

Part 1

Chapter 1

The Prince had always liked his London, when it had come to him; he was one of the modern Romans who find by the Thames a more convincing image of the truth of the ancient state than any they have left by the Tiber. Brought up on the legend of the City to which the world paid tribute, he recognised in the present London much more than in contemporary Rome the real dimensions of such a case. If it was a question of an Imperium, he said to himself, and if one wished, as a Roman, to recover a little the sense of that, the place to do so was on London Bridge, or even, on a fine afternoon in May, at Hyde Park Corner. It was not indeed to either of those places that these grounds of his predilection, after all sufficiently vague, had, at the moment we are concerned with him, guided his steps; he had strayed, simply enough, into Bond Street, where his imagination, working at comparatively short range, caused him now and then to stop before a window in which objects massive and lumpish, in silver and gold, in the forms to which precious stones contribute, or in leather, steel, brass, applied to a hundred uses and abuses, were as tumbled together as if, in the insolence of the Empire, they had been the loot of far-off victories. The young man's movements, however, betrayed no consistency of attention—not even, for that matter, when one of his arrests had proceeded from possibilities in faces shaded, as they passed him on the pavement, by huge beribboned hats, or more delicately tinted still under the tense silk of parasols held at perverse angles in waiting victorias. And the Prince's undirected thought was not a little symptomatic, since, though the turn of the season had come and the flush of the streets begun to fade, the possibilities of faces, on the August afternoon, were still one of the notes of the scene. He was too restless—that was the fact—for any concentration, and the last idea that would just now have occurred to him in any connection was the idea of pursuit.

He had been pursuing for six months as never in his life before, and what had actually unsteadied him, as we join him, was the sense of how he had been justified. Capture had crowned the pursuit—or success, as he would otherwise have put it, had rewarded virtue; whereby the

consciousness of these things made him, for the hour, rather serious than gay. A sobriety that might have consorted with failure sat in his handsome face, constructively regular and grave, yet at the same time oddly and, as might be, functionally almost radiant, with its dark blue eyes, its dark brown moustache and its expression no more sharply "foreign" to an English view than to have caused it sometimes to be observed of him with a shallow felicity that he looked like a "refined" Irishman. What had happened was that shortly before, at three o'clock, his fate had practically been sealed, and that even when one pretended to no quarrel with it the moment had something of the grimness of a crunched key in the strongest lock that could be made. There was nothing to do as yet, further, but feel what one had done, and our personage felt it while he aimlessly wandered. It was already as if he were married, so definitely had the solicitors, at three o'clock, enabled the date to be fixed, and by so few days was that date now distant. He was to dine at half-past eight o'clock with the young lady on whose behalf, and on whose father's, the London lawyers had reached an inspired harmony with his own man of business, poor Calderoni, fresh from Rome and now apparently in the wondrous situation of being "shown London," before promptly leaving it again, by Mr. Verver himself, Mr. Verver whose easy way with his millions had taxed to such small purpose, in the arrangements, the principle of reciprocity. The reciprocity with which the Prince was during these minutes most struck was that of Calderoni's bestowal of his company for a view of the lions. If there was one thing in the world the young man, at this juncture, clearly intended, it was to be much more decent as a son-in-law than lots of fellows he could think of had shown themselves in that character. He thought of these fellows, from whom he was so to differ, in English; he used, mentally, the English term to describe his difference, for, familiar with the tongue from his earliest years, so that no note of strangeness remained with him either for lip or for ear, he found it convenient, in life, for the greatest number of relations. He found it convenient, oddly, even for his relation with himself—though not unmindful that there might still, as time went on, be others, including a more intimate degree of that one, that would seek, possibly with violence, the larger or the finer issue—which was it?—of the vernacular. Miss Verver had told him he spoke English too well—it was his only fault, and he had not been able to speak worse even to oblige her. "When I speak worse, you see, I speak French," he had said; intimating thus that there were discriminations, doubtless of the invidious kind, for which that language was the most apt. The girl had taken this, she let him know, as a

reflection on her own French, which she had always so dreamed of making good, of making better; to say nothing of his evident feeling that the idiom supposed a cleverness she was not a person to rise to. The Prince's answer to such remarks—genial, charming, like every answer the parties to his new arrangement had yet had from him—was that he was practising his American in order to converse properly, on equal terms as it were, with Mr. Verver. His prospective father-in-law had a command of it, he said, that put him at a disadvantage in any discussion; besides which—well, besides which he had made to the girl the observation that positively, of all his observations yet, had most finely touched her.

