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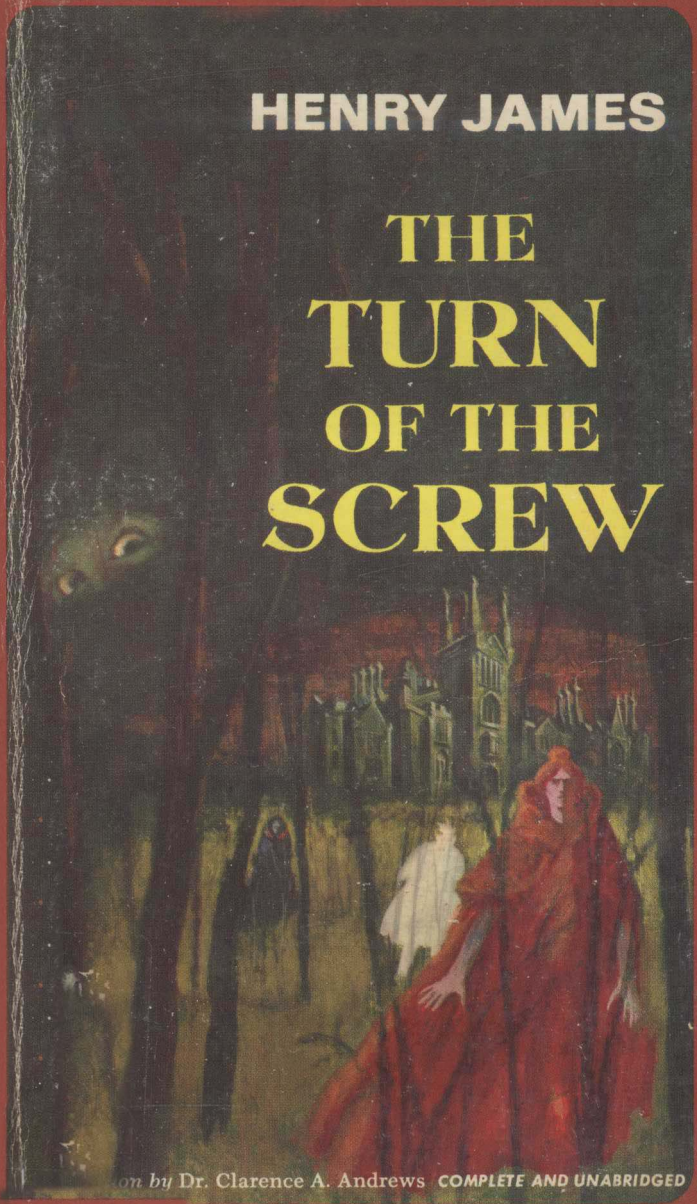
HENRY JAMES

THE TURN OF THE SCREW



...on by Dr. Clarence A. Andrews COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

THE TURN of THE SCREW

HENRY JAMES

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THE TURN of THE SCREW*

HENRY JAMES

Introduction

Among those emotions which rule man from time to time, one of the strongest is fear; and among the oldest and strongest of his fears is his fear of the unknown. Indeed his fear of death is as likely to be based on the quality of the unknown in death. Witness Hamlet:

> But that the dread of something after death—
> The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn
> No traveller returns—puzzles the will,
> And makes us rather bear the ills we have
> Than fly to others that we know not of?

But paralleling man's fear of the unknown is the state of his curiosity concerning the unknown. And out of his fear and out of his curiosity, he has developed a whole range of literature—and somewhere in this range is the ghost story.

No doubt the literature of ghosts is as old as time. Surely the most famous of literary ghosts is that one who teases the mind of Hamlet until he resolves to settle his dilemma with the play which "will catch the conscience of the king." In later English literary history, there were other ghosts; they were almost certain to abound in a land of ruins of castles and wrecks of abbeys, of dungeons and keeps, and other such subterranean passages, in a land which treasured its medieval past with its devils, its ghouls, its bonefires, its All-Hallows' Eves. In the eighteenth

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century there came into being what is now known as the Gothic tale—a tale of horror, of supernatural beings, of mad people, of weird doings. There was Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), "Monk" Lewis's *Ambrosio, or the Monk* (1796), Charles R. Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), the American Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). The tradition carried on into the later nineteenth century in the work of J. Sheridan LeFanu and Wilkie Collins, in such books as Bram Stocker's ghoulish *Dracula* (1891), and Baron Corvo's *The Weird of the Wanderer* (1912). Edgar Allan Poe was to reduce the ghost story to short-story length and to point the way for Robert Louis Stevenson, Arthur Conan Doyle, Oscar Wilde, Ambrose Bierce, Arthur Machen, Lord Dunsany, W. W. Jacobs, and Henry James.

