

poor girl may be excused for having enjoyed it—so far as enjoyment was possible to her. Basil Ransom's visible discomfiture was more agreeable to her than anything had been for a long time.

'I went with her myself to the early train; and I saw it leave the station.' And Olive kept her eyes unaverted, for the satisfaction of seeing how he took it.

It must be confessed that he took it rather ill. He had decided it was best he should retire, but Verena's retiring was another matter. 'And where is she gone?' he asked, with a frown.

'I don't think I am obliged to tell you.'

'Of course not! Excuse my asking. It is much better that I should find it out for myself, because if I owed the information to you I should perhaps feel a certain delicacy as regards profiting by it.'

'Gracious heaven!' cried Miss Chancellor, at the idea of Ransom's delicacy. Then she added more deliberately: 'You will not find out for yourself.'

'You think not?'

'I am sure of it!' And her enjoyment of the situation becoming acute, there broke from her lips a shrill, unfamiliar, troubled sound, which performed the office of a laugh, a laugh of triumph, but which, at a distance, might have passed almost as well for a wail of despair. It rang in Ransom's ears as he quickly turned away.

XL.

It was Mrs. Luna who received him, as she had received him on the occasion of his first visit to Charles Street; by which I do not mean quite in the same way. She had known very little about him then, but she knew too much for her happiness to-day, and she had with him now a little invidious, contemptuous manner, as if everything he should say or do could be a proof only of abominable duplicity and perversity. She had a theory that he had treated her shamefully; and he knew it—I do not mean the fact, but the theory: which led him to reflect that her resentments were as shallow as her opinions, inasmuch as if she really believed in her grievance, or if it had had any dignity, she would not have consented to see him. He had not presented himself at Miss Chancellor's door without a very good reason, and having done so he could not turn away so long as there was any one in the house of whom he might have speech. He had sent up his name to Mrs. Luna, after being told that she was staying there, on the mere chance that she would see him; for he thought a refusal a very possible sequel to the letters she had written him during the past four or five months—letters he had scarcely read, full of allusions of the most cutting sort to proceedings of his, in the past, of which he had no recollection whatever. They bored him, for he had quite other matters in his mind.

'I don't wonder you have the bad taste, the crudity,' she said, as soon as he came into the room, looking at him more sternly than he would have believed possible to her.

He saw that this was an allusion to his not having been to see her since the period of her sister's visit to New York; he having conceived for her, the evening of Mrs. Burrage's

party, a sentiment of aversion which put an end to such attentions. He didn't laugh, he was too worried and pre-occupied; but he replied, in a tone which apparently annoyed her as much as any indecent mirth: 'I thought it very possible you wouldn't see me.'

'Why shouldn't I see you, if I should take it into my head? Do you suppose I care whether I see you or not?'

'I supposed you wanted to, from your letters.'

'Then why did you think I would refuse?'

'Because that's the sort of thing women do.'

'Women—women! You know much about them!'

'I am learning something every day.'

'You haven't learned yet, apparently, to answer their letters. It's rather a surprise to me that you don't pretend not to have received mine.'

Ransom could smile now; the opportunity to vent the exasperation that had been consuming him almost restored his good humour. 'What could I say? You overwhelmed me. Besides, I did answer one of them.'

'One of them? You speak as if I had written you a dozen!' Mrs. Luna cried.

'I thought that was your contention—that you had done me the honour to address me so many. They were crushing, and when a man's crushed, it's all over.'

'Yes, you look as if you were in very small pieces! I am glad I shall never see you again.'

'I can see now why you received me—to tell me that,' Ransom said.

'It is a kind of pleasure. I am going back to Europe.'

'Really? for Newton's education?'

'Ah, I wonder you can have the face to speak of that—after the way you deserted him!'

'Let us abandon the subject, then, and I will tell you what I want.'

'I don't in the least care what you want,' Mrs. Luna remarked. 'And you haven't even the grace to ask me where I am going—over there.'

'What difference does that make to me—once you leave these shores?'

Mrs. Luna rose to her feet. 'Ah, chivalry, chivalry!'

she exclaimed. And she walked away to the window—one of the windows from which Ransom had first enjoyed, at Olive's solicitation, the view of the Back Bay. Mrs. Luna looked forth at it with little of the air of a person who was sorry to be about to lose it. 'I am determined you shall know where I am going,' she said in a moment. 'I am going to Florence.'

'Don't be afraid!' he replied. 'I shall go to Rome.'

'And you'll carry there more impertinence than has been seen there since the old emperors.'

