

out only to say to her things which, after all, free as she was to contradict them and tolerant as she always tried to be, could only give her pain; yet there was a spell upon her as she listened; it was in her nature to be easily submissive, to like being overborne. She could be silent when people insisted, and silent without acrimony. Her whole relation to Olive was a kind of tacit, tender assent to passionate insistence, and if this had ended by being easy and agreeable to her (and indeed had never been anything else), it may be supposed that the struggle of yielding to a will which she felt to be stronger even than Olive's was not of long duration. Ransom's will had the effect of making her linger even while she knew the afternoon was going on, that Olive would have come back and found her still absent, and would have been submerged again in the bitter waves of anxiety. She saw her, in fact, as she must be at that moment, posted at the window of her room in Tenth Street, watching for some sign of her return, listening for her step on the staircase, her voice in the hall. Verena looked at this image as at a painted picture, perceived all it represented, every detail. If it didn't move her more, make her start to her feet, dart away from Basil Ransom and hurry back to her friend, this was because the very torment to which she was conscious of subjecting that friend made her say to herself that it must be the very last. This was the last time she could ever sit by Mr. Ransom and hear him express himself in a manner that interfered so with her life; the ordeal had been so personal and so complete that she forgot, for the moment, it was also the first time it had occurred. It might have been going on for months. She was perfectly aware that it could bring them to nothing, for one must lead one's own life; it was impossible to lead the life of another, especially when that other was so different, so arbitrary and unscrupulous.

XXXIV.

'I PRESUME you are the only person in this country who feels as you do,' she observed at last.

'Not the only person who feels so, but very possibly the only person who thinks so. I have an idea that my convictions exist in a vague, unformulated state in the minds of a great many of my fellow-citizens. If I should succeed some day in giving them adequate expression I should simply put into shape the slumbering instincts of an important minority.'

'I am glad you admit it's a minority!' Verena exclaimed. 'That's fortunate for us poor creatures. And what do you call adequate expression? I presume you would like to be President of the United States?'

'And breathe forth my views in glowing messages to a palpitating Senate? That is exactly what I should like to be; you read my aspirations wonderfully well.'

'Well, do you consider that you have advanced far in that direction, as yet?' Verena asked.

This question, with the tone in which it happened to be uttered, seemed to the young man to project rather an ironical light upon his present beggarly condition, so that for a moment he said nothing; a moment during which if his neighbour had glanced round at his face she would have seen it ornamented by an incipient blush. Her words had for him the effect of a sudden, though, on the part of a young woman who had of course every right to defend herself, a perfectly legitimate taunt. They appeared only to repeat in another form (so at least his exaggerated Southern pride, his hot sensibility, interpreted the matter), the idea that a gentleman so dreadfully backward in the path of fortune had no right to take up the time of a

brilliant, successful girl, even for the purpose of satisfying himself that he renounced her. But the reminder only sharpened his wish to make her feel that if he had renounced, it was simply on account of that same ugly, accidental, outside backwardness; and if he had not, he went so far as to flatter himself, he might triumph over the whole accumulation of her prejudices—over all the bribes of her notoriety. The deepest feeling in Ransom's bosom in relation to her was the conviction that she was made for love, as he had said to himself while he listened to her at Mrs. Burrage's. She was profoundly unconscious of it, and another ideal, crude and thin and artificial, had interposed itself; but in the presence of a man she should really care for, this false, flimsy structure would rattle to her feet, and the emancipation of Olive Chancellor's sex (what sex was it, great heaven? he used profanely to ask himself), would be relegated to the land of vapours, of dead phrases. The reader may imagine whether such an impression as this made it any more agreeable to Basil to have to believe it would be indelicate in him to try to woo her. He would have resented immensely the imputation that he had done anything of that sort yet. 'Ah, Miss Tarrant, my success in life is one thing—my ambition is another!' he exclaimed, presently, in answer to her inquiry. 'Nothing is more possible than that I may be poor and unheard of all my days; and in that case no one but myself will know the visions of greatness I have stifled and buried.'

'Why do you talk of being poor and unheard of? Aren't you getting on quite well in this city?'