It is James's venture into the genre of the ghost story that is before us now; one could wish after reading it that there had been many others. But there is at least *The Turn of the Screw*, a story which from the aesthetic point of view must be the finest ghost story in our language. Although James's story contains some of the machinery of the Gothic tale—the vast old house with its crenelated towers and its staircases, the haunting, evil figures of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel—its merits lie primarily in its qualities of realistic detail and understatement. There are no creaking doors, no clanking chains, no rattling suits of armor in this story—there are only four people slowly going mad under the influence of an evil atmosphere which is developed with all the subtlety and skill of a writer who was to become a major influence on modern English and American writers.

The quality of understatement is such that highly perceptive readers have read into the story levels of meaning which may or may not be there. Thus Edwin Wilson in his 1934 *Hound and Horn* essay interprets the story in Freudian terms, the apparitions (Peter Quint is seen only from the waist up, he notes) resulting from aberrations in the mind of a woman who is on the way to becoming an old maid; in love with a man who has employed her and forbidden his company; deprived of natural male company; and, as a result, turning to the children, particularly the "incredibly beautiful" Miles, with a desire to love and protect him which becomes perverted and causes her to project attributions of sexual misbehavior to the dead Peter Quint and Miss Jessel. Robert Bechtold Heilman, on the other hand (in his 1948 *University of Kansas City Review* essay), reads the story as a poem and notes that the language is designed to imply and reinforce the parable of man's fall from a state of grace.

The story line itself is fairly simple. A young governess is hired by a well-to-do London gentleman to look after his wards

at his estate; she is charged with complete responsibility and told not to "bother" her employer. At the estate, she is charmed by little Flora, a child "with the deep, sweet serenity indeed of one of Raphael's holy infants," and subsequently by Miles, although she is disconcerted by the message from his school that he is not to be returned there after his holiday—for reasons not made clear. Soon after Miles's arrival, the governess begins to see the apparitions—first that of Peter Quint and then that of Miss Jessel. Eventually relations between the governess and Flora become strained to the point where Mrs. Grose must take the little girl away. In a final scene in which Quint once more appears, the boy reveals why he was sent home from school and then dies.

The narrative is presented through the "frame" device—James begins, somewhat as Chaucer had with his pilgrims, with a group of people gathered together on Christmas Eve, their pastime being to listen to a tale from one of the group. This tale leads to mention of another, which is "beyond everything" for "sheer terror." The second tale is in manuscript, however, "in old faded ink," in London, and cannot be told this night; it must be sent for and its reading delayed, anticipated with a thrill of horror. (The fiction of the manuscript is, incidentally, another Gothic device, approaching in *Melmoth the Wanderer* the nausea of absurdity.) The manuscript presents the story, one which has happened long before, through the language of its author, a central participant in the action. Through this roundabout way, James manages to introduce his "fine central intelligence"—a literary device which he constantly advocated.

Although James invented the term, the idea was not new—Tobias Smollett had used a similar literary device in his *Expedition of Humphry Clinker* a century and a quarter earlier—but James was to bring the device to perfection, and in so doing, to place an emphasis on the point of view from which a story was told which was to influence almost every subsequent important writer in English. One has to look no further than Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* to see how one author responded to the lesson of the master.

The world of *The Turn of the Screw* is not the world which the average person knows in the last third of the twentieth century. The world of Bly is a world in which the morale of the inhabitants depends on and grows out of gentleness (in an older sense of the word), decorum, propriety, order, and manners. When the morale is threatened because of an implied act of impropriety of one of the chief members, and then through the appearance of the figures of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, the manners of this world are also threatened—and eventually they break down, forcing the destruction of the society.

The world of Bly is a class world in which two upper-class children ("little grandees") become the charge of a middle-class governess with the assistance of a lower-class woman, "a civil person," appropriately named Mrs. Grose. (James's names, like Dickens', "suit" the characters and the stories very well.) It is a world in which the difference between grossness and grandness is a very subtle one. In such a world, a small boy can be discharged from a private school merely because he "said things" about others. In such a world, instances of gross behavior—truly gross behavior—are never discussed directly; at most, they are suggested or implied. In such a world, even slight misbehavior leads to crudeness or violence. In such a world, the appearance of Peter Quint or Miss Jessel is indeed a terrifying matter.

