for me."

"My dear chap!" Chilver murmured, patting his shoulder. "Well, give me time!" he easily added.

"To the end of your year? I'll come back *then*," said Braddle, going off.

7

He came back punctually enough, and one of the results of it was a talk that, a few weeks later, he had one Sunday afternoon with Mrs Chilver, whom, till this occasion though it was not his first visit to the house he had not yet seen alone. It took him then but ten minutes ten minutes of a marked but subsiding want of ease to break out with a strong appeal to her on the question of the danger of the possible arrival of somebody else. "*Would* you mind of course I know it's an immense deal for me to ask having it just said at the door that you're not at home? I do so want really to get *at* you."

"Oh, you needn't be afraid of an interruption." Mrs Chilver seemed only amused. "No one comes to us. You see what our life is. Whom have you yet met here?"

He appeared struck with this. "Yes. Of course your living at Hammersmith "

"We have to live where we can live for tenpence a year." He was silent at this touch, with a silence that, like an exclamation, betrayed a kind of helplessness, and she went on explaining as if positively to assist him. "Besides,

we haven't the want. And so few people know us. We're our own company."

"Yes that's just it. I never saw such a pair. It's as if you did it on purpose. But it was to show you how I feel at last the luxury of seeing you without Chilver."

"Ah, but I can't forbid *him* the door!" she laughed.

He kept his eyes for a minute on that of the room. "Do you mean he *will* come in?"

"Oh, if he does it won't be to hurt you. He's not jealous."

"Well, *I* am," said the visitor frankly, "and I verily believe it's his not being and showing it so that partly has to do with that. If he cared I believe I shouldn't. Besides, what does it matter ?" He threshed about in his place uncomfortably.

She sat there with all her effaced anxieties patient and pretty. "What does what matter? "

"Why, *how* it happens since it does happen that he's always here."

"But you see he isn't!"

He made an eager movement. "Do you mean then we *can* talk? "

She just visibly hesitated. "He and I only want to be kind to you."

"That's just what's awful!" He fell back again. "It's the way he has kept me on and on. I mean without " But he had another drop.

"Without what?"

Poor Braddle at last sprang up. "Do you mind my being in a horrible fidget and floundering about the room?"

She demurred, but without gravity. "Not if you don't again knock over the lamp. Do you remember the day you did that at Brighton?"

With his ambiguous frown at her he stopped short. "Yes, and how even that didn't move you."

"Well, don't presume on it again!" she laughed.

"You mean it might move you this time?" he went on.

"No; I mean that as I've now got better lamps !"

He roamed there among her decent frugalities and, as regarded other matters as well as lamps, noted once more as he had done on other occasions the extreme moderation of the improvement. He had rather imagined on Chilver's part more margin. Then at last suddenly, with an effect of irrelevance: "Why *don't* people, as you say, come to you?"

"That's the kind of thing," she smiled, "you *used* to ask so much."

"Oh, too much, of course, and it's absurd my still wanting to know. It's none of my business; but, you know, nothing is if you come to that. It's your extraordinary kindness the way you give me my head that puts me up to things. Only you're trying the impossible you can't keep me on. I mean without well, what I spoke of just

now. Do you mind my bringing it bang out like a brute?" he continued, stopping before her again. "Isn't it a question of either really taking me in or quite leaving me out?" As she had nothing, however, at first, for this inquiry but silence, and as her face made her silence charming, his appeal suddenly changed. "Do you mind my going on like this?"

"I don't mind anything. You want, I judge, some help. What help can I give you?"

He dropped, at this, straight into his chair again. "There you are! You pitied me even from the first regularly beforehand. You're so confoundedly superior" he almost sufficiently joked. "Of course I know all our relations are most extraordinary, but I think yours and mine is the strangest unless it be yours and Chilver's."

"Let us say it's his and *yours*, and have done with it," she smiled.

"Do you know what I came back then for? I mean the second time, *this* time?"

"Why, to see *me*, I've all these days supposed."

"Well," said Braddle with a slight hesitation, "it was, to that extent, to show my confidence."

But she also hesitated. "Your confidence in what?"

He had still another impatience, with the force of which he again changed his place. "Am I giving him away? How much do you know?"

In the air of his deep unrest her soft stillness lending itself, but only by growing softer had little by little taken on a beauty. "I'm trying to follow you to understand. I know of your meeting with Henry last year at a club."

"Ah then, if he gave me away !"

"I gathered rather, I seem to remember, from what he mentioned to me, that he must rather have given me too. But I don't in the least mind."

"Well, what passed between us then," said Braddle, "is why I came back. He made me, if I should wait, a sort of promise "

"Oh" she took him up "I don't think he was conscious of anything like a promise. He said at least nothing to me of that." With which, as Braddle's face had exceedingly fallen, "But I know what you then wanted and what you still want to know," she added.

On this, for a time, they sat there with a long look. "I would rather have had it from *him*," he said at last.

"It would certainly have been more natural," she intelligently returned. "But he has given you no chance to press him again?"

"None and with an evident intention: seeing me only with you."

"Well, at the present moment he doesn't see you at all. Nor me either!" Mrs Chilver added as if to cover something in the accent of her former phrase. "But if he has avoided close quarters with you it has been not to disappoint you."

"He won't, after all, tell me?"

"He can't. He has nothing to tell."

Poor Braddle showed at this what his disappointment could be. "He has not even yet asked you? "

"Not even yet after fifteen months. But don't be hard on him," she pleaded. "*You* wouldn't."

"For all this time?" Braddle spoke almost with indignation at the charge. "My dear lady rather!"

"No, no," she gently insisted, "not even to tell *him*."

"He told you then," Braddle demanded, "that I thought he ought, if on no other grounds, to ask just *in order* to tell me?"