This question of Verena's left him no time, or at least no coolness, to remember that to Mrs. Luna and to Olive he had put a fine face on his prospects, and that any impression the girl might have about them was but the natural echo of what these ladies believed. It had to his ear such a subtly mocking, defiant, unconsciously injurious quality, that the only answer he could make to it seemed to him for the moment to be an outstretched arm, which, passing round her waist, should draw her so close to him as to enable him to give her a concise account of his situation in the form of a deliberate kiss. If the moment I speak of

had lasted a few seconds longer I know not what monstrous proceeding of this kind it would have been my difficult duty to describe; it was fortunately arrested by the arrival of a nursery-maid pushing a perambulator and accompanied by an infant who toddled in her wake. Both the nurse and her companion gazed fixedly, and it seemed to Ransom even sternly, at the striking couple on the bench; and meanwhile Verena, looking with a quickened eye at the children (she adored children), went on—

'It sounds too flat for you to talk about your remaining unheard of. Of course you are ambitious; any one can see that, to look at you. And once your ambition is excited in any particular direction, people had better look out. With your will!' she added, with a curious mocking candour.

'What do you know about my will?' he asked, laughing a little awkwardly, as if he had really attempted to kiss her—in the course of the second independent interview he had ever had with her—and been rebuffed.

'I know it's stronger than mine. It made me come out, when I thought I had much better not, and it keeps me sitting here long after I should have started for home.'

'Give me the day, dear Miss Tarrant, give me the day,' Basil Ransom murmured; and as she turned her face upon him, moved by the expression of his voice, he added—'Come and dine with me, since you wouldn't lunch. Are you really not faint and weak?'

'I am faint and weak at all the horrible things you have said; I have lunched on abominations. And now you want me to dine with you? Thank you; I think you're cool!' Verena cried, with a laugh which her chronicler knows to have been expressive of some embarrassment, though Basil Ransom did not.

'You must remember that I have, on two different occasions, listened to you for an hour, in speechless, submissive attention, and that I shall probably do it a great many times more.'

'Why should you ever listen to me again, when you loathe my ideas?'

'I don't listen to your ideas; I listen to your voice.'

'Ah, I told Olive!' said Verena, quickly, as if his words had confirmed an old fear; which was general, however, and did not relate particularly to him.

Ransom still had an impression that he was not making love to her, especially when he could observe, with all the superiority of a man—'I wonder whether you have understood ten words I have said to you?'

'I should think you had made it clear enough—you had rubbed it in!'

'What have you understood, then?'

'Why, that you want to put us back further than we have been at any period.'

'I have been joking; I have been piling it up,' Ransom said, making that concession unexpectedly to the girl. Every now and then he had an air of relaxing himself, becoming absent, ceasing to care to discuss.

She was capable of noticing this, and in a moment she asked—'Why don't you write out your ideas?'

This touched again upon the matter of his failure; it was curious how she couldn't keep off it, hit it every time. 'Do you mean for the public? I have written many things, but I can't get them printed.'

'Then it would seem that there are not so many people—so many as you said just now—who agree with you.'

'Well,' said Basil Ransom, 'editors are a mean, timorous lot, always saying they want something original, but deadly afraid of it when it comes.'

'Is it for papers, magazines?' As it sank into Verena's mind more deeply that the contributions of this remarkable young man had been rejected—contributions in which, apparently, everything she held dear was riddled with scorn—she felt a strange pity and sadness, a sense of injustice. 'I am very sorry you can't get published,' she said, so simply that he looked up at her, from the figure he was scratching on the asphalt with his stick, to see whether such a tone as that, in relation to such a fact, were not 'put on.' But it was evidently genuine, and Verena added that she supposed getting published was very difficult always; she remembered, though she didn't mention, how little success her father had when he tried. She hoped

Mr. Ransom would keep on; he would be sure to succeed at last. Then she continued, smiling, with more irony: 'You may denounce me by name if you like. Only please don't say anything about Olive Chancellor.'

'How little you understand what I want to achieve!' Basil Ransom exclaimed. 'There you are—you women—all over; always meaning yourselves, something personal, and always thinking it is meant by others!'

'Yes, that's the charge they make,' said Verena, gaily.

'I don't want to touch you, or Miss Chancellor, or Mrs. Farrinder, or Miss Birdseye, or the shade of Eliza P. Moseley, or any other gifted and celebrated being on earth—or in heaven.'

'Oh, I suppose you want to destroy us by neglect, by silence!' Verena exclaimed, with the same brightness.

'No, I don't want to destroy you, any more than I want to save you. There has been far too much talk about you, and I want to leave you alone altogether. My interest is in my own sex; yours evidently can look after itself. That's what I want to save.'

Verena saw that he was more serious now than he had been before, that he was not piling it up satirically, but saying really and a trifle wearily, as if suddenly he were tired of much talk, what he meant. 'To save it from what?' she asked.