In such a world, a story does not depend on gross turns of plot or purple passages of prose. Compare, for example, this passage from Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* with any of the passages in James's novel:

> "No, this shall prevent it!" cried the tyrant, drawing his dagger, and plunging it over her shoulder into the bosom of the person that spoke.
>
> "Ah me, I am slain!" cried Matilda, sinking: "good Heaven, receive my soul!"
>
> "Savage, inhuman monster, what hast thou done?" cried Theodore, rushing on him and wrenching his dagger from him . . .
>
> Manfred, waking as from a trance, beat his breast, twisted his hands in his locks, and endeavoured to recover his dagger from Theodore to dispatch himself.

A primary reason for the differences in the language and tone of the two stories is not only in the worlds depicted (the romantic world of *Otranto* versus the realistic world of this novel); it is also in the conscious craftsmanship with which James went about his work (which is not to say that Walpole was necessarily any less conscious of his purposes and methods). But we know more about James's methods and purposes because of the extensive records which he left behind; the evidence of his notebooks, for instance, or of the prefaces to the "New York edition."

From this evidence, we know that James found the germ for his story in a badly and imperfectly told ghost story—the teller being no less a personage than an Archbishop of Canterbury.

The idea appealed to James because it could be developed in such a way that the reader's imagination would not be inhibited in any way—either by the details supplied or because of the authorial intrusions commonly found in other nineteenth century novels. James knew that the true terror which the story would

arouse would be aroused in his readers' minds. By having the central character relate events as they happened and as she recalled them, he was able to involve his readers and give his readers' imaginations full opportunity to exercise themselves.

The result of this lack of authorial interference or control (the latter term is James's) is a delightful ambiguity which has intrigued readers such as Wilson. This ambiguity leads to such questions as: Are the ghosts real or only figments of the imagination of the governess? Is it the ghosts or the growing intemperateness of the governess (or something else) which leads to Miles's death? Are the children truly evil—or is their evil behavior only a projection of the governess—or the result of the children's reactions to her behavior—or is it due to the influence of the ghosts? Does Mrs. Grose finally accept the reality of the ghosts (which she never sees) because she is convinced the ghosts exist by the behavior of the governess—or does she pretend to because she is frightened by the irrationality of the governess?

A note about the style: It may cause the modern reader, accustomed to the directness and forthrightness of, say, Hemingway, some problems; he may find himself confused and even irritated by the convolutions of thought which are disclosed through the syntactical turns and twists of James's sentences. He may even find it somewhat unbelievable that the various narrators (Douglas, the "I" who makes the "exact transcript," the governess who has been dead these twenty years, and little Miles, who has been dead some forty more) all speak and narrate in the same style; he may question that "little" Miles (he is "scarce ten years old") can speak sentences such as this one:

> "Look here, my dear, you know, when in the world, please, am I going back to school?"

One may attempt to justify this language on the grounds that it is the language of gentlefolk—deliberate, slowly paced, precise to avoid any suggestions of "violence," designed to show concern for others. But this argument is not easily defended when one finds the same language in other novels and stories by James.

Who, then, was Henry James? He was an American most of his life, born in New York City on April 15, 1843, the son of another Henry James (1811-1882), who is known for his idiosyncratic espousal of Swedenborgianism, and the brother of William James (1842-1910), the noted psychologist and pragmatic philosopher. The family was financially well-off, and James lived variously in Albany and New York City, and in Europe where he was educated by tutors, and by governesses such as the one in this story. Lacking other formal education, he read widely,

primarily fiction. An accident at the beginning of the Civil War, producing what he called an "obscure hurt," kept him out of the conflict, and he began writing fiction. By 1868, he was being called "the best-writer of short stories in America," and he had become a close friend of William Dean Howells, then an editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*. Between them, these two writers ushered "realism" into American literature.

At first, James set his stories in America. His style and technique in these reflect careful studies of the French writers Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850), Prosper Merimée (1803-1870), George Sand (Amandine Aurore Lucie Dupin—1803-1876), and the English novelist George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans—1819-1880).

From 1869 on, James spent increasing amounts of time in Europe, and many of his later stories and novels reflect his European sympathies and experiences. In the last year or so of his life, he became a British citizen; he died in London in 1916. Altogether, he wrote some twenty full-length novels, a dozen novelettes ("the beautiful and blest nouvelle . . . the ideal form for fiction"), more than one hundred short stories, and a number of essays, including some on the drama, a form to which he aspired but in which he never achieved. (Curiously enough, although James could not write in the dramatic form, two of his works, this one and *The Heiress*, have been successfully dramatized by others.) In the years 1907-09, his works were collected in twenty-four volumes as the "New York edition." For these volumes James wrote a series of prefaces which, in their collected form, amount to a major text on the art of fiction. The aspiring writer can do worse than to master these prefaces and the points made therein.