"You know I think he's a REAL galantuomo—'and no mistake.' There are plenty of sham ones about. He seems to me simply the best man I've ever seen in my life."

"Well, my dear, why shouldn't he be?" the girl had gaily inquired.

It was this, precisely, that had set the Prince to think. The things, or many of them, that had made Mr. Verver what he was seemed practically to bring a charge of waste against the other things that, with the other people known to the young man, had failed of such a result. "Why, his 'form,'" he had returned, "might have made one doubt."

"Father's form?" She hadn't seen it. It strikes me he hasn't got any."

"He hasn't got mine—he hasn't even got yours."

"Thank you for 'even!'" the girl had laughed at him. "Oh, yours, my dear, is tremendous. But your father has his own. I've made that out. So don't doubt it. It's where it has brought him out—that's the point."

"It's his goodness that has brought him out," our young woman had, at this, objected.

"Ah, darling, goodness, I think, never brought anyone out. Goodness, when it's real, precisely, rather keeps people in." He had been interested in his discrimination, which amused him. "No, it's his WAY. It belongs to him."

But she had wondered still. "It's the American way. That's all."

"Exactly—it's all. It's all, I say! It fits him—so it must be good for something."

"Do you think it would be good for you?" Maggie Verver had smilingly asked.

To which his reply had been just of the happiest. "I don't feel, my dear, if you really want to know, that anything much can now either hurt me or help me. Such as I am—but you'll see for yourself. Say, however, I am a galantuomo—which I devoutly hope: I'm like a chicken, at best, chopped up and smothered in sauce; cooked down as a creme de

volaille, with half the parts left out. Your father's the natural fowl running about the bassecour. His feathers, movements, his sounds—those are the parts that, with me, are left out."

"All, as a matter of course—since you can't eat a chicken alive!"

The Prince had not been annoyed at this, but he had been positive. "Well, I'm eating your father alive—which is the only way to taste him. I want to continue, and as it's when he talks American that he is most alive, so I must also cultivate it, to get my pleasure. He couldn't make one like him so much in any other language."

It mattered little that the girl had continued to demur—it was the mere play of her joy. "I think he could make you like him in Chinese."

"It would be an unnecessary trouble. What I mean is that he's a kind of result of his inevitable tone. My liking is accordingly FOR the tone—which has made him possible."

"Oh, you'll hear enough of it," she laughed, "before you've done with us."

Only this, in truth, had made him frown a little.

"What do you mean, please, by my having 'done' with you?"

"Why, found out about us all there is to find."

He had been able to take it indeed easily as a joke. "Ah, love, I began with that. I know enough, I feel, never to be surprised. It's you yourselves meanwhile," he continued, "who really know nothing. There are two parts of me"—yes, he had been moved to go on. "One is made up of the history, the doings, the marriages, the crimes, the follies, the boundless betises of other people—especially of their infamous waste of money that might have come to me. Those things are written—literally in rows of volumes, in libraries; are as public as they're abominable. Everybody can get at them, and you've, both of you, wonderfully, looked them in the face. But there's another part, very much smaller doubtless, which, such as it is, represents my single self, the unknown, unimportant, unimportant—unimportant save to YOU—personal quantity. About this you've found out nothing."

"Luckily, my dear," the girl had bravely said; "for what then would become, please, of the promised occupation of my future?"

The young man remembered even now how extraordinarily CLEAR—he couldn't call it anything else—she had looked, in her prettiness, as she had said it. He also remembered what he had been moved to reply. "The happiest reigns, we are taught, you know, are the reigns without any history."