'Were the emperors impertinent, in addition to their other vices? I am determined, on my side, that you shall know what I have come for,' Ransom said. 'I wouldn't ask you if I could ask any one else; but I am very hard pressed, and I don't know who can help me.'

Mrs. Luna turned on him a face of the frankest derision. 'Help you? Do you remember the last time I asked you to help me?'

'That evening at Mrs. Burrage's? Surely I wasn't wanting then; I remember urging on your acceptance a chair, so that you might stand on it, to see and to hear.'

'To see and to hear what, please? Your disgusting infatuation!'

'It's just about that I want to speak to you,' Ransom pursued. 'As you already know all about it, you have no new shock to receive, and I therefore venture to ask you—'

'Where tickets for her lecture to-night can be obtained? Is it possible she hasn't sent you one?'

'I assure you I didn't come to Boston to hear it,' said Ransom, with a sadness which Mrs. Luna evidently regarded as a refinement of outrage. 'What I should like to ascertain is where Miss Tarrant may be found at the present moment.'

'And do you think that's a delicate inquiry to make of me?'

'I don't see why it shouldn't be, but I know you don't think it is, and that is why, as I say, I mention the matter to you only because I can imagine absolutely no one else who is in a position to assist me. I have been to the

house of Miss Tarrant's parents, in Cambridge, but it is closed and empty, destitute of any sign of life. I went there first, on arriving this morning, and rang at this door only when my journey to Monadnoc Place had proved fruitless. Your sister's servant told me that Miss Tarrant was not staying here, but she added that Mrs. Luna was. No doubt you won't be pleased at having been spoken of as a sort of equivalent; and I didn't say to myself—or to the servant—that you would do as well; I only reflected that I could at least try you. I didn't even ask for Miss Chancellor, as I am sure she would give me no information whatever.'

Mrs. Luna listened to this candid account of the young man's proceedings with her head turned a little over her shoulder at him, and her eyes fixed as unsympathetically as possible upon his own. 'What you propose, then, as I understand it,' she said in a moment, 'is that I should betray my sister to you.'

'Worse than that; I propose that you should betray Miss Tarrant herself.'

'What do I care about Miss Tarrant? I don't know what you are talking about.'

'Haven't you really any idea where she is living? Haven't you seen her here? Are Miss Olive and she not constantly together?'

Mrs. Luna, at this, turned full round upon him, and, with folded arms and her head tossed back, exclaimed: 'Look here, Basil Ransom, I never thought you were a fool, but it strikes me that since we last met you have lost your wits!'

'There is no doubt of that,' Ransom answered, smiling.

'Do you mean to tell me you don't know everything about Miss Tarrant that can be known?'

'I have neither seen her nor heard of her for the last ten weeks; Miss Chancellor has hidden her away.'

'Hidden her away, with all the walls and fences of Boston flaming to-day with her name?'

'Oh yes, I have noticed that, and I have no doubt that by waiting till this evening I shall be able to see her. But I don't want to wait till this evening; I want to see her now, and not in public—in private.'

'Do you indeed?—how interesting!' cried Mrs. Luna,

with rippling laughter. 'And pray what do you want to do with her?'

Ransom hesitated a little. 'I think I would rather not tell you.'

'Your charming frankness, then, has its limits! My poor cousin, you are really too *naïf*. Do you suppose it matters a straw to me?'

Ransom made no answer to this appeal, but after an instant he broke out: 'Honestly, Mrs. Luna, can you give me no clue?'

'Lord, what terrible eyes you make, and what terrible words you use! "Honestly," quoth he! Do you think I am so fond of the creature that I want to keep her all to myself?'

'I don't know; I don't understand,' said Ransom, slowly and softly, but still with his terrible eyes.

'And do you think I understand any better? You are not a very edifying young man,' Mrs. Luna went on; 'but I really think you have deserved a better fate than to be jilted and thrown over by a girl of that class.'

'I haven't been jilted. I like her very much, but she never encouraged me.'

At this Mrs. Luna broke again into articulate scoffing. 'It is very odd that at your age you should be so little a man of the world!'

Ransom made her no other answer than to remark, thoughtfully and rather absently: 'Your sister is really very clever.'

'By which you mean, I suppose, that I am not!' Mrs. Luna suddenly changed her tone, and said, with the greatest sweetness and humility: 'God knows, I have never pretended to be!'