Any mature study of the work of James should pay particular attention to the development of the characters, their functions (as well as rôles) in the story, the point of view (in the broadest sense of the term) from which the story is told, the efforts made by the author to involve his reader in the story, the manners and human relationships described and exhibited, the kinds of realism displayed. Such particular attention will pay handsome dividends indeed for the student, for Henry James has been acknowledged by many as one of the greatest writers in English.

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The Turn of the Screw

The story had held us, round the fire, sufficiently breathless, but except the obvious remark that it was gruesome, as, on Christmas eve in an old house, a strange tale should essentially be, I remember no comment uttered till somebody happened to say that it was the only case he had met in which such a visitation had fallen on a child. The case, I may mention, was that of an apparition in just such an old house as had gathered us for the occasion—an appearance, of a dreadful kind, to a little boy sleeping in the room with his mother and waking her up in the terror of it; waking her not to dissipate his dread and soothe him to sleep again, but to encounter also, herself, before she had succeeded in doing so, the same sight that had shaken him. It was this observation that drew from Douglas—not immediately, but later in the evening—a reply that had the interesting consequence to which I call attention. Someone else told a story not particularly effective, which I saw he was not following. This I took for a sign that he had himself something to produce and that we should only have to wait. We waited in fact till two nights later; but that same evening, before we scattered, he brought out what was in his mind.

"I quite agree—in regard to Griffin's ghost, or whatever it was—that its appearing first to the little boy, at so tender an age, adds a particular touch. But it's not the first occurrence of its charming kind that I know to have involved a child. If the child gives the effect another turn of the screw, what do you say to *two* children—?"

"We say, of course," somebody exclaimed, "that they give two turns! Also that we want to hear about them."

I can see Douglas there before the fire, to which he had got up to present his back, looking down at his interlocutor

with his hands in his pockets. "Nobody but me, till now, has ever heard. It's quite too horrible." This, naturally, was declared by several voices to give the thing the utmost price, and our friend, with quiet art, prepared his triumph by turning his eyes over the rest of us and going on: "It's beyond everything. Nothing at all that I know touches it."

"For sheer terror?" I remember asking.

He seemed to say it was not so simple as that; to be really at a loss how to qualify it. He passed his hand over his eyes, made a little wincing grimace. "For dreadful—dreadfulness!"

"Oh, how delicious!" cried one of the women.

He took no notice of her; he looked at me, but as if, instead of me, he saw what he spoke of. "For general uncanny ugliness and horror and pain."

"Well then," I said, "just sit right down and begin."

He turned round to the fire, gave a kick to a log, watched it an instant. Then as he faced us again: "I can't begin. I shall have to send to town." There was a unanimous groan at this, and much reproach; after which, in his preoccupied way, he explained. "The story's written. It's in a locked drawer—it has not been out for years. I could write to my man and enclose the key; he could send down the packet as he finds it." It was to me in particular that he appeared to propound this—appeared almost to appeal for aid not to hesitate. He had broken a thickness of ice, the formation of many a winter; he had his reasons for a long silence. The others resented postponement, but it was just his scruples that charmed me. I adjured him to write by the first post and to agree with us for an early hearing; then I asked him if the experience in question had been his own. To this his answer was prompt. "Oh, thank God, no!"

"And is the record yours? You took the thing down?"

"Nothing but the impression. I took that *here*"—he tapped his heart. "I've never lost it."

"Then your manuscript—?"

"Is in old, faded ink, and in the most beautiful hand." He hung fire again. "A woman's. She has been dead these twenty years. She sent me the pages in question before she

died." They were all listening now, and of course there was somebody to be arch, or at any rate to draw the inference. But if he put the inference by without a smile it was also without irritation. "She was a most charming person, but she was ten years older than I. She was my sister's governess," he quietly said. "She was the most agreeable woman I've ever known in her position; she would have been worthy of any whatever. It was long ago, and this episode was long before. I was at Trinity, and I found her at home on my coming down the second summer. I was much there that year—it was a beautiful one; and we had, in her off-hours, some strolls and talks in the garden—talks in which she struck me as awfully clever and nice. Oh yes; don't grin: I liked her extremely and am glad to this day to think she liked me too. If she hadn't she wouldn't have told me. She had never told anyone. It wasn't simply that she said so, but that I knew she hadn't. I was sure; I could see. You'll easily judge why when you hear."