'From the most damnable feminisation! I am so far from thinking, as you set forth the other night, that there is not enough woman in our general life, that it has long been pressed home to me that there is a great deal too much. The whole generation is womanised; the masculine tone is passing out of the world; it's a feminine, a nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age, an age of hollow phrases and false delicacy and exaggerated solicitudes and coddled sensibilities, which, if we don't soon look out, will usher in the reign of mediocrity, of the feeblest and flattest and the most pretentious that has ever been. The masculine character, the ability to dare and endure, to know and yet not fear reality, to look the world in the face and take it for what it is—a very queer and partly very base mixture—that is what I want to preserve, or rather, as I may say, to

recover; and I must tell you that I don't in the least care what becomes of you ladies while I make the attempt!

The poor fellow delivered himself of these narrow notions (the rejection of which by leading periodicals was certainly not a matter for surprise), with low, soft earnestness, bending towards her so as to give out his whole idea, yet apparently forgetting for the moment how offensive it must be to her now that it was articulated in that calm, severe way, in which no allowance was to be made for hyperbole. Verena did not remind herself of this; she was too much impressed by his manner and by the novelty of a man taking that sort of religious tone about such a cause. It told her on the spot, from one minute to the other and once for all, that the man who could give her that impression would never come round. She felt cold, slightly sick, though she replied that now he summed up his creed in such a distinct, lucid way, it was much more comfortable—one knew with what one was dealing; a declaration much at variance with the fact, for Verena had never felt less gratified in her life. The ugliness of her companion's profession of faith made her shiver; it would have been difficult to her to imagine anything more crudely profane. She was determined, however, not to betray any shudder that could suggest weakness, and the best way she could think of to disguise her emotion was to remark in a tone which, although not assumed for that purpose, was really the most effective revenge, inasmuch as it always produced on Ransom's part (it was not peculiar, among women, to Verena), an angry helplessness—'Mr. Ransom, I assure you this is an age of conscience.'

'That's a part of your cant. It's an age of unspeakable shams, as Carlyle says.'

'Well,' returned Verena, 'it's all very comfortable for you to say that you wish to leave us alone. But you can't leave us alone. We are here, and we have got to be disposed of. You have got to put us somewhere. It's a remarkable social system that has no place for *us*!' the girl went on, with her most charming laugh.

'No place in public. My plan is to keep you at home and have a better time with you there than ever.'

'I'm glad it's to be better; there's room for it. Woe to American womanhood when you start a movement for being more—what you like to be—at home!'

'Lord, how you're perverted; you, the very genius!' Basil Ransom murmured, looking at her with the kindest eyes.

She paid no attention to this, she went on, 'And those who have got no home (there are millions, you know), what are you going to do with *them*? You must remember that women marry—are given in marriage—less and less; that isn't their career, as a matter of course, any more. You can't tell them to go and mind their husband and children, when they have no husband and children to mind.'

'Oh,' said Ransom, 'that's a detail! And for myself, I confess, I have such a boundless appreciation of your sex in private life that I am perfectly ready to advocate a man's having a half a dozen wives.'

'The civilisation of the Turks, then, strikes you as the highest?'

'The Turks have a second-rate religion; they are fatalists, and that keeps them down. Besides, their women are not nearly so charming as ours—or as ours would be if this modern pestilence were eradicated. Think what a confession you make when you say that women are less and less sought in marriage; what a testimony that is to the pernicious effect on their manners, their person, their nature, of this fatuous agitation.'

'That's very complimentary to me!' Verena broke in, lightly.

But Ransom was carried over her interruption by the current of his argument. 'There are a thousand ways in which any woman, all women, married or single, may find occupation. They may find it in making society agreeable.'

'Agreeable to men, of course.'

'To whom else, pray? Dear Miss Tarrant, what is most agreeable to women is to be agreeable to men! That is a truth as old as the human race, and don't let Olive Chancellor persuade you that she and Mrs. Farrinder have invented any that can take its place, or that is more profound, more durable.'

Verena waived this point of the discussion; she only said: 'Well, I am glad to hear you are prepared to see the place all choked up with old maids!'