Ransom looked at her a moment, and guessed the meaning of this altered note. It had suddenly come over her that with her portrait in half the shop-fronts, her advertisement on all the fences, and the great occasion on which she was to reveal herself to the country at large close at hand, Verena had become so conscious of high destinies that her dear friend's Southern kinsman really appeared to her very small game, and she might therefore be regarded as having cast him off. If this were the case, it would

perhaps be well for Mrs. Luna still to hold on. Basil's induction was very rapid, but it gave him time to decide that the best thing to say to his interlocutress was: 'On what day do you sail for Europe?'

'Perhaps I shall not sail at all,' Mrs. Luna replied, looking out of the window.

'And in that case—poor Newton's education?'

'I should try to content myself with a country which has given you yours.'

'Don't you want him, then, to be a man of the world?'

'Ah, the world, the world!' she murmured, while she watched, in the deepening dusk, the lights of the town begin to reflect themselves in the Back Bay. 'Has it been such a source of happiness to me that I belong to it?'

'Perhaps, after all, I shall be able to go to Florence!' said Ransom, laughing.

She faced him once more, this time slowly, and declared that she had never known anything so strange as his state of mind—she would be so glad to have an explanation of it. With the opinions he professed (it was for them she had liked him—she didn't like his character), why on earth should he be running after a little fifth-rate *poseuse*, and in such a frenzy to get hold of her? He might say it was none of her business, and of course she would have no answer to that; therefore she admitted that she asked simply out of intellectual curiosity, and because one always was tormented at the sight of a painful contradiction. With the things she had heard him say about his convictions and theories, his view of life and the great questions of the future, she should have thought he would find Miss Tarrant's attitudinising absolutely nauseous. Were not her views the same as Olive's, and hadn't Olive and he signally failed to hit it off together? Mrs. Luna only asked because she was really quite puzzled. 'Don't you know that some minds, when they see a mystery, can't rest till they clear it up?'

'You can't be more puzzled than I am,' said Ransom. 'Apparently the explanation is to be found in a sort of reversal of the formula you were so good, just now, as to apply to me. You like my opinions, but you entertain a different sentiment for my character. I deplore Miss

Tarrant's opinions, but her character—well, her character pleases me.'

Mrs. Luna stared, as if she were waiting, the explanation surely not being complete. 'But as much as that?' she inquired.

'As much as what?' said Ransom, smiling. Then he added, 'Your sister has beaten me.'

'I thought she had beaten some one of late; she has seemed so gay and happy. I didn't suppose it was *all* because I was going away.'

'Has she seemed very gay?' Ransom inquired, with a sinking of the heart. He wore such a long face, as he asked this question, that Mrs. Luna was again moved to audible mirth, after which she explained:

'Of course I mean gay for her. Everything is relative. With her impatience for this lecture of her friend's to-night, she's in an unspeakable state! She can't sit still for three minutes, she goes out fifteen times a day, and there has been enough arranging and interviewing, and discussing and telegraphing and advertising, enough wire-pulling and rushing about, to put an army in the field. What is it they are always doing to the armies in Europe?—mobilising them? Well, Verena has been mobilised, and this has been headquarters.'

'And shall you go to the Music Hall to-night?'

'For what do you take me? I have no desire to be shrieked at for an hour.'

'No doubt, no doubt, Miss Olive must be in a state,' Ransom went on, rather absently. Then he said, with abruptness, in a different tone: 'If this house has been, as you say, headquarters, how comes it you haven't seen her?'

'Seen Olive? I have seen nothing else!'

'I mean Miss Tarrant. She must be somewhere—in the place—if she's to speak to-night.'

'Should you like me to go out and look for her? *Il ne manqueroit plus que cela!*' cried Mrs. Luna. 'What's the matter with you, Basil Ransom, and what are you after?' she demanded, with considerable sharpness. She had tried haughtiness and she had tried humility, but they brought her equally face to face with a competitor whom she couldn't

take seriously, yet who was none the less objectionable for that.

I know not whether Ransom would have attempted to answer her question had an obstacle not presented itself; at any rate, at the moment she spoke, the curtain in the doorway was pushed aside, and a visitor crossed the threshold. 'Mercy! how provoking!' Mrs. Luna exclaimed, audibly enough; and without moving from her place she bent an uncharitable eye upon the invader, a gentleman whom Ransom had the sense of having met before. He was a young man with a fresh face and abundant locks, prematurely white; he stood smiling at Mrs. Luna, quite undaunted by the absence of any demonstration in his favour. She looked as if she didn't know him, while Ransom prepared to depart, leaving them to settle it together.