"Oh, I'm not afraid of history!" She had been sure of that. "Call it the bad part, if you like—yours certainly sticks out of you. What was it else," Maggie Verver had also said, "that made me originally think of you? It wasn't—as I should suppose you must have seen—what you call your unknown quantity, your particular self. It was the generations behind you, the follies and the crimes, the plunder and the waste—the wicked Pope, the monster most of all, whom so many of the volumes in your family library are all about. If I've read but two or three yet, I shall give myself up but the more—as soon as I have time—to the rest. Where, therefore"—she had put it to him again—"without your archives, annals, infamies, would you have been?"

He recalled what, to this, he had gravely returned. "I might have been in a somewhat better pecuniary situation." But his actual situation under the head in question positively so little mattered to them that, having by that time lived deep into the sense of his advantage, he had kept no impression of the girl's rejoinder. It had but sweetened the waters in which he now floated, tinted them as by the action of some essence, poured from a gold-topped phial, for making one's bath aromatic. No one before him, never—not even the infamous Pope—had so sat up to his neck in such a bath. It showed, for that matter, how little one of his race could escape, after all, from history. What was it but history, and of THEIR kind very much, to have the assurance of the enjoyment of more money than the palace-builder himself could have dreamed of? This was the element that bore him up and into which Maggie scattered, on occasion, her exquisite colouring drops. They were of the colour—of what on earth? of what but the extraordinary American good faith? They were of the colour of her innocence, and yet at the same time of her imagination, with which their relation, his and these people's, was all suffused. What he had further said on the occasion of which we thus represent him as catching the echoes from his own thoughts while he loitered—what he had further said came back to him, for it had been the voice itself of his luck, the soothing sound that was always with him. "You Americans are almost incredibly romantic."

"Of course we are. That's just what makes everything so nice for us."

"Everything?" He had wondered.

"Well, everything that's nice at all. The world, the beautiful, world—or everything in it that is beautiful. I mean we see so much."

He had looked at her a moment—and he well knew how she had struck him, in respect to the beautiful world, as one of the beautiful, the most beautiful things. But what he had answered was: "You see too

much—that's what may sometimes make you difficulties. When you don't, at least," he had amended with a further thought, "see too little." But he had quite granted that he knew what she meant, and his warning perhaps was needless.

He had seen the follies of the romantic disposition, but there seemed somehow no follies in theirs—nothing, one was obliged to recognise, but innocent pleasures, pleasures without penalties. Their enjoyment was a tribute to others without being a loss to themselves. Only the funny thing, he had respectfully submitted, was that her father, though older and wiser, and a man into the bargain, was as bad—that is as good—as herself.

"Oh, he's better," the girl had freely declared "that is he's worse. His relation to the things he cares for—and I think it beautiful—is absolutely romantic. So is his whole life over here—it's the most romantic thing I know."

"You mean his idea for his native place?"

"Yes—the collection, the Museum with which he wishes to endow it, and of which he thinks more, as you know, than of anything in the world. It's the work of his life and the motive of everything he does."

The young man, in his actual mood, could have smiled again—smiled delicately, as he had then smiled at her. "Has it been his motive in letting me have you?"

"Yes, my dear, positively—or in a manner," she had said.

"American City isn't, by the way, his native town, for, though he's not old, it's a young thing compared with him—a younger one. He started there, he has a feeling about it, and the place has grown, as he says, like the programme of a charity performance. You're at any rate a part of his collection," she had explained—"one of the things that can only be got over here. You're a rarity, an object of beauty, an object of price. You're not perhaps absolutely unique, but you're so curious and eminent that there are very few others like you—you belong to a class about which everything is known. You're what they call a *morceau de musee*."

"I see. I have the great sign of it," he had risked—"that I cost a lot of money."

"I haven't the least idea," she had gravely answered, "what you cost"—and he had quite adored, for the moment, her way of saying it. He had felt even, for the moment, vulgar. But he had made the best of that. "Wouldn't you find out if it were a question of parting with me? My value would in that case be estimated."

She had looked at him with her charming eyes, as if his value were well before her. "Yes, if you mean that I'd pay rather than lose you."

And then there came again what this had made him say. "Don't talk about ME—it's you who are not of this age. You're a creature of a braver and finer one, and the cinquecento, at its most golden hour, wouldn't have been ashamed of you. It would of me, and if I didn't know some of the pieces your father has acquired, I should rather fear, for American City, the criticism of experts. Would it at all events be your idea," he had then just ruefully asked, "to send me there for safety?"