"Because the thing had been such a scare?"

He continued to fix me. "You'll easily judge," he repeated: "*you* will."

I fixed him too. "I see. She was in love."

He laughed for the first time. "You *are* acute. Yes, she was in love. That is, she had been. That came out—she couldn't tell her story without its coming out. I saw it, and she saw I saw it; but neither of us spoke of it. I remember the time and the place—the corner of the lawn, the shade of the great beeches and the long, hot summer afternoon. It wasn't a scene for a shudder; but oh—!" He quitted the fire and dropped back into his chair.

"You'll receive the packet Thursday morning?" I inquired.

"Probably not till the second post."

"Well then; after dinner—"

"You'll all meet me here?" He looked us round again.

"Isn't anybody going?" It was almost the tone of hope.

"Everybody will stay!"

"*I* will—and *I* will!" cried the ladies whose departure had been fixed. Mrs. Griffin, however, expressed the need

for a little more light. "Who was it she was in love with?"

"The story will tell," I took upon myself to reply.

"Oh, I can't wait for the story!"

"The story *won't* tell," said Douglas; "not in any literal, vulgar way."

"More's the pity, then. That's the only way I ever understand."

"Won't *you* tell, Douglas?" somebody else inquired.

He sprang to his feet again. "Yes—tomorrow. Now I must go to bed. Good-night." And quickly catching up a candlestick, he left us slightly bewildered. From our end of the great brown hall we heard his step on the stair; whereupon Mrs. Griffin spoke. "Well, if I don't know who she was in love with, I know who *he* was."

"She was ten years older," said her husband.

"*Raison de plus*—at that age! But it's rather nice, his long reticence."

"Forty years!" Griffin put in.

"With this outbreak at last."

"The outbreak," I returned, "will make a tremendous occasion of Thursday night;" and everyone so agreed with me that, in the light of it, we lost all attention for everything else. The last story, however incomplete and like the mere opening of a serial, had been told; we handshook and "candlestuck," as somebody said, and went to bed.

I knew the next day that a letter containing the key had, by the first post, gone off to his London apartments; but in spite of—or perhaps just on account of—the eventual diffusion of this knowledge we quite let him alone till after dinner, till such an hour of the evening, in fact, as might best accord with the kind of emotion on which our hopes were fixed. Then he became as communicative as we could desire and indeed gave us his best reason for being so. We had it from him again before the fire in the hall, as we had had our mild wonders of the previous night. It appeared that the narrative he had promised to read us really required for a proper intelligence a few words of prologue. Let me say here distinctly, to have done with it, that this narrative, from an exact transcript of my own made much later, is

what I shall presently give. Poor Douglas, before his death —when it was in sight—committed to me the manuscript that reached him on the third of these days and that, on the same spot, with immense effect, he began to read to our hushed little circle on the night of the fourth. The departing ladies who had said they would stay didn't, of course, thank heaven, stay: they departed, in consequence of arrangements made, in a rage of curiosity, as they professed, produced by the touches with which he had already worked us up. But that only made his little final auditory more compact and select, kept it, round the hearth, subject to a common thrill.

The first of these touches conveyed that the written statement took up the tale at a point after it had, in a manner, begun. The fact to be in possession of was therefore that his old friend, the youngest of several daughters of a poor country parson, had, at the age of twenty, on taking service for the first time in the schoolroom, come up to London, in trepidation, to answer in person an advertisement that had already placed her in brief correspondence with the advertiser. This person proved, on her presenting herself, for judgment, at a house in Harley Street, that impressed her as vast and imposing—this prospective patron proved a gentleman, a bachelor in the prime of life, such a figure as had never risen, save in a dream or an old novel, before a fluttered, anxious girl out of a Hampshire vicarage. One could easily fix his type; it never, happily, dies out. He was handsome and bold and pleasant, off-hand and gay and kind. He struck her, inevitably, as gallant and splendid, but what took her most of all and gave her the courage she afterwards showed was that he put the whole thing to her as a kind of favour, an obligation he should gratefully incur. She conceived him as rich, but as fearfully extravagant—saw him all in a glow of high fashion, of good looks, of expensive habits, of charming ways with women. He had for his own town residence a big house filled with the spoils of travel and the trophies of the chase; but it was to his country home, an old family place in Essex, that he wished her immediately to proceed.