'I'm afraid you don't remember me, though I have seen you before,' said the young man, very amiably. 'I was here a week ago, and Miss Chancellor presented me to you.'

'Oh yes; she's not at home now,' Mrs. Luna returned, vaguely.

'So I was told—but I didn't let that prevent me.' And the young man included Rasil Ransom in the smile with which he made himself more welcome than Mrs. Luna appeared disposed to make him, and by which he seemed to call attention to his superiority. 'There is a matter on which I want very much to obtain some information, and I have no doubt you will be so good as to give it to me.'

'It comes back to me—you have something to do with the newspapers,' said Mrs. Luna; and Ransom too, by this time, had placed the young man among his reminiscences. He had been at Miss Birdseye's famous party, and Doctor Prance had there described him as a brilliant journalist.

It was quite with the air of such a personage that he accepted Mrs. Luna's definition, and he continued to radiate towards Ransom (as if, in return, he remembered *his* face), while he dropped, confidentially, the word that expressed everything—'The Vesper,' don't you know?' Then he went on: 'Now, Mrs. Luna, I don't care, I'm

not going to let you off! We want the last news about Miss Verena, and it has got to come out of this house.'

'Oh murder!' Ransom muttered, beneath his breath, taking up his hat.

'Miss Chancellor has hidden her away; I have been scouring the city in search of her, and her own father hasn't seen her for a week. We have got his ideas; they are very easy to get, but that isn't what we want.'

'And what do you want?' Ransom was now impelled to inquire, as Mr. Pardon (even the name at present came back to him), appeared sufficiently to have introduced himself.

'We want to know how she feels about to-night; what report she makes of her nerves, her anticipations; how she looked, what she had on, up to six o'clock. Gracious! if I could see her I should know what I wanted, and so would she, I guess!' Mr. Pardon exclaimed. 'You must know something, Mrs. Luna; it isn't natural you shouldn't. I won't inquire any further where she is, because that might seem a little pushing, if she does wish to withdraw herself—though I am bound to say I think she makes a mistake; we could work up these last hours for her! But can't you tell me any little personal items—the sort of thing the people like? What is she going to have for supper? or is she going to speak—a—without previous nourishment?'

'Really, sir, I don't know, and I don't in the least care; I have nothing to do with the business!' Mrs. Luna cried, angrily.

The reporter stared; then, eagerly, 'You have nothing to do with it—you take an unfavourable view, you protest?' And he was already feeling in a side-pocket for his note-book.

'Mercy on us! are you going to put *that* in the paper?' Mrs. Luna exclaimed; and in spite of the sense, detestable to him, that everything he wished most to avert was fast closing over the girl, Ransom broke into cynical laughter.

'Ah, but do protest, madam; let us at least have that fragment!' Mr. Pardon went on. 'A protest from this house would be a charming note. We *must* have it—we've got nothing else! The public are almost as much

interested in your sister as they are in Miss Verena; they know to what extent she has backed her: and I should be so delighted (I see the heading, from here, so attractive!) just to take down "What Miss Chancellor's Family Think about It!"

Mrs. Luna sank into the nearest chair, with a groan, covering her face with her hands. 'Heaven help me, I am glad I am going to Europe!'

'That is another little item—everything counts,' said Matthias Pardon, making a rapid entry in his tablets. 'May I inquire whether you are going to Europe in consequence of your disapproval of your sister's views?'

Mrs. Luna sprang up again, almost snatching the memorandum out of his hand. 'If you have the impertinence to publish a word about me, or to mention my name in print, I will come to your office and make such a scene!'

'Dearest lady, that would be a godsend!' Mr. Pardon cried, enthusiastically; but he put his note-book back into his pocket.

'Have you made an exhaustive search for Miss Tarrant?' Basil Ransom asked of him. Mr. Pardon, at this inquiry, eyed him with a sudden, familiar archness, expressive of the idea of competition; so that Ransom added: 'You needn't be afraid, I'm not a reporter.'

'I didn't know but what you had come on from New York.'

'So I have—but not as the representative of a newspaper.'

'Fancy his taking you——' Mrs. Luna murmured, with indignation.