"Well, we may have to come to it."

"I'll go anywhere you want."

"We must see first—it will be only if we have to come to it. There are things," she had gone on, "that father puts away—the bigger and more cumbrous of course, which he stores, has already stored in masses, here and in Paris, in Italy, in Spain, in warehouses, vaults, banks, safes, wonderful secret places. We've been like a pair of pirates—positively stage pirates, the sort who wink at each other and say 'Ha-ha!' when they come to where their treasure is buried. Ours is buried pretty well everywhere—except what we like to see, what we travel with and have about us. These, the smaller pieces, are the things we take out and arrange as we can, to make the hotels we stay at and the houses we hire a little less ugly. Of course it's a danger, and we have to keep watch. But father loves a fine piece, loves, as he says, the good of it, and it's for the company of some of his things that he's willing to run his risks. And we've had extraordinary luck"—Maggie had made that point; "we've never lost anything yet. And the finest objects are often the smallest. Values, in lots of cases, you must know, have nothing to do with size. But there's nothing, however tiny," she had wound up, "that we've missed."

"I like the class," he had laughed for this, "in which you place me! I shall be one of the little pieces that you unpack at the hotels, or at the worst in the hired houses, like this wonderful one, and put out with the family photographs and the new magazines. But it's something not to be so big that I have to be buried."

"Oh," she had returned, "you shall not be buried, my dear, till you're dead. Unless indeed you call it burial to go to American City."

"Before I pronounce I should like to see my tomb." So he had had, after his fashion, the last word in their interchange, save for the result of an observation that had risen to his lips at the beginning, which he had then checked, and which now came back to him. "Good, bad or indifferent, I hope there's one thing you believe about me."

He had sounded solemn, even to himself, but she had taken it gaily. "Ah, don't fix me down to 'one'! I believe things enough about you, my dear, to have a few left if most of them, even, go to smash. I've taken care of THAT. I've divided my faith into water-tight compartments. We must manage not to sink."

"You do believe I'm not a hypocrite? You recognise that I don't lie or dissemble or deceive? Is THAT water-tight?"

The question, to which he had given a certain intensity, had made her, he remembered, stare an instant, her colour rising as if it had sounded to her still stranger than he had intended. He had perceived on the spot that any SERIOUS discussion of veracity, of loyalty, or rather of the want of them, practically took her unprepared, as if it were quite new to her. He had noticed it before: it was the English, the American sign that duplicity, like "love," had to be joked about. It couldn't be "gone into." So the note of his inquiry was—well, to call it nothing else—premature; a mistake worth making, however, for the almost overdone drollery in which her answer instinctively sought refuge.

"Water-tight—the biggest compartment of all? Why, it's the best cabin and the main deck and the engine-room and the steward's pantry! It's the ship itself—it's the whole line. It's the captain's table and all one's luggage—one's reading for the trip." She had images, like that, that were drawn from steamers and trains, from a familiarity with "lines," a command of "own" cars, from an experience of continents and seas, that he was unable as yet to emulate; from vast modern machineries and facilities whose acquaintance he had still to make, but as to which it was part of the interest of his situation as it stood that he could, quite without wincing, feel his future likely to bristle with them.

It was in fact, content as he was with his engagement and charming as he thought his affianced bride, his view of THAT furniture that mainly constituted our young man's "romance"—and to an extent that made of his inward state a contrast that he was intelligent enough to feel. He was intelligent enough to feel quite humble, to wish not to be in the least hard or voracious, not to insist on his own side of the bargain, to warn himself in short against arrogance and greed. Odd enough, of a truth, was his sense of this last danger—which may illustrate moreover his general attitude toward dangers from within. Personally, he considered, he hadn't the vices in question—and that was so much to the good. His race, on the other hand, had had them handsomely enough, and he was somehow full of his race. Its presence in him was like the consciousness of some inexpugnable scent in which his clothes, his whole person, his