'I don't object to the *old* old maids; they were delightful; they had always plenty to do, and didn't wander about the world crying out for a vocation. It is the new old maid that you have invented from whom I pray to be delivered.' He didn't say he meant Olive Chancellor, but Verena looked at him as if she suspected him of doing so; and to put her off that scent he went on, taking up what she had said a moment before: 'As for its not being complimentary to you, my remark about the effect on the women themselves of this pernicious craze, my dear Miss Tarrant, you may be quite at your ease. You stand apart, you are unique, extraordinary; you constitute a category by yourself. In you the elements have been mixed in a manner so felicitous that I regard you as quite incorruptible. I don't know where you come from nor how you come to be what you are, but you are outside and above all vulgarising influences. Besides, you ought to know,' the young man proceeded, in the same cool, mild, deliberate tone, as if he were demonstrating a mathematical solution, 'you ought to know that your connection with all these rantings and ravings is the most unreal, accidental, illusory thing in the world. You think you care about them, but you don't at all. They were imposed upon you by circumstances, by unfortunate associations, and you accepted them as you would have accepted any other burden, on account of the sweetness of your nature. You always want to please some one, and now you go lecturing about the country, and trying to provoke demonstrations, in order to please Miss Chancellor, just as you did it before to please your father and mother. It isn't *you*, the least in the world, but an inflated little figure (very remarkable in its way too), whom you have invented and set on its feet, pulling strings, behind it, to make it move and speak, while you try to conceal and efface yourself there. Ah, Miss Tarrant, if it's a question of pleasing, how much you might please some one else by tipping your preposterous puppet over and standing forth in your freedom as well as in your loveliness!'

While Basil Ransom spoke—and he had not spoken just that way yet—Verena sat there deeply attentive, with her eyes on the ground; but as soon as he ceased she sprang to her feet—something made her feel that their association had already lasted quite too long. She turned away from him as if she wished to leave him, and indeed were about to attempt to do so. She didn't desire to look at him now, or even to have much more conversation with him. 'Something,' I say, made her feel so, but it was partly his curious manner—so serene and explicit, as if he knew the whole thing to an absolute certainty—which partly scared her and partly made her feel angry. She began to move along the path to one of the gates, as if it were settled that they should immediately leave the place. He laid it all out so clearly; if he had had a revelation he couldn't speak otherwise. That description of herself as something different from what she was trying to be, the charge of want of reality, made her heart beat with pain; she was sure, at any rate, it was her real self that was there with him now, where she oughtn't to be. In a moment he was at her side again, going with her; and as they walked it came over her that some of the things he had said to her were far beyond what Olive could have imagined as the very worst possible. What would be her state now, poor forsaken friend, if some of them had been borne to her in the voices of the air? Verena had been affected by her companion's speech (his manner had changed so; it seemed to express something quite different), in a way that pushed her to throw up the discussion and determine that as soon as they should get out of the park she would go off by herself; but she still had her wits about her sufficiently to think it important she should give no sign of discomposure, of confessing that she was driven from the field. She appeared to herself to notice and reply to his extraordinary observations enough, without taking them up too much, when she said, tossing the words over her shoulder at Ransom, while she moved quickly: 'I presume, from what you say, that you don't think I have much ability.'

He hesitated before answering, while his long legs easily kept pace with her rapid step—her charming, touching,

hurrying step, which expressed all the trepidation she was anxious to conceal. 'Immense ability, but not in the line in which you most try to have it. In a very different line, Miss Tarrant! Ability is no word for it; it's genius!'

She felt his eyes on her face—ever so close and fixed there—after he had chosen to reply to her question that way. She was beginning to blush; if he had kept them longer, and on the part of any one else, she would have called such a stare impertinent. Verena had been commended of old by Olive for her serenity 'while exposed to the gaze of hundreds'; but a change had taken place, and she was now unable to endure the contemplation of an individual. She wished to detach him, to lead him off again into the general; and for this purpose, at the end of a moment, she made another inquiry: 'I am to understand, then, as your last word that you regard us as quite inferior?'

'For public, civic uses, absolutely—perfectly weak and second-rate. I know nothing more indicative of the muddled sentiment of the time than that any number of men should be found to pretend that they regard you in any other light. But privately, personally, it's another affair. In the realm of family life and the domestic affections—'

At this Verena broke in, with a nervous laugh, 'Don't say that; it's only a phrase!'

'Well, it's a better one than any of yours,' said Basil Ransom, turning with her out of one of the smaller gates—the first they had come to. They emerged into the species of *plaza* formed by the numbered street which constitutes the southern extremity of the park and the termination of the Sixth Avenue. The glow of the splendid afternoon was over everything, and the day seemed to Ransom still in its youth. The bowers and boskages stretched behind them, the artificial lakes and cockneyfied landscapes, making all the region bright with the sense of air and space, and raw natural tints, and vegetation too diminutive to overshadow. The chocolate-coloured houses, in tall, new rows, surveyed the expanse; the street-cars rattled in the foreground, changing horses while the horses

steamed, and absorbing and emitting passengers; and the beer-saloons, with exposed shoulders and sides, which in New York do a good deal towards representing the picturesque, the 'bit' appreciated by painters, announced themselves in signs of large lettering to the sky. Groups of the unemployed, the children of disappointment from beyond the seas, propped themselves against the low, sunny wall of the park; and on the other side the commercial vista of the Sixth Avenue stretched away with a remarkable absence of aerial perspective.