'Well, I have been everywhere I could think of,' Mr. Pardon remarked. 'I have been hunting round after your sister's agent, but I haven't been able to catch up with him; I suppose he has been hunting on his side. Miss Chancellor told me—Mrs. Luna may remember it—that she shouldn't be here at all during the week, and that she preferred not to tell me either where or how she was to spend her time until the momentous evening. Of course I let her know that I should find out if I could, and you may remember,' he said to Mrs. Luna, 'the conversation

we had on the subject. I remarked, candidly, that if they didn't look out they would overdo the quietness. Doctor Tarrant has felt very low about it. However, I have done what I could with the material at my command, and the "Vesper" has let the public know that her whereabouts was the biggest mystery of the season. It's difficult to get round the "Vesper."

'I am almost afraid to open my lips in your presence.' Mrs. Luna broke in, 'but I must say that I think my sister was strangely communicative. She told you ever so much that I wouldn't have breathed.'

'I should like to try you with something you know!' Matthias Pardon returned, imperturbably. 'This isn't a fair trial, because you don't know. Miss Chancellor came round—came round considerably, there's no doubt of that; because a year or two ago she was terribly unapproachable. If I have mollified her, madam, why shouldn't I mollify you? She realises that I can help her now, and as I ain't rancorous I am willing to help her all she'll let me. The trouble is, she won't let me enough, yet; it seems as if she couldn't believe it of me. At any rate,' he pursued, addressing himself more particularly to Ransom, 'half an hour ago, at the Hall, they knew nothing whatever about Miss Tarrant, beyond the fact that about a month ago she came there, with Miss Chancellor, to try her voice, which rang all over the place, like silver, and that Miss Chancellor guaranteed her absolute punctuality to-night.'

'Well, that's all that is required,' said Ransom, at hazard; and he put out his hand, in farewell, to Mrs. Luna.

'Do you desert me already?' she demanded, giving him a glance which would have embarrassed any spectator but a reporter of the 'Vesper.'

'I have fifty things to do; you must excuse me.' He was nervous, restless, his heart was beating much faster than usual; he couldn't stand still, and he had no compunction whatever about leaving her to get rid, by herself, of Mr. Pardon.

This gentleman continued to mix in the conversation, possibly from the hope that if he should linger either Miss

Tarrant or Miss Chancellor would make her appearance. 'Every seat in the Hall is sold; the crowd is expected to be immense. When our Boston public *does* take an idea!' Mr. Pardon exclaimed.

Ransom only wanted to get away, and in order to facilitate his release by implying that in such a case he should see her again, he said to Mrs. Luna, rather hypocritically, from the threshold, 'You had really better come to-night.'

'I am not like the Boston public—I don't take an idea!' she replied.

'Do you mean to say you are not going?' cried Mr. Pardon, with widely-open eyes, clapping his hand again to his pocket. 'Don't you regard her as a wonderful genius?'

Mrs. Luna was sorely tried, and the vexation of seeing Ransom slip away from her with his thoughts visibly on Verena, leaving her face to face with the odious newspaperman, whose presence made passionate protest impossible—the annoyance of seeing everything and every one mock at her and fail to compensate her was such that she lost her head, while rashness leaped to her lips and jerked out the answer—'No indeed; I think her a vulgar idiot!'

'Ah, madam, I should never permit myself to print that!' Ransom heard Mr. Pardon rejoin, reproachfully, as he dropped the *portière* of the drawing-room.

XLI.

HE walked about for the next two hours, walked all over Boston, heedless of his course, and conscious only of an unwillingness to return to his hotel and an inability to eat his dinner or rest his weary legs. He had been roaming in very much the same desperate fashion, at once eager and purposeless, for many days before he left New York, and he knew that his agitation and suspense must wear themselves out. At present they pressed him more than ever; they had become tremendously acute. The early dusk of the last half of November had gathered thick, but the evening was fine and the lighted streets had the animation and variety of a winter that had begun with brilliancy. The shop-fronts glowed through frosty panes, the passers bustled on the pavement, the bells of the street-cars jangled in the cold air, the newsboys hawked the evening-papers, the vestibules of the theatres, illuminated and flanked with coloured posters and the photographs of actresses, exhibited seductively their swinging doors of red leather or baize, spotted with little brass nails. Behind great plates of glass the interior of the hotels became visible, with marble-paved lobbies, white with electric lamps, and columns, and Westerners on divans stretching their legs, while behind a counter, set apart and covered with an array of periodicals and novels in paper covers, little boys, with the faces of old men, showing plans of the play-houses and offering librettos, sold orchestra-chairs at a premium. When from time to time Ransom paused at a corner, hesitating which way to drift, he looked up and saw the stars, sharp and near, scintillating over the town. Boston seemed to him big and full of nocturnal life, very much awake and preparing for an evening of pleasure.