hands and the hair of his head, might have been steeped as in some chemical bath: the effect was nowhere in particular, yet he constantly felt himself at the mercy of the cause. He knew his antenatal history, knew it in every detail, and it was a thing to keep causes well before him. What was his frank judgment of so much of its ugliness, he asked himself, but a part of the cultivation of humility? What was this so important step he had just taken but the desire for some new history that should, so far as possible, contradict, and even if need be flatly dishonour, the old? If what had come to him wouldn't do he must MAKE something different. He perfectly recognised—always in his humility—that the material for the making had to be Mr. Verver's millions. There was nothing else for him on earth to make it with; he had tried before—had had to look about and see the truth. Humble as he was, at the same time, he was not so humble as if he had known himself frivolous or stupid. He had an idea—which may amuse his historian—that when you were stupid enough to be mistaken about such a matter you did know it. Therefore he wasn't mistaken—his future might be MIGHT be scientific. There was nothing in himself, at all events, to prevent it. He was allying himself to science, for it was science but the absence of prejudice backed by the presence of money? His life would be full of machinery, which was the antidote to superstition, which was in its turn, too much, the consequence, or at least the exhalation, of archives. He thought of these—of his not being at all events futile, and of his absolute acceptance of the developments of the coming age to redress the balance of his being so differently considered. The moments when he most winced were those at which he found himself believing that, really, futility would have been forgiven him. Even WITH it, in that absurd view, he would have been good enough. Such was the laxity, in the Ververs, of the romantic spirit. They didn't, indeed, poor dears, know what, in that line—the line of futility—the real thing meant. HE did—having seen it, having tried it, having taken its measure. This was a memory in fact simply to screen out—much as, just in front of him while he walked, the iron shutter of a shop, closing early to the stale summer day, rattled down at the turn of some crank. There was machinery again, just as the plate glass, all about him, was money, was power, the power of the rich peoples. Well, he was OF them now, of the rich peoples; he was on their side—if it wasn't rather the pleasanter way of putting it that they were on his.

Something of this sort was in any case the moral and the murmur of his walk. It would have been ridiculous—such a moral from such a source—if it hadn't all somehow fitted to the gravity of the hour, that

gravity the oppression of which I began by recording. Another feature was the immediate nearness of the arrival of the contingent from home. He was to meet them at Charing Cross on the morrow: his younger brother, who had married before him, but whose wife, of Hebrew race, with a portion that had gilded the pill, was not in a condition to travel; his sister and her husband, the most anglicised of Milanese, his maternal uncle, the most shelved of diplomatists, and his Roman cousin, Don Ottavio, the most disponible of ex-deputies and of relatives—a scant handful of the consanguineous who, in spite of Maggie's plea for hymeneal reserve, were to accompany him to the altar. It was no great array, yet it was apparently to be a more numerous muster than any possible to the bride herself, having no wealth of kinship to choose from and making it up, on the other hand, by loose invitations. He had been interested in the girl's attitude on the matter and had wholly deferred to it, giving him, as it did, a glimpse, distinctly pleasing, of the kind of ruminations she would in general be governed by—which were quite such as fell in with his own taste. They hadn't natural relations, she and her father, she had explained; so they wouldn't try to supply the place by artificial, by make-believe ones, by any searching of highways and hedges. Oh yes, they had acquaintances enough—but a marriage was an intimate thing. You asked acquaintances when you HAD your kith and kin—you asked them over and above. But you didn't ask them alone, to cover your nudity and look like what they weren't. She knew what she meant and what she liked, and he was all ready to take from her, finding a good omen in both of the facts. He expected her, desired her, to have character; his wife SHOULD have it, and he wasn't afraid of her having much. He had had, in his earlier time, to deal with plenty of people who had had it; notably with the three four ecclesiastics, his great-uncle, the Cardinal, above all, who had taken a hand and played a part in his education: the effect of all of which had never been to upset him. He was thus fairly on the look-out for the characteristic in this most intimate, as she was to come, of his associates. He encouraged it when it appeared.