"Oh dear, no. He only told me he had met you, and where you had been. We don't speak of his 'asking'," she explained.

"Don't you?" Her visitor stared.

"Never."

"Then how have you known ?"

"What you want so much? Why, by having seen it in you before and just *how* much and seeing it now. I've been feeling all along," she said, "how you must have argued."

"Oh, we didn't argue!"

"I think *you* did."

He had slowly got up now less actively but not less intensely nervous and stood there heedless of this and rather differently looking at her. "He never talks with you of his asking?"

"Never," she repeated.

"And you still stick to it that *I* wouldn't?"

She hesitated. "Have talked of it?"

"Have asked."

She was beautiful as she smiled up at him. "It would have been a little different. *You* would have talked."

He remained there a little in silence; what he might have done seemed so both to separate them and to hold them together. "And Chilver, you feel, will now never ask?"

"Never now."

He seemed to linger for conviction. "If he was going to, you mean, he would have done it "

"Yes" she was prompt "the moment his time was up."

"I see" and, turning away, he moved slowly about. "So you're safe?"

"Safe."

"And I'm just where I was!" he oddly threw off.

"I'm amazed again," Mrs Chilver said, "at your so clinging to it that you would have had the benefit of his information."

It was a remark that pulled him up as if something like a finer embarrassment had now come to him. "I've only in mind his information as to the fact that he had made you speak."

"And what good would *that* have done you?"

"Without the details?" he was indeed thinking.

"I like your expressions!" said Mrs Chilver.

"Yes aren't they hideous?" He had jerked out his glass and, with a returning flush, appeared to affect to smile over it. But the drop of his glass showed something in each of his eyes that, though it might have come from the rage, came evidently to his companion's vision at least from the more pardonable pain, of his uncertainty. "But there we are!"

The manner in which these last words reached her had clearly to do with her finally leaving her place, watching him meanwhile as he wiped his glass. "Yes there we are. He did tell me," she went on, "that you had told him where you had been and that you could pick up nothing "

"Against you?" he broke in. "Not a beggarly word."

"And you tried hard?"

"I worked like a nigger. It was no use."

"But say you had succeeded what," she asked, "was your idea?"

"Why, not to have had the thing any longer between us."

He brought this out with such simplicity that she stared. "But if it had been ?"

"Yes?" the way she hung fire made him eager.

"Well something you would have loathed."

"*Is* it?" he almost sprang at her. "For pity's sake, *what* is it?" he broke out in a key that now filled the room supremely with the strange soreness of his yearning for his justification.

She kept him waiting, after she had taken this in, but another instant. "You would rather, you say, have had it from *him* "

"But I must take it as I can get it? Oh, anyhow!" he fairly panted.

"Then with a condition."

It threw him back into a wail that was positively droll. "Another?"

"This one," she dimly smiled, "is comparatively easy. You must promise me with the last solemnity "

"Yes!"

"On the sacred honour of a gentleman "

"Yes!"

"To repeat to no one whatever what you now have from me."

Thus completely expressed, the condition checked him but a moment. "Very well!"

"You promise?"

"On the sacred honour of a gentleman."

"Then I invite you to make the inference most directly suggested by the vanity of your researches."

He looked about him. "The inference?"

"As to what a fault may have been that it's impossible to find out."

He got hold as he could. "It may have been hidden."

"Then anything hidden, from so much labour, so well "

"May not have existed?" he stammered after she had given him time to take something from her deep eyes. He glared round and round with it seemed to have it on his hands before the world. "Then what did you mean ?"

"Ah, sir, what did *you*? You invented my past."
"Do you mean you *hadn't* one?" cried Bertram Braddle.

"None I would have mentioned to you. It was *you* who brought it up."

He appealed, in his stupefaction, to the immensity of the vacancy itself. "There's *nothing*?"

She made no answer for a moment, only looking, while he dropped hard on her sofa, so far away that her eyes might have been fixed on the blue Pacific. "There's the upshot of your inquiry."

He followed her, while she moved before him, from his place. "What did you then so intensely keep back?"

"What did *you*," she asked as she paused, "so intensely put forward? I kept back what you have from me now."

"*This*," he gasped from the depths of his collapse, "is what you would have told me?"

"If, as my loyal husband, you had brought it up again. But you wouldn't!" she once more declared.

"And I should have gone on thinking "

"Yes," she interrupted "that you were, for *not* bringing it up, the most delicate and most generous of men."

It seemed all to roll over him and sweep him down, but he gave, in his swift passage, a last clutch. "You consent to let *him* think you ?"

"He thinks me what he finds me!" said Mrs Chilver.

Braddle got up from the sofa, looking about for his hat and stick; but by the time he had reached the door with them he rose again to the surface. "I, too, then am to leave him his idea ?"

"Well, of what?" she demanded as he faltered.
"Of your whatever you called it."

"I called it nothing. You relieved me of the question of the name."

He gloomily shook his head. "You see to what end! Chilver, at any rate," he said, "has his view, and to that extent has a name for it."

"Only to the extent of having the one you gave him."

"Well, what I gave him he took!" Braddle, with returning spirit, declared. "What I suggested God forgive me! he believed."

"Yes that he might make his sacrifice. You speak," said Mrs Chilver, "of his idea. His sacrifice is his idea. And his idea," she added, "is his happiness."

"His sacrifice of your reputation?"

"Well to whom? "

"To *me*," said Bertram Braddle. "Do you expect me now to permit that?"

Mrs Chilver serenely enough considered. "I shall protect his happiness, which is above all his vision of his own attitude, and I don't see how you can prevent this save by breaking your oath."

"Oh, my oath!" And he prolonged the groan of his resentment.

It evidently what he felt made her sorry for him, and she spoke in all kindness. "It's only your punishment!" she sighed after him as he departed.

THE END