He had been left, by the death of their parents in India, guardian to a small nephew and a small niece, children of a younger, a military brother, whom he had lost two years before. These children were, by the strangest of chances for a man in his position,—a lone man without the right sort of experience or a grain of patience,—very heavily on his hands. It had all been a great worry and, on his own part doubtless, a series of blunders, but he immensely pitied the poor chicks and had done all he could: had in particular sent them down to his other house, the proper place for them being of course the country, and kept them there, from the first, with the best people he could find to look after them, parting even with his own servants to wait on them and going down himself, whenever he might, to see how they were doing. The awkward thing was that they had practically no other relations and that his own affairs took up all his time. He had put them in possession of Bly, which was healthy and secure, and had placed at the head of their little establishment—but below stairs only—an excellent woman, Mrs. Grose, whom he was sure his visitor would like and who had formerly been maid to his mother. She was now housekeeper and was also acting for the time as superintendent to the little girl, of whom, without children of her own, she was, by good luck, extremely fond. There were plenty of people to help, but of course the young lady who should go down as governess would be in supreme authority. She would also have, in holidays, to look after the small boy, who had been for a term at school—young as he was to be sent, but what else could be done?—and who, as the holidays were about to begin, would be back from one day to the other. There had been for the two children at first a young lady whom they had had the misfortune to lose. She had done for them quite beautifully—she was a most respectable person—till her death, the great awkwardness of which had, precisely, left no alternative but the school for little Miles. Mrs. Grose, since then, in the way of manners and things, had done as she could for Flora; and there were, further, a cook, a housemaid, a dairywoman, an

old pony, an old groom, and an old gardener, all likewise thoroughly respectable.

So far had Douglas presented his picture when someone put a question. "And what did the former governess die of? —of so much respectability?"

Our friend's answer was prompt. "That will come out. I don't anticipate."

"Excuse me—I thought that was just what you *are* doing."

"In her successor's place," I suggested, "I should have wished to learn if the office brought with it—"

"Necessary danger to life?" Douglas completed my thought. "She did wish to learn, and she did learn. You shall hear tomorrow what she learnt. Meanwhile, of course, the prospect struck her as slightly grim. She was young, untried, nervous: it was a vision of serious duties and little company, of really great loneliness. She hesitated—took a couple of days to consult and consider. But the salary offered much exceeded her modest measure, and on a second interview she faced the music, she engaged." And Douglas, with this, made a pause that, for the benefit of the company, moved me to throw in—

"The moral of which was of course the seduction exercised by the splendid young man. She succumbed to it."

He got up and, as he had done the night before, went to the fire, gave a stir to a log with his foot, then stood a moment with his back to us. "She saw him only twice."

"Yes, but that's just the beauty of her passion."

A little to my surprise, on this, Douglas turned round to me. "It *was* the beauty of it. There were others," he went on, "who hadn't succumbed. He told her frankly all his difficulty—that for several applicants the conditions had been prohibitive. They were, somehow, simply afraid. It sounded dull—it sounded strange; and all the more so because of his main condition."

"Which was—?"

"That she should never trouble him—but never, never; neither appeal nor complain nor write about anything; only

meet all questions herself, receive all moneys from his solicitor, take the whole thing over and let him alone. She promised to do this, and she mentioned to me that when, for a moment, disburdened, delighted, he held her hand, thanking her for the sacrifice, she already felt rewarded."

"But was that all her reward?" one of the ladies asked.

"She never saw him again."

"Oh!" said the lady; which, as our friend immediately left us again, was the only other word of importance contributed to the subject till, the next night, by the corner of the hearth, in the best chair, he opened the faded red cover of a thin old-fashioned gilt-edged album. The whole thing took indeed more nights than one, but on the first occasion the same lady put another question. "What is your title?"

"I haven't one."

"Oh, *I* have!" I said. But Douglas, without heeding me, had begun to read with a fine clearness that was like a rendering to the ear of the beauty of his author's hand.

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I remember the whole beginning as a succession of flights and drops, a little see-saw of the right throbs and the wrong. After rising, in town, to meet his appeal, I had at all events a couple of very bad days—found myself doubtful again, felt indeed sure I had made a mistake. In this state of mind I spent the long hours of bumping, swinging coach that carried me to the stopping-place at which I was to be met by a vehicle from the house. This convenience, I was told, had been ordered, and I found, toward the close of the June afternoon, a commodious fly in waiting for me. Driving at that hour, on a lovely day, through a country to which the summer sweetness seemed to offer me a friendly wel-