He felt therefore, just at present, as if his papers were in order, as if his accounts so balanced as they had never done in his life before and he might close the portfolio with a snap. It would open again, doubtless, of itself, with the arrival of the Romans; it would even perhaps open with his dining to-night in Portland Place, where Mr. Verver had pitched a tent suggesting that of Alexander furnished with the spoils of Darius. But what meanwhile marked his crisis, as I have said, was his sense of the immediate two or three hours. He paused on corners, at crossings;

there kept rising for him, in waves, that consciousness, sharp as to its source while vague as to its end, which I began by speaking of—the consciousness of an appeal to do something or other, before it was too late, for himself. By any friend to whom he might have mentioned it the appeal could have been turned to frank derision. For what, for whom indeed but himself and the high advantages attached, was he about to marry an extraordinarily charming girl, whose "prospects," of the solid sort, were as guaranteed as her amiability? He wasn't to do it, assuredly, all for her. The Prince, as happened, however, was so free to feel and yet not to formulate that there rose before him after a little, definitely, the image of a friend whom he had often found ironic. He withheld the tribute of attention from passing faces only to let his impulse accumulate. Youth and beauty made him scarcely turn, but the image of Mrs. Assingham made him presently stop a hansom. HER youth, her beauty were things more or less of the past, but to find her at home, as he possibly might, would be "doing" what he still had time for, would put something of a reason into his restlessness and thereby probably soothe it. To recognise the propriety of this particular pilgrimage—she lived far enough off, in long Cadogan Place—was already in fact to work it off a little. A perception of the propriety of formally thanking her, and of timing the act just as he happened to be doing—this, he made out as he went, was obviously all that had been the matter with him. It was true that he had mistaken the mood of the moment, misread it rather, superficially, as an impulse to look the other way—the other way from where his pledges had accumulated. Mrs. Assingham, precisely, represented, embodied his pledges—was, in her pleasant person, the force that had set them successively in motion. She had MADE his marriage, quite as truly as his papal ancestor had made his family—though he could scarce see what she had made it for unless because she too was perversely romantic. He had neither bribed nor persuaded her, had given her nothing—scarce even till now articulate thanks; so that her profit-to think of it vulgarly—must have all had to come from the Ververs.

Yet he was far, he could still remind himself, from supposing that she had been grossly remunerated. He was wholly sure she hadn't; for if there were people who took presents and people who didn't she would be quite on the right side and of the proud class. Only then, on the other hand, her disinterestedness was rather awful—it implied, that is, such abysses of confidence. She was admirably attached to Maggie—whose possession of such a friend might moreover quite rank as one of her "assets"; but the great proof of her affection had been in bringing them,

with her design, together. Meeting him during a winter in Rome, meeting him afterwards in Paris, and "liking" him, as she had in time frankly let him know from the first, she had marked him for her young friend's own and had then, unmistakably, presented him in a light. But the interest in Maggie—that was the point—would have achieved but little without her interest in HIM. On what did that sentiment, unsolicited and unrecompensed, rest? what good, again—for it was much like his question about Mr. Verver—should he ever have done her? The Prince's notion of a recompense to women—similar in this to his notion of an appeal—was more or less to make love to them. Now he hadn't, as he believed, made love the least little bit to Mrs. Assingham—nor did he think she had for a moment supposed it. He liked in these days, to mark them off, the women to whom he hadn't made love: it represented—and that was what pleased him in it—a different stage of existence from the time at which he liked to mark off the women to whom he had. Neither, with all this, had Mrs. Assingham herself been either aggressive or resentful. On what occasion, ever, had she appeared to find him wanting? These things, the motives of such people, were obscure—a little alarmingly so; they contributed to that element of the impenetrable which alone slightly qualified his sense of his good fortune. He remembered to have read, as a boy, a wonderful tale by Allan Poe, his prospective wife's countryman—which was a thing to show, by the way, what imagination Americans COULD have: the story of the shipwrecked Gordon Pym, who, drifting in a small boat further toward the North Pole—or was it the South?—than anyone had ever done, found at a given moment before him a thickness of white air that was like a dazzling curtain of light, concealing as darkness conceals, yet of the colour of milk or of snow. There were moments when he felt his own boat move upon some such mystery. The state of mind of his new friends, including Mrs. Assingham herself, had resemblances to a great white curtain. He had never known curtains but as purple even to blackness—but as producing where they hung a darkness intended and ominous. When they were so disposed as to shelter surprises the surprises were apt to be shocks.