'I must go home; good-bye,' Verena said, abruptly, to her companion.

'Go home? You won't come and dine, then?'

Verena knew people who dined at midday and others who dined in the evening, and others still who never dined at all; but she knew no one who dined at half-past three. Ransom's attachment to this idea therefore struck her as queer and infelicitous, and she supposed it betrayed the habits of Mississippi. But that couldn't make it any more acceptable to her, in spite of his looking so disappointed—with his dimly-glowing eyes—that he was heedless for the moment that the main fact connected with her return to Tenth Street was that she wished to go alone.

'I must leave you, right away,' she said. 'Please don't ask me to stay; you wouldn't if you knew how little I want to!' Her manner was different now, and her face as well, and though she smiled more than ever she had never seemed to him more serious.

'Alone, do you mean? Really I can't let you do that,' Ransom replied, extremely shocked at this sacrifice being asked of him. 'I have brought you this immense distance, I am responsible for you, and I must place you where I found you.'

'Mr. Ransom, I must, I will!' she exclaimed, in a tone he had not yet heard her use; so that, a good deal amazed, puzzled and pained, he saw that he should make a mistake if he were to insist. He had known that their expedition must end in a separation which could not be sweet, but he had counted on making some of the terms of it himself. When he expressed the hope that she would at least allow

him to put her into a car, she replied that she wished no car; she wanted to walk. This image of her 'streaking off' by herself, as he figured it, did not mend the matter; but in the presence of her sudden nervous impatience he felt that here was a feminine mystery which must be allowed to take its course.

'It costs me more than you probably suspect, but I submit. Heaven guard you and bless you, Miss Tarrant!'

She turned her face away from him as if she were straining at a leash; then she rejoined, in the most unexpected manner: 'I hope very much you *will* get printed.'

'Get my articles published?' He stared, and broke out: 'Oh, you delightful being!'

'Good-bye,' she repeated; and now she gave him her hand. As he held it a moment, and asked her if she were really leaving the city so soon that she mightn't see him again, she answered: 'If I stay it will be at a place to which you mustn't come. They wouldn't let you see me.'

He had not intended to put that question to her; he had set himself a limit. But the limit had suddenly moved on. 'Do you mean at that house where I heard you speak?'

'I may go there for a few days.'

'If it's forbidden to me to go and see you there, why did you send me a card?'

'Because I wanted to convert you then.'

'And now you give me up?'

'No, no; I want you to remain as you are!'

She looked strange, with her more mechanical smile, as she said this, and he didn't know what idea was in her head. She had already left him, but he called after her, 'If you do stay, I will come!' She neither turned nor made an answer, and all that was left to him was to watch her till she passed out of sight. Her back, with its charming young form, seemed to repeat that last puzzle, which was almost a challenge.

For this, however, Verena Tarrant had not meant it. She wanted, in spite of the greater delay and the way Olive would wonder, to walk home, because it gave her time to think, and think again, how glad she was (really, positively,

now), that Mr. Ransom was on the wrong side. If he had been on the right——! She did not finish this proposition. She found Olive waiting for her in exactly the manner she had foreseen; she turned to her, as she came in, a face sufficiently terrible. Verena instantly explained herself, related exactly what she had been doing; then went on, without giving her friend time for question or comment: 'And you——you paid your visit to Mrs. Burrage?'

'Yes, I went through that.'

'And did she press the question of my coming there?'

'Very much indeed.'

'And what did you say?'

'I said very little, but she gave me such assurances——'

'That you thought I ought to go?'

Olive was silent a moment; then she said: 'She declares they are devoted to the cause, and that New York will be at your feet.'

Verena took Miss Chancellor's shoulders in each of her hands, and gave her back, for an instant, her gaze, her silence. Then she broke out, with a kind of passion: 'I don't care for her assurances—I don't care for New York! I won't go to them—I won't—do you understand?' Suddenly her voice changed, she passed her arms round her friend and buried her face in her neck. 'Olive Chancellor, take me away, take me away!' she went on. In a moment Olive felt that she was sobbing and that the question was settled, the question she herself had debated in anguish a couple of hours before.