Shocks, however, from these quite different depths, were not what he saw reason to apprehend; what he rather seemed to himself not yet to have measured was something that, seeking a name for it, he would have called the quantity of confidence reposed in him. He had stood still, at many a moment of the previous month, with the thought, freshly determined or renewed, of the general expectation—to define it roughly—of which he was the subject. What was singular was that it

seemed not so much an expectation of anything in particular as a large, bland, blank assumption of merits almost beyond notation, of essential quality and value. It was as if he had been some old embossed coin, of a purity of gold no longer used, stamped with glorious arms, mediaeval, wonderful, of which the "worth" in mere modern change, sovereigns and half crowns, would be great enough, but as to which, since there were finer ways of using it, such taking to pieces was superfluous. That was the image for the security in which it was open to him to rest; he was to constitute a possession, yet was to escape being reduced to his component parts. What would this mean but that, practically, he was never to be tried or tested? What would it mean but that, if they didn't "change" him, they really wouldn't know—he wouldn't know himself—how many pounds, shillings and pence he had to give? These at any rate, for the present, were unanswerable questions; all that was before him was that he was invested with attributes. He was taken seriously. Lost there in the white mist was the seriousness in them that made them so take him. It was even in Mrs. Assingham, in spite of her having, as she had frequently shown, a more mocking spirit. All he could say as yet was that he had done nothing, so far as to break any charm. What should he do if he were to ask her frankly this afternoon what was, morally speaking, behind their veil. It would come to asking what they expected him to do. She would answer him probably: "Oh, you know, it's what we expect you to be!" on which he would have no resource but to deny his knowledge. Would that break the spell, his saying he had no idea? What idea in fact could he have? He also took himself seriously—made a point of it; but it wasn't simply a question of fancy and pretension. His own estimate he saw ways, at one time and another, of dealing with: but theirs, sooner or later, say what they might, would put him to the practical proof. As the practical proof, accordingly, would naturally be proportionate to the cluster of his attributes, one arrived at a scale that he was not, honestly, the man to calculate. Who but a billionaire could say what was fair exchange for a billion? That measure was the shrouded object, but he felt really, as his cab stopped in Cadogan Place, a little nearer the shroud. He promised himself, virtually, to give the latter a twitch.

Chapter 2

"They're not good days, you know," he had said to Fanny Assingham after declaring himself grateful for finding her, and then, with his cup of tea, putting her in possession of the latest news—the documents signed an hour ago, *de part et d'autre*, and the telegram from his backers, who had reached Paris the morning before, and who, pausing there a little, poor dears, seemed to think the whole thing a tremendous lark. "We're very simple folk, mere country cousins compared with you," he had also observed, "and Paris, for my sister and her husband, is the end of the world. London therefore will be more or less another planet. It has always been, as with so many of us, quite their Mecca, but this is their first real caravan; they've mainly known 'old England' as a shop for articles in india-rubber and leather, in which they've dressed themselves as much as possible. Which all means, however, that you'll see them, all of them, wreathed in smiles. We must be very easy with them. Maggie's too wonderful—her preparations are on a scale! She insists on taking in the sposi and my uncle. The, others will come to me. I've been engaging their rooms at the hotel, and, with all those solemn signatures of an hour ago, that brings the case home to me."

"Do you mean you're afraid?" his hostess had amusedly asked.

"Terribly afraid. I've now but to wait to see the monster come. They're not good days; they're neither one thing nor the other. I've really got nothing, yet I've everything to lose. One doesn't know what still may happen."

The way she laughed at him was for an instant almost irritating; it came out, for his fancy, from behind the white curtain. It was a sign, that is, of her deep serenity, which worried instead of soothing him. And to be soothed, after all, to be tided over, in his mystic impatience, to be told what he could understand and believe—that was what he had come for. "Marriage then," said Mrs. Assingham, "is what you call the monster? I admit it's a fearful thing at the best; but, for heaven's sake, if that's what you're thinking of, don't run away from it."

"Ah, to run away from it would be to run away from you," the Prince replied; "and I've already told you often enough how I depend on you to see me through." He so liked the way she took this, from the corner of her sofa, that he gave his sincerity—for it WAS sincerity—fuller expression. "I'm starting on the great voyage—across the unknown sea; my ship's all rigged and appointed, the cargo's stowed away and the company complete. But what seems the matter with me is that I can't sail alone; my ship must be one of a pair, must have, in the waste of waters, a—what do you call it?—a consort. I don't ask you to stay on board with me, but I must keep your sail in sight for orientation. I don't in the least myself know, I assure you, the points of the compass. But with a lead I can perfectly follow. You MUST be my lead."

"How can you be sure," she asked, "where I should take you?"

"Why, from your having brought me safely thus far. I should never have got here without you. You've provided the ship itself, and, if you've not quite seen me aboard, you've attended me, ever so kindly, to the dock. Your own vessel is, all conveniently, in the next berth, and you can't desert me now."

She showed him again her amusement, which struck him even as excessive, as if, to his surprise, he made her also a little nervous; she treated him in fine as if he were not uttering truths, but making pretty figures for her diversion. "My vessel, dear Prince?" she smiled. "What vessel, in the world, have I? This little house is all our ship, Bob's and mine—and thankful we are, now, to have it. We've wandered far, living, as you may say, from hand to mouth, without rest for the soles of our feet. But the time has come for us at last to draw in."

He made at this, the young man, an indignant protest. "You talk about rest—it's too selfish!—when you're just launching me on adventures?"

She shook her head with her kind lucidity. "Not adventures—heaven forbid! You've had yours—as I've had mine; and my idea has been, all along, that we should neither of us begin again. My own last, precisely, has been doing for you all you so prettily mention. But it consists simply in having conducted you to rest. You talk about ships, but they're not the comparison. Your tossings are over—you're practically IN port. The port," she concluded, "of the Golden Isles."

He looked about, to put himself more in relation with the place; then, after an hesitation, seemed to speak certain words instead of certain others. "Oh, I know where I AM—! I do decline to be left, but what I came for, of course, was to thank you. If to-day has seemed, for the first time,

the end of preliminaries, I feel how little there would have been any at all without you. The first were wholly yours."

"Well," said Mrs. Assingham, "they were remarkably easy. I've seen them, I've HAD them," she smiled, "more difficult. Everything, you must feel, went of itself. So, you must feel, everything still goes."

The Prince quickly agreed. "Oh, beautifully! But you had the conception."

"Ah, Prince, so had you!"

He looked at her harder a moment. "You had it first. You had it most."

She returned his look as if it had made her wonder. "I LIKED it, if that's what you mean. But you liked it surely yourself. I protest, that I had easy work with you. I had only at last—when I thought it was time—to speak for you."

"All that is quite true. But you're leaving me, all the same, you're leaving me—you're washing your hands of me," he went on. "However, that won't be easy; I won't BE left." And he had turned his eyes about again, taking in the pretty room that she had just described as her final refuge, the place of peace for a world-worn couple, to which she had lately retired with "Bob." "I shall keep this spot in sight. Say what you will, I shall need you. I'm not, you know," he declared, "going to give you up for anybody."

"If you're afraid—which of course you're not—are you trying to make me the same?" she asked after a moment.

He waited a minute too, then answered her with a question. "You say you 'liked' it, your undertaking to make my engagement possible. It remains beautiful for me that you did; it's charming and unforgettable. But, still more, it's mysterious and wonderful. WHY, you dear delightful woman, did you like it?"

"I scarce know what to make," she said, "of such an inquiry. If you haven't by this time found out yourself, what meaning can anything I say have for you? Don't you really after all feel," she added while nothing came from him—"aren't you conscious every minute, of the perfection of the creature of whom I've put you into possession?"

"Every minute—gratefully conscious. But that's exactly the ground of my question. It wasn't only a matter of your handing me over—it was a matter of your handing her. It was a matter of HER fate still more than of mine. You thought all the good of her that one woman can think of another, and yet, by your account, you enjoyed assisting at her risk."

She had kept her eyes on him while he spoke, and this was what, visibly, determined a repetition for her. "Are you trying to frighten me